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Why my favourite phone of all time is an old Nokia

Battery, reliability and Snake – the Nokia 3210 puts the iPhone and chums to shame. With Microsoft poised to squash iconic Nokia brand, CNET's Luke Westaway looks back.

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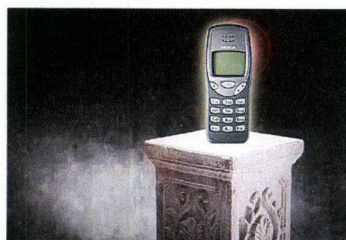
Phones

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by **Luke Westaway**
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The Nokia 3210 is my favourite phone of all time. It was also my first phone, and the device that inspired a lifelong passion for tech. That's because since the 3210 went away, I've been pacing the metaphorical widow's walk, gazing out over the (still metaphorical) ocean of technology, waiting for the ship that will bring me a phone of equal splendour. I am still waiting.



The glorious Nokia 3210.

Wikipedia/Shutterstock

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Released in 1999, the Nokia 3210 was a triumph of design -- a remarkably entertaining and engaging phone that brought mobile gadgetry to a wider audience than ever before. It sadly never went on sale in the US, but American readers may feel free to substitute "3210" for any of Nokia's millennial mobiles, for instance, the **famously indestructible** Nokia 3310, variants of which did make it to the states.

Nokia: A long and innovative history (photos)



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PREV

Free of gimmicks, the 3210 was a phone designed for everyone. Cutting-edge yet easy to use, loads of fun yet thoroughly reliable. In short, it was great, and by comparison modern smartphones look like lazy, squalid heaps of useless silicon. Here are just a few of the reasons why.

Assault on battery

While the **iPhone 5S** and **Galaxy S5** can't go more than a day before squealing for their chargers, the Nokia 3210, which weighed 151g and could store details of a whopping 250 contacts, was nowhere

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US Edition

any... g for a reliable, well-built phone. As such, nearly...
 knew... kokia phone, and a compatible battery that could...
 plundered and swapped into my loyal 3210 was never too far away.

Well Nokia: The rise and fall of a mobile

If, like me, you were a youth with poor planning skills, the power to swap and share charged-up batteries just long enough to send a few crucial texts was a life-saver. And that's not to mention the ubiquity of the old-school Nokia charger, which, for a few heady years, could reliably be found in the drawers of every home in Britain.

Attenuators gonna hate

The 3210 was one of the first mobiles to ditch the ugly external antenna that blighted early phones, and yet it was still capable of reliably making calls. We took this feature for granted until the era of smartphones was ushered in, when simply holding your phone could cause fatal signal attenuation. During my time with the noble 3210, however, the last thing I wanted to do was make boring old calls -- this was the age of the SMS revolution.

T9 days' wonder

The 3210 was a texting machine, with a beautifully laid-out keypad, also playing host to the supremely elegant T9 predictive text system.



Swiftkey has nothing on this.

Wikipedia

For those who've forgotten T9, or reached phone-buying age after it faded from popularity (I've just realised how many people that could potentially describe, and suddenly feel a bit old) it was a wonderfully simple text-entry system developed by a US company called Tegic, that saw you tapping just one key for every letter, while an on-board computer figured out which words you were aiming for, spelling out texts at great speed, with perfect grammar. If it wasn't for the 3210 bringing T9 to the youthful masses, a whole genratn wd stl b spkng lyk ths. Tx T9.

Better than BlackBerry Qwerty keypads, better than touch-typing, better than Siri, Swype and Swiftkey, text-entry on the Nokia 3210 was a rapid-fire, key-clacking thing of beauty. Incidentally, Tegic was later acquired by Nuance, the speech recognition firm rumoured to be powering Siri. And we **all know how easy to use that is.**

Fascia frenzy



Hey, why wouldn't you want your phone to look like this?

mobilemadness

The Nokia 3210 lacked access to a thousands-strong app store, but that didn't stop it from inspiring a whole ecosystem of accessories and digital extras. An entire industry sprang up around crafting cheap, swappable casings, while for a fee you could text a number out the back of a magazine and have the network operator logo on the homescreen swapped for something a little more edgy. Young me opted for a tiny, pixelated dragon. Old me is not proud.

