

My Newton

1996 – 2005

by Fletcher Lee Hartsell III

Since my Apple Newton MessagePad 2000, I have tried other “personal digital assistants.” I’ve had a lot of them: the Palm IIIx, the Handspring Visor Deluxe and the Visor Edge, the Palm Tungsten T and E, the Palm TX, and now a free Palm Tungsten E2 after my TX died from overuse.

But the Newton was my first true love (even before my old collection of Niki Taylor digital photos). I have the early-adopter disease and, well, I was probably first in line at the campus bookstore waiting for this miraculous and fanciful piece of technology when it was first released. To understand the emotion involved, you have to remember a time when laptops weren’t portable and everyone used land lines.

The Newton was actually a personal digital assistant in all the right ways. It was a piece of technology that really understood me. I didn’t need to learn a special writing language—it could transcribe my iterant musings the first time (or the second time, or the third time) I recorded them on its screen. The stylus was novel. Every way it offered up useful tasks was novel. Rather than asking me how I wanted to do things with applications, it helped me get things done. My contacts were organized. My schedule was right there.

It was the right size. It was the size of a book but it was a computer! I could carry it in one hand or hold it lovingly in two; portrait or landscape. I could read it in bright sun or read it under the covers. It was stylish by itself or I could dress it up in a smart wallet (with keyboard!) for class.

Like many college relationships, though, it was not meant to last. In my senior year Apple announced it was discontinuing the entire Newton line. Damn Steve Jobs! I could tell that his return to Apple was sure to be a disaster. The Newton soon became orphaned technology and the lack of continuing support for it forced me reluctantly onward to the more ubiquitous Palm Pilot. Ever since, I’ve felt like I’ve been cheating on my first love, especially with Palm’s perennial failure to innovate.

The Newton lay dormant in my home office until a year ago. My wife persuaded me to list my dear assistant on eBay. It sold for \$50—a paltry sum compared to its original retail price of \$1000 (with keyboard) and certainly compared to its value to me. Every once in a while I wistfully look online for another one.

I miss my Newton. I’d use it now if not for fear of ridicule from those sporting more memory and processing power in their phones. But no device since has been able to surpass its usefulness or its cool factor; no device can replace its place in my heart. 🖐️

