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The Golden Age of PDAs

Before smartphones ruled the roost, personal digital assistants (PDAs) walked the Earth. Let's look back at the era of dedicated PDAs: roughly 1992 to 2007.

By Benj Edwards

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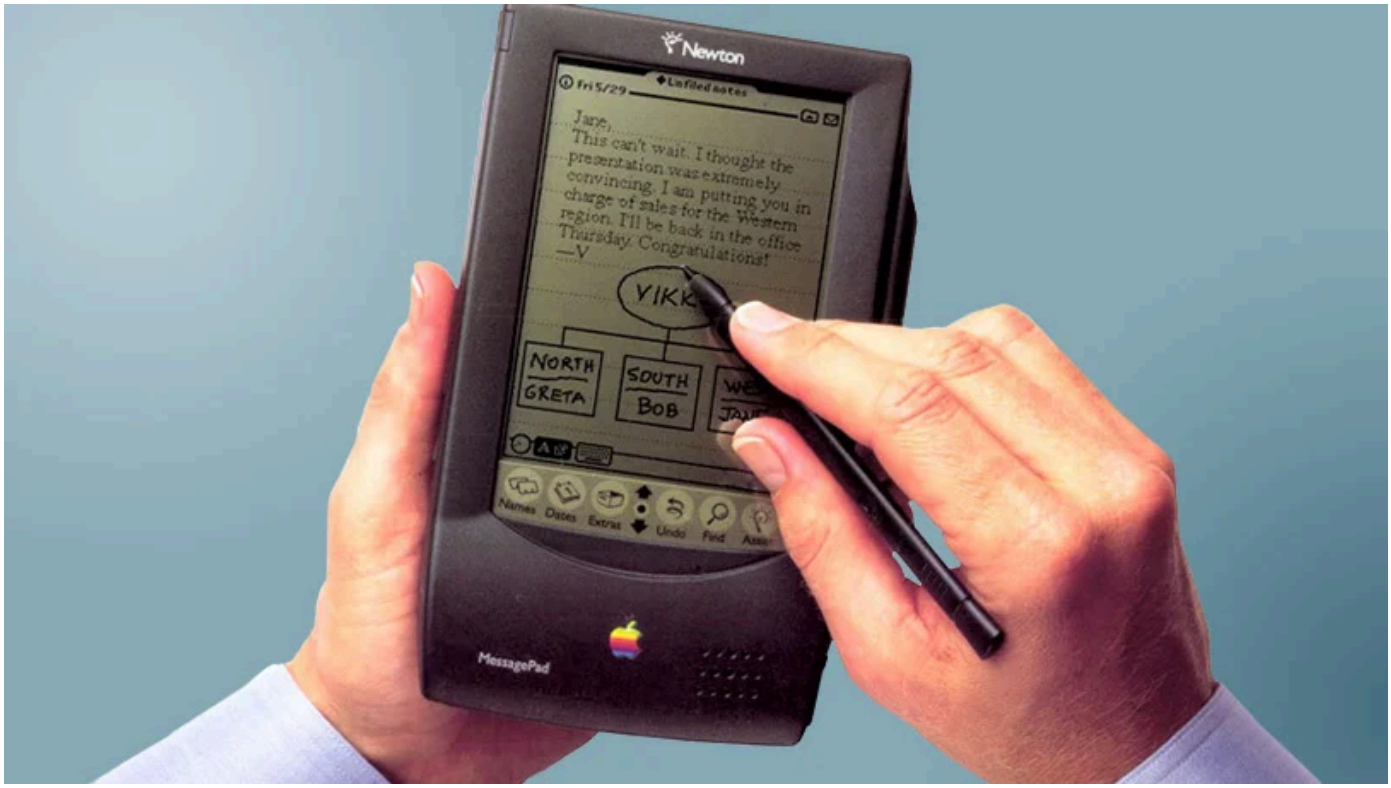

At a time when just about everyone I know carries a smartphone with them all day, we take for granted the concept of having a handy pocket computer ready to take notes or do calculations. These gadgets (which now do much more than just take notes and plan our schedules) stay beside

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us as we sleep—they are practically extensions of our brains. And they all came from the same progenitor: the Personal Digital Assistant, or PDA.