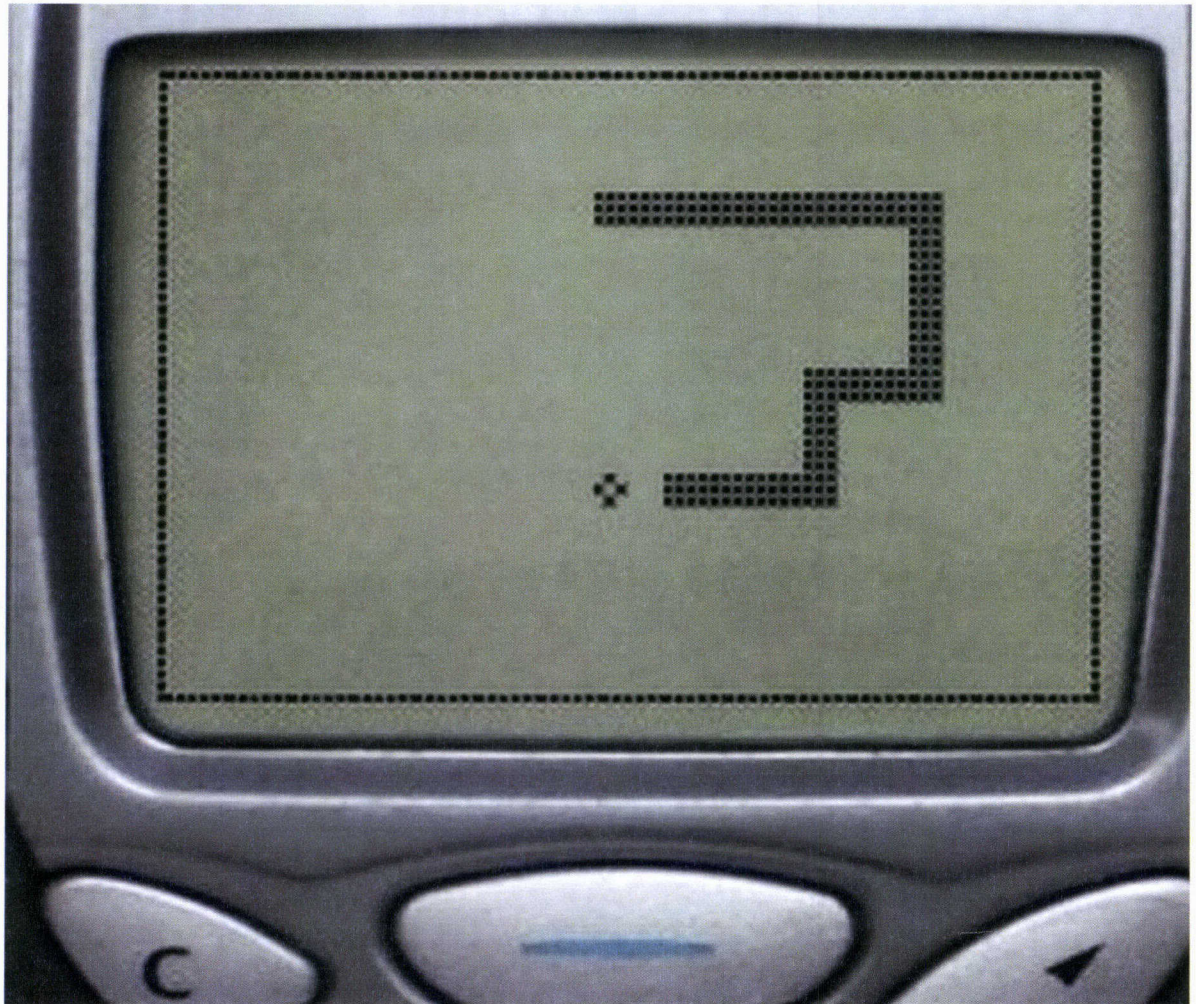
The Nokia 3210 also played host to a brilliant Composer mode, which let you painstakingly type in the notation for popular music hits, either by trial and error, or by copying the code out from a friend, or -- again -- the back of a magazine. I'm not saying I spent precious hours of my youth keying in a monophonic version of Tom Jones' "**Sex Bomb**", but let's just say I didn't *not* spend hours keying in a monophonic version of Tom Jones' "**Sex Bomb**".

Fix it yourself

The Nokia 3210 shattered into pieces whenever you dropped it. But it didn't break, oh no. Like other Nokia mobiles of the era it simply separated into its component parts -- back plate, front plate, battery and keyboard -- so that you could quickly snap it back together again. Whether or not Nokia deliberately designed its mobiles to explode harmlessly into bits when dropped is a mystery to me, but I certainly miss that modular, indestructible design.

Blower-constrictor: Why Snake was the 3210's killer app

Don't get me wrong, the Nokia 3210 wasn't perfect. Wait, hang on, let me check that again... oh no wait, it was *completely perfect*. And nowhere was its immaculate appeal more sweetly expressed than in Snake, the best mobile game I have ever played.



Candy Crush? Jog on.

Geekbomb

One of three built-in games (poor Memory and Rotation never got much attention), the all-consuming Snake saw you frantically tapping the 3210's 2, 4, 6 and 8 buttons to manoeuvre the titular reptile to little dots of food, without bumping into either the walls or your own tail. Eating more food made your snake incrementally longer, increasing the challenge, while dialling the difficulty up to max would quickly turn your sullen, slothful British teen into a muscly-thumbed savant. As Tetris was to the original Game Boy, so Snake was to Nokia -- a killer application that was worth buying a phone for, and one that found huge traction among young gadgeteers.

