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Touch Screens That Changed the World

Touch screens are everywhere we look these days, but they've actually been around for a lot longer than you might think. Join us on a tour through nearly four decades of touch screen devices that changed the world...

The hardware icons we created for this article are also available for [free download](#).



1972 PLATO IV

One of the first ways touchscreens were deployed was for the PLATO project, originally built by the University of Illinois as a computer-based education system. In 1972, the \$12,000 PLATO IV system was put into operation. The system had an orange plasma display and a 16 x 16 infrared touchscreen. For the first time ever, students were able to answer questions by touching a screen.

**1983 HP-150**

Released in 1983, the HP-150 was the world's earliest commercial touchscreen computer. Its 9-inch Sony CRT was surrounded by infrared transmitters and receivers that detected the position of any non-transparent object on the screen. The small holes that housed these parts collected dust and had to be vacuumed periodically to maintain touchscreen functionality.

**1985 Home Manager**

Perhaps influenced by HP, Unity Systems was formed the same year HP released the HP-150. The company sought to create the world's first touchscreen-based home automation system. Unity Systems' Home Manager was introduced in 1985 and was produced by the company until 1999. Service is still available to the nearly 6,000 systems that remain in operation today. Amazing!

**1989 GRiDPAD**

GRiD was a pioneer in mobile computing, and many of the technologies in today's notebooks, tablets, and handhelds would not exist had it not been for them. In 1989, GRiD introduced the world's first pen-based handheld, the GRiDPAD. It measured 9 x 12 x 1.4 inches and weighed 4.5 pounds. Text was entered directly on the screen with an electronic pen. The procedure was slow, taking one to two seconds for written characters to be redisplayed as computer-generated characters.

**1992 Simon**

The IBM Simon was the world's first smartphone. Though launched in 1993, the Simon was first shown as a product concept in 1992. It included a calendar, address book, world clock, calculator, note pad, e-mail, and games. The Simon used a touchscreen and optional stylus to dial phone numbers, send faxes and write memos. Text could be entered with either an on-screen "predictive" keyboard or QWERTY keyboard.



1993 Newton

Manufactured by Sharp, the Apple Newton MessagePad was one of the first-ever Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) — a term coined by Apple's then-CEO John Sculley. Its built-in handwriting recognition was the Newton's most unique and interesting ability. The handwriting-recognition technology was ultimately ported to Mac OS X, where it's known as "Inkwell." It hasn't really taken off there, either. Two ex-Newton developers founded Pico, the company that created the operating system for the original iPod.

**1996 Pilot**

Pilot was the name of the first generation of PDAs manufactured by Palm Computing in 1996 (then a division of U.S. Robotics). A trademark infringement lawsuit by Pilot Pen Corporation forced them to change the name to Palm Connected Organizers, but not before "PalmPilot" had entered the vernacular as a synonym for PDA, regardless of the brand. Rather than recognizing handwriting, the Pilot used Graffiti, a single-stroke shorthand written by Palm that was efficient and easy to learn.

**1999 Edge**

Introduced to the market in 1999, the Sequoia Voting Systems' AVC Edge touchscreen voting machine is a freestanding unit that allow voters to select their choices electronically. It was first used in the 2000 presidential election. It can be placed on a tabletop or assembled as a stand with its integrated legs. The AVC Edge eliminates hanging chads, thereby reducing the number of unintentionally spoiled ballots. After the polls close, the system prints polling place totals. These are stored as a permanent record — further assuring the security and integrity of the election.

**2004 DS**

The Nintendo DS (which stands for dual-screen) released in 2004, is the first touchscreen handheld gaming system. The clamshell design has two LCD screens inside — with the bottom one sensitive to touch. The touchscreen allows users to interact with in-game elements more directly than by pressing buttons. For example, in the included chatting software, PictoChat, a stylus is used to write messages or draw.

**2007 iPhone**

Apple announced the iPhone on January 9, 2007, nearly 15 years after the IBM Simon was first shown. It was the first smartphone to bring many, now standard, technologies to the industry — including multi-touch gestures, full Web browsing, and an accelerometer to flip the screen's orientation or act as another form of input. And while the iPhone wasn't the first to allow 3rd-party applications, Apple made purchasing and installing the apps so easy and consumer friendly that 1 billion of them were downloaded in the first nine months.







2007 Surface

In 2007, Microsoft announced Surface, a table computer that uses multi-touch technology to allow several users, using their fingers (up to 52), to simultaneously manipulate images and other data right on the screen. It can also sense and interact with objects like cameras, phones, water glasses, and even paintbrushes that are placed on top of it. A similar concept was used in the 2002 movie "Minority Report". In the commentary section of the DVD, director Steven Spielberg says that the idea came from a consultation with Microsoft during the making of the movie.