These PDAs all carried with them a similar design: they were battery-powered and pocket-sized, came equipped with a touch screen and stylus for input (usually no integrated hardware keyboard), and used some form of flash or solid-state memory for storage. Most of them included no form of built-in wireless communications functionality, though that changed around 2005.

While we love our smartphones today, back in the 1980s and 90s, tech manufacturers faced an uphill battle to convince the general public that such pocket computing devices could even be useful, let alone essential, in daily life. The vision for pocket computers has existed since at least the 1940s, but it wasn't until the mid-1990s when the technology finally allowed the idea to become a practical reality.

And that's where we start this brief journey through the Golden Age of dedicated PDAs, which lasted roughly 15 years—between 1992 and 2007. It began with the introduction of the first practical touch-screen-only devices, and ended with the introduction of the no-stylus Apple iPhone in 2007.

With that in mind, I thought it would be fun to take a look at a handful of prominent and interesting PDA models from this somewhat arbitrary Golden Age. Of course, hundreds of different PDA models saw release during this period, so if I left something out that you loved (which of course I did), I would love to hear about it in the comments.

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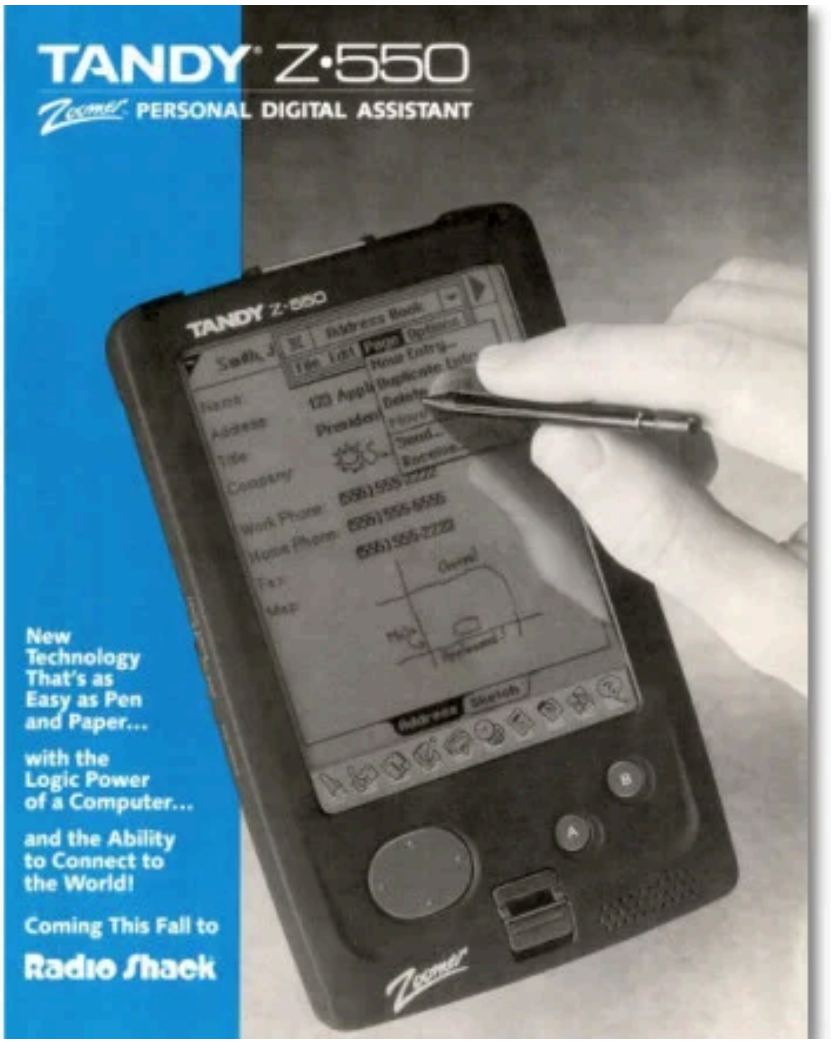
Tandy Z-PDA (1992)