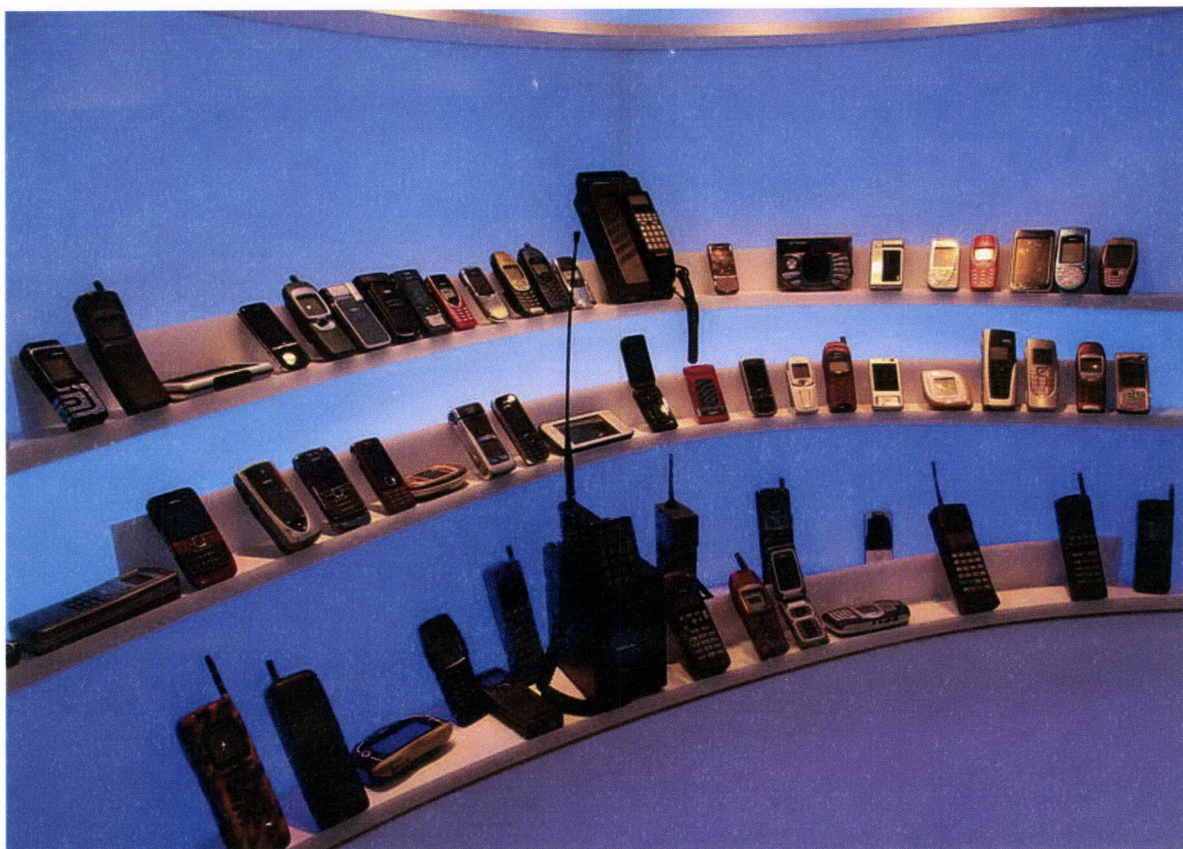
The colorful Lumia 930 shines at Build (pictures)



Comeback kid?

Working for CNET, I've heard from so many phone owners who bemoan their smartphone's weak battery life or quick-to-shatter screens, and yearn for the simplicity of yesteryear. So is there any chance we'll see a return of mobiles like the 3210? Unlikely.

The 3210 harks back to a time when phones were just that -- phones. Today your average smartphone is asked to facilitate not only calls and texts, but all manner of modern, digital diversions. We need Netflix on-the-move so phones need big, breakable screens, we want photos of our food so they need expensive camera units, we want polygon-mangling games and moving wallpapers, necessitating prodigious, power-gulping processors. The meteoric rise of smartphones is proof that our collective needs have changed.



Farewell, old friends.

Roger Cheng/CNET

We shouldn't, then, expect a return to those low-fi, durable days. But I live in hope that one day we'll be treated to a phone so complete, so accomplished and so fun, that it emulates the 3210 in spirit, if not in actual hardware.

Goodwill hunting

Today, the Nokia phone brand seems to be on the brink of vanishing, as boss Stephen Elop has said that, post-Microsoft sale, the famous name "won't be around for long". When I think about the enormous amount of goodwill that quality devices like the Nokia 3210 instilled in my generation's collective consciousness -- particularly in Europe -- that move feels reckless, callous, and downright wrong. To the top-level execs at Microsoft, if you're reading this, please change your minds and keep Nokia's mobile flame aglow.

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