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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.

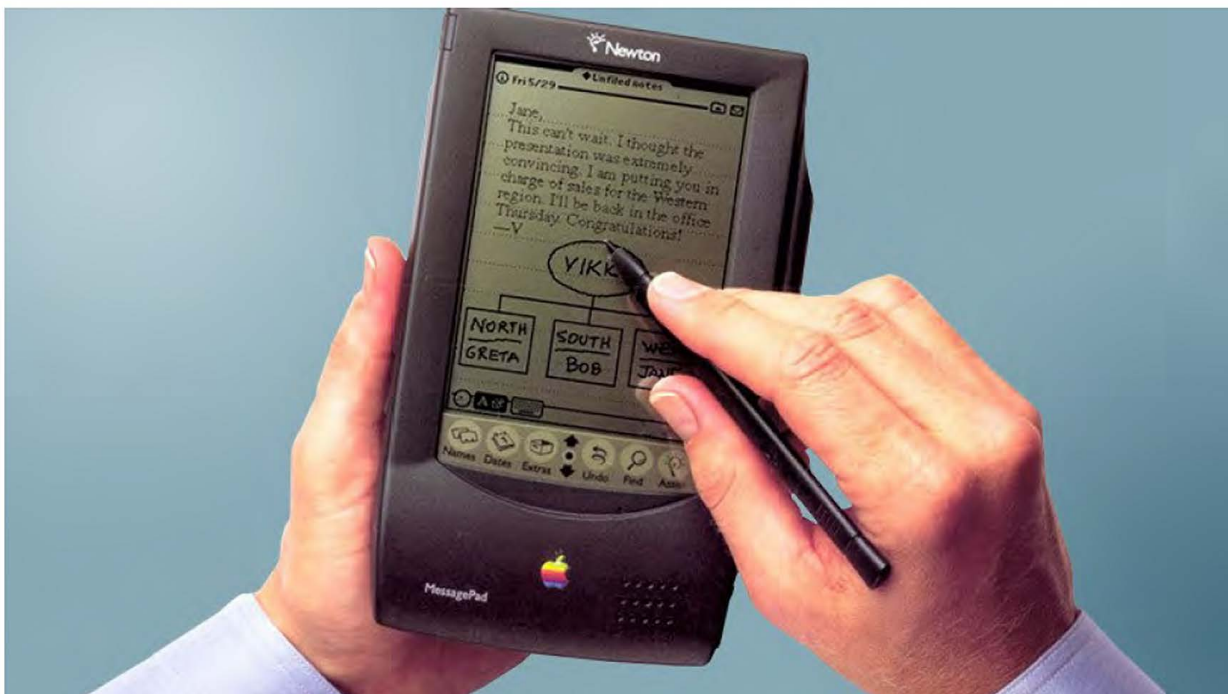By **Benj Edwards**
November 20, 2018

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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 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.



## Tandy Z-PDA (1992)
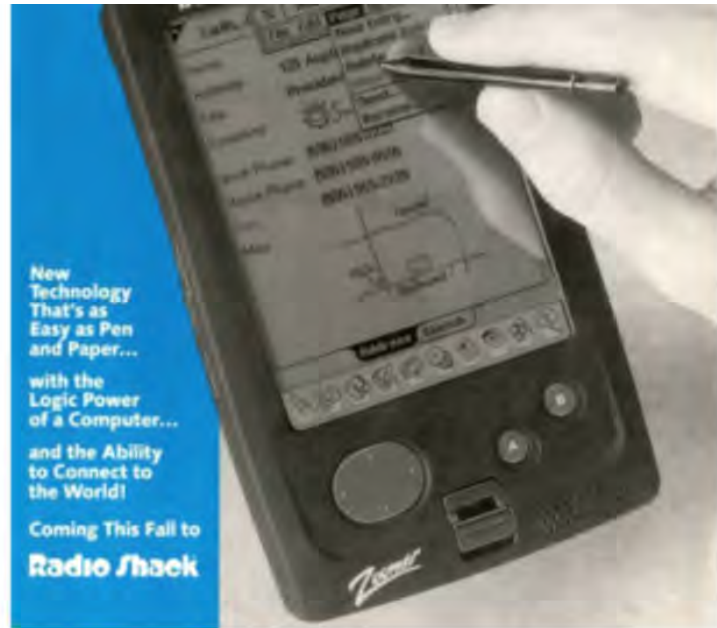
While not the first PDA of all time, the Tandy Z-PDA launched a new era in the form factor centered around a touch-screen display without a keyboard. It used a version of GEOS as its operating system and carried an x86 CPU under the hood. Casio also marketed this device under the name Z-7000. The Z-PDA 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.

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