While not the first PDA of all time, the Tandy Z-PDA launched a new era in the form factor centered around a touch-screen display without a keyboard. It used a version of GEOS as its operating system and carried an x86 CPU under the hood. Casio also marketed this device under the name Z-7000. The Z-PDA is also notable for having been designed by Jeff Hawkins, who would later go on to create the PalmPilot.

Apple Newton MessagePad (1993-1998)

When Apple stepped into the PDA market in 1993 with its MessagePad, it made waves in the press due to Apple's high profile as a tech company. Not long after, critics began to lampoon the handwriting-recognition technology baked into its Newton OS, and the product line's reputation among the general public never really recovered. Beloved by fans of the platform, the MessagePad saw five more model releases until 1998. That's when Steve Jobs killed the product line in attempt to refocus Apple on a small number of core products.

USRobotics PalmPilot (1997)

Some could argue that PDAs finally became practical mass-market devices thanks to the PalmPilot, which combined an innovative and easy-to-learn Graffiti input system with a long battery life and an easy-to-use interface. These innovations can be traced back to Jeff Hawkins, who formerly worked for tablet pioneer GRiD and designed the Zoomer PDA for Tandy and Casio. For his third crack at PDAs, Hawkins knocked it out of the park, spawning a huge PalmOS platform that would continue for at least a decade.

Handspring Visor (1999-2001)

After leaving Palm in 1998, Jeff Hawkins went on to found Handspring, which created a colorful and capable line of PalmOS-compatible PDAs called the Visor. One of the Visor's core innovations was the inclusion of the Springboard Expansion Slot in the back of the case, which allowed users to plug in a variety of software cartridges such as maps and games, and accessories such as GPS receivers and digital cameras.

Compaq/HP iPaq (2000-2009)

PC giant Compaq launched its line of PDAs in 2000 with the iPaq, a small color touch-screen device that ran Microsoft's Pocket PC 2000 operating system (formerly known as Windows CE, and renamed Windows Mobile in 2003). After Hewlett-Packard acquired Compaq in 2002, HP continued using the iPaq name, producing dozens of Windows Mobile compatible PDA models until 2009.

Palm Tungsten T (2002)

Under intense competition from a new wave of color-screened Windows Pocket PC devices, Palm came back swinging in a big way with the Tungsten series in 2002, which fared well with critics. The Tungsten T, seen here, included a compact slide-out form factor and was the first Palm PDA to use PalmOS 5. It also included an SD flash card slot for modular data storage.

Dell Axim (2002-2007)

Not to be left out of all the PDA fun, Dell entered the PDA arena with its Axim line in 2002. Over the next several years, the firm produced over a dozen color touch-screen devices, all of which ran variations of Microsoft's Pocket PC/Windows Mobile operating system. Dell introduced its last Axim model, the X51v in 2005 and discontinued it in 2007.

Sony CLIE (2000-2005)

Sony CLIE (2000-2005)

Not to be left out of the excitement, Sony also jumped into the PDA market in a big way with its CLIÉ series of handheld devices, which varied wildly in form factor and sometimes included a built-in keyboard. These touch-screen devices ran PalmOS and emphasized multimedia capabilities such as integrated digital cameras and music playback support. Sony's densely integrated CLIÉ designs presaged the coming of the all-in-one smartphone devices that ultimately wiped out the dedicated PDA market for good.

Everything Old Is New Again?

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In 2018, Palm (now backed by big Chinese phone maker TCL) returned with the Palm Phone, which is really just a secondary phone that gives you just enough connectivity that you can leave your main phone at home. According to PCMag's Sascha Segan—who has reviewed a number of the phones on this list—the Palm Phone is "a great idea, but it doesn't get performance basics right."

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