**2010 iPad**

Apple's iPad promises to bridge the gap between laptops and smartphones. A machine designed to handle browsing, email, photos, video, music, games, and eBooks better than any laptop or smartphone on their own. And with an available keyboard dock and plenty of apps just a touch away, the iPad will also serve a market of non-technical and new computer users. The iPad may prove to do for touchscreen tablets what Apple did for smartphones with the release of the iPhone.


 [Add a Comment](#) |  January 27th, 2010 (4:27pm) |  [News](#) |  Posted by Morgan

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Comments

1. Alex Chisholm |  January 27th, 2010 at 6:34 pm

This is really cool....

2. Jon Danforth |  January 27th, 2010 at 7:37 pm


I always thought that the Philips Pronto changed the world. It was the first touchscreen remote control that I remember hitting the market at a price point that was affordable for normal people.

3. [Vincent](#) |  January 28th, 2010 at 9:24 am

This is an amazing piece and the icons can't get any better. Great work putting this together!


4. [Grant Hutchinson](#) |  February 1st, 2010 at 5:16 pm

This is a beautiful set of icons, but I have an issue ... you've grafted a Newton OS 2.x screenshot onto a first generation MessagePad. The original MessagePad (OMP) and MessagePad 100 (MP100) devices could not run NOS 2.x and therefore many of the GUI elements and applications in the screenshot are incorrect. Also, did you get permission from either Marcin Wichary or Mark Underwood for the use of the original screenshot? As it was obviously obtained from Marcin's [GUIDebook](#) site. Just wondering.



5. Big Al |  February 1st, 2010 at 8:58 pm

Great history summary of touchscreens, thanks for this guys!



Oh, and Grant, shut up you muppet.

6. [Aaron Craig](#) |  February 2nd, 2010 at 11:59 am

Great compilation, and great icons, but I must agree with Jon that the Pronto should be on the list. Is there a reason you omitted it?

7.  Morgan |  February 2nd, 2010 at 1:24 pm

@Grant. I appreciate your feedback. We've corrected the Newton OS to keep the historical accuracy of this collection as accurate possible.

8.  Morgan |  February 2nd, 2010 at 1:44 pm

We will continue to grow this collection as time allows. I think the Pronto is an excellent candidate for a future update. Keep the suggestions coming 😊

9. [Grant Hutchinson](#) |  February 3rd, 2010 at 9:43 pm

@Morgan ... Thanks for the update. I appreciate that.

@Big "Obviously Compensating for Something" Al ... Jim Henson really was a genius, wasn't he?

10. Ruben Vicuna |  March 21st, 2010 at 1:28 pm

Great compilation thanks,

An important milestone missing seems to be the Nokia 770 Internet Tablet announced at the Linux World Summit in New York City on May 25, 2005.

11. [Guido Santé](#) |  April 1st, 2010 at 9:12 am

Nice compilation ! Full with memories ! 😊

12. [39 Cent Stamp](#) |  April 2nd, 2010 at 6:10 am

Awesome! Add the pronto! My very first custom GUI 😊


<http://www.wiremunky.com/image/humor/ts1000.png>

13. [39 Cent Stamp](#) |  April 2nd, 2010 at 6:12 am


I forgot to add that the little boy on the bike in that screenshot is me. It was a caricature done at the 1982 worlds fair in Knoxville 😊

14. [WpFolios](#) |  April 3rd, 2010 at 4:46 am

Clean and awesome!, love these

15. Paul |  June 8th, 2010 at 6:32 pm

You should add the Korg Trinity to the list, first musical instrument ever with a touch screen with a nice GUI, made in 1997 if I'm not wrong.

16. [Tim Silva](#) |  July 19th, 2010 at 10:02 pm


This is an AMAZING article!! ☐

17. [Parapharmacie Paraselection](#) |  July 20th, 2010 at 5:23 am

Nice article, thanks.

18. allanonmage |  September 2nd, 2010 at 9:56 am


I am surprised that there isn't a single Windows Mobile / Pocket PC on the list. Palm may have started things, but WM devices made the economy of scale practical for hand held touch screen devices.

19. anusha |  December 27th, 2010 at 9:36 am

it was very nice

20. [Rodrigo Desouza](#) |  February 29th, 2012 at 2:37 am

I cannot thank you enough for the article.Thanks Again. Fantastic.

21. Esmii |  October 1st, 2012 at 12:21 pm

Helpful but should have all years & different kind of technology not just touchscreens 😊

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