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Past Portables

Yesterday's portable technology — today's doorstep.



Past Portables

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In the age of pocket-sized PDA's, 8-megapixel cameras for kids, and 2-gig drives no bigger than a pen cap, it's easy to forget just how far technology has come. With a tip of our hat to both the trailblazers and the total turkeys of yesteryear, here's a look back over the not-so distant past of portable electronics. It's a vivid reminder that every technology to break new ground eventually winds up buried beneath it.

-- By Rich Maloof, special to MSN Tech & Gadgets

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Photo Courtesy of © CASIO AMERICA, INC

Calculator Watches

Part watch, part calculator, and part girl-repellent, calculator watches made a dubious fashion statement in the 1980s. The Japanese company Casio was the reigning king of the genre and produced a broad range of multi-function watches for brainiacs and those individuals planning to cheat on a math final. Upping the ante on competitors, the CFX-200 pictured here offered scientific calculator functions, making the watch indispensable for anyone who needed to solve floating-point arithmetic problems on the go. There are more than 20 buttons on the sides and 1x1-inch face of this nerd maker, which was only slightly cooler than a wearable slide rule. A watch like the CFX-200 was much appreciated by engineers and students at M.I.T., who were also the only people who understood how to set the date and time. That's right — this thing could tell time, too.

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Photo Courtesy of Michael Nyberg

Panasonic "Dynamite 8" 8-track player

Giving new meaning to the term "boombox," Panasonic's Dynamite 8 encapsulated the best and worst of the 8-track era (was there a best, really?). The player was shaped like a miniature dynamite detonator box, giving way to snappy ad copy like "Take the plunge" and "It's a blast." True to the convenience and fidelity of 8-track cartridges, the Dynamite 8 included no tone controls and offered only monophonic sound since it housed a single speaker.

Just jam your favorite Steve Miller Band 8-track into the side of the box and spin the top-mounted volume dial until the speaker distorts. When "Swingtown" cuts off in the middle, since the tape has reached the end of a track, pump the plunger one time and — cha-kunk — the tune resumes in Program 2. That is, provided the four C-cell batteries haven't already died.

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Photo Courtesy of © 2009 CANON Inc.

Super 8 movie camera

Not until the mid 1960s did it become practical for any ol' Joe to shoot moving pictures. With Super 8 cameras combining portability, usability, and affordability, the age of home movies began in earnest. Filming at 18 frames per second, cameras like the Canon Auto Zoom 814 shown here could capture memories for three minutes and twenty seconds before the fifty feet of film in the cartridge was spent.

Several manufacturers made cameras that accommodated the Super 8 film cartridges introduced by Eastman Kodak in 1965. What was so super? Super 8's predecessor, the Standard 8 format, used film of the same 8mm width but the Super had smaller sprocket holes along the edge, nearly doubling the available image area. Though today's digital camcorders are nearly small enough to swallow, Super 8's are still valued by filmmakers for the distinct look of their saturated images.

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Photo Courtesy of @ SEARS

Portable turntables

Music fans today opt to shut out the world with in-ear headsets and listen in isolation. Once upon time, though, friends enjoyed music together. With a personal turntable in tow, you and your bestest pals could decide whose bed to jump on and then spin "Love Me Do" or "He's So Fine" to your heart's content.

Several suitcase models had a lid that closed over the turntable and clipped tightly shut. This particular model, originally offered through the Sears catalog, dropped open like a step stool. One toggle switch selected RPM speed while the other automated return of the stylus arm; if you were willing to have your precious records drop down and skid atop one another, you could play back a short stack of singles consecutively. Top-edge controls made it easy to adjust the bass/treble mix with the Tone knob or rock the house by dialing the Volume all the way up to "Zoom."

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Boomboxes

Self-contained stereo systems were all the rage in the mid- to late-1970s. Going mobile with a boombox hiked up on one shoulder, you had the freedom to entertain friends and irritate anyone else nearby in most any setting. Common features included an AM/FM stereo receiver, detachable speakers, and an uncanny ability to eat cassette tape.

Boomboxes had nearly worn out their welcome by 1986 when the beast pictured here was introduced. The Sharp GF-777 was just about the size of a Boeing 777, complete with landing lights, and at over 19 pounds you would do well to enlist a fellow disco fan to help carry this quasi-portable party monster down the block. Why anyone would lug a boombox like this from one place to another, rather than just build a house around it, remains something of a mystery.

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Motorola DynaTAC 8000X

This was the world's first commercially available handheld cell phone. Motorola's DynaTAC (Dynamic Adaptive Total Area Coverage) 8000X was approved by the FCC in 1983 and first sold in 1984 to elite consumers who could afford its \$3,995 price tag. Weighing 28 ounces and measuring 10 inches high not including the antenna, the DynaTAC and others built in its image were aptly nicknamed "brick" phones.

Motorola's Martin Cooper, who foresaw that the future was in handhelds rather than in car phones, is credited with leading the R&D team that first developed the cell phone. Cooper himself placed the first cell call a decade prior to the DynaTAC's release, too. In 1973, on his way to a press conference, Cooper called to say hi to his competitors at Bell Laboratories.

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Photo Courtesy of The Computer History Museum

Compaq Portable

The Compaq company was a tad liberal in naming this computer the Portable in 1982; at 34 pounds, it was about as portable as a filing cabinet. But it did fold up into a suitcase-sized case with a handle, and was unofficially referred to as "luggable" rather than portable. At \$3,590, the unit shipped with a 10MB hard drive and featured two 5.25" floppy drives. There were also serial and parallel ports, and the onboard 9" display glowed in green phosphor. By developing their own version of IBM's lauded BIOS (Basic Input/Output System) interface, Compaq shattered IBM's monopoly with this computer, opening up the PC market. Successors like the Portable III and Portable 386 earned Compaq more users, but this is the one that broke the mold.

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Photo Courtesy of Handheld Museum

Blip

The pièce de résistance in our blast through the past is Blip, "the digital game" from 1977. On the heels of Atari's success with Pong, the Tomy toy company introduced Blip as a far cheaper stand-in that required no television. Blip was a strange little mix of electronic ping-pong and catch. A wind-up timer buzzed as players exchanged a small red blob zipping awkwardly across the black court.

Special honors here to another birthday-list topper from 1977: Mattel's handheld Football game, which featured little red LED slashes blocking and tackling on a miniature field. As a testament to the enduring charm of this handheld, an [LED Football app](#) is now available for the iPhone.

Between Blip and Football, pre-adolescents of the late '70s could find few better things to do on a long car ride — or huddled under the covers way past bedtime.

Thanks to fellow geeks Lee Knife, Pete Prown, and HP Newquist for sharing their suggestions and memories.

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