

Watches that compute are the next small thing in technology

December 14 2011, By John Boudreau

The watch may be making a comeback - and it will do much more than just tell time.

As people have become equipped with smartphones, laptops and other digital devices with clocks, the importance of the [wristwatch](#) has diminished. But a bevy of smart-watches - devices that aim to alert users to text messages and phone calls, and even monitor health - are being rolled out in coming months by entrepreneurs who hope to create a 21st-century relevance for a centuries-old gadget, the timepiece.

"Today, we are not using time to synchronize ourselves," said Bill Geiser, CEO and co-founder of Meta Watch, a Dallas-based startup that just launched new Bluetooth-connected watches. "We have all forms of [digital communication](#), text messages, proximity services, social networks."

This latest digital trend, like so many, has been helped along by Apple. Apple's postage stamp-size iPod Nano media player morphed into a watch for many users after the late Steve Jobs joked in September 2010 that one of the company's board members planned to wear it as a watch. Industry insiders saw the not-so-off-the-cuff remark as a glimpse of what the Cupertino, Calif., company views as a possible gadget in the future.

Almost overnight, a small industry of Nano wristband designers emerged to take advantage of a new application for an Apple product. When

Apple gave the [digital music player](#) a refresh this fall, it did not change its form - a first in the Nano's history - and it included 18 different clock faces, including Minnie and Mickey Mouse, in addition to its other features, including photos and a built-in [accelerometer](#) for workouts.

"The Nano was a [technological achievement](#) Apple had created, but it didn't have a home," said Scott Wilson, a designer who created the popular Nano wristbands TikTok and LunaTik. "Then people saw it as an inexpensive (computer) watch."

While it's unclear what else Apple might have in mind for the wrist, a new industry is emerging to create new devices to help people to manage their increasingly data-driven lives.

"There is a need for people to get instant access to their critical information," said Tim Twerdahl, vice president of product marketing at Los Altos, Calif.-based WIMM Labs, which just released the WIMM One, a Bluetooth and Wi-Fi-enabled computer watch that is being licensed to major brands, from sports to luxury companies, that will create personalized devices. The 2-year-old startup received funding from Apple-product maker Foxconn in Taiwan.

Gadgets like the WIMM One are not designed to replace smartphones and tablets, he said. Rather, they are digital sieves that enable users to sift through the clutter of apps, emails, text messages and phone messages they are bombarded with every day to quickly get the info they need immediately.

They will allow users to set up caller ID alerts from specific numbers, such as those of family members. And the computer watches will let users - with a finger swipe - access things like calendars, weather updates and GPS services to help one quickly find the car in the mall parking lot. The cubelike WIMM One, which weighs 22 grams, is waterproof and

can be worn as a pendant, on a belt or be placed on a bike steering wheel.

San Jose, Calif.-based startup Smart Monitor is using motion-detecting technology to create wrist devices that would alert caregivers or parents of a patient's or child's seizure or tremors. It will go on sale early next year. The company, which is licensing Meta Watch devices, is also awaiting FDA approval of its SmartWatch as well.

The SmartWatch not only alerts caregivers of unusual movement such as an epileptic seizure, but it also collects data that can assist medical professionals in assessing a person's condition, said Smart Monitor co-founder and President Anoo Nathan.

"We are taking the watch in a completely new direction," she said. "The computing is being done on your wrist."

The explosion of smartphones, to which the SmartWatch is tethered via Bluetooth connection, is creating a market for new devices, she said. Another factor is new power-sipping technology that enables small batteries in computer watches to last days without charges. "The amount of data that can be sent via a small Bluetooth chip is phenomenal," Nathan said.

Twerdahl expects the first WIMM-based computer watches also to be launched early next year.

"We are in active discussions with major mobile operators and fitness and consumer electronics companies," he said. "The licensing model allows us to enter multiple segments simultaneously."

The idea of wrist computers isn't new. In 2004, Microsoft teamed up with companies like Swatch to unveil watches that provided data feeds

like news and sports updates, weather and stock quotes as well as instant messages through Microsoft's MSN Direct service delivered over local FM radio channels. But the market and technology were not ready, said Ben Bjarin, director of consumer technology at Creative Strategies.

"It was terrible," he said. "They killed it. It was ahead of its time. I don't think there was a real value proposition for consumers. Smartphones weren't even around then."

Wrist computers are part of what Bjarin sees as a new market for "glance-able" gadgets - small and large screens that enable quick glimpses of important information.

"Things like these will show up all over the home," he said. "They are things you glance at, not something you use to do heavy computing on. I wouldn't be shocked if Apple evolved the Nano to take advantage of this."

Geiser, who formally co-led the watch maker Fossil's technology division, said, "This is not a fad. We think this is a solid direction. The mobile ecosystem is exploding."

(c)2011 the San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.)
Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Watches that compute are the next small thing in technology (2011, December 14)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-small-technology.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.