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Ten gadgets that defined the decade

By Engadget staff posted December 30th 2009 12:21PM

FEATURE

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TEN GADGETS THAT DEFINED THE DECADE

As 2009 winds down and we try to come up with new and clever ways of referring to the early years of this century, there's really only one thing left to do: declare our ten favorite gadgets of the aughts and show them off in chronological order. It's arguable that if this wasn't the decade of gadgets, it was certainly a decade *shaped* by gadgets -- one which saw the birth of a new kind of connectedness. In just ten years time, gadgets have touched almost every aspect of our daily lives, and personal technology has come into its own in a way never before seen. It's a decade that's been marked the ubiquity of the internet, the downfall of the desktop, and the series finale of *Friends*, but we've boiled it down to the ten devices we've loved the most and worked the hardest over the past ten years. We even had some of our friends in the tech community chime in with their picks on what they thought was the gadget or tech of the decade -- so join us for a look back at the best (gadget) years ever!

Canon Digital ELPH (2000)

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Vital stats

Line started in 2000 with PowerShot S100, which retailed for \$599 with 2 megapixel sensor and CF storage.

History

We've no personal attraction to Canon, but it's tough to argue the importance of the PowerShot Digital ELPH range during the noughties. First emerging in early 2000, the 2 megapixel S100 sparked a revolution in the point-and-shoot arena by enabling the (mildly affluent) Joe and / or Jane to afford a pocket-sized digital camera with image quality that was more than passable -- and even today the lineup is as significant and well-respected as the day it was introduced. The line took handheld cameras to a new level of thin (borrowing heavily on the already-popular ELPH line of fashion-forward film cameras), and starting with the SD100 model in 2003 it also helped kick start the SD obsession that carries on today. Various manufacturers have attempted to achieve the same level of success by jacking up the megapixels and slimming things down as much as humanly possible, but when you think P&S, you probably think Canon first (and for good reason).

Editor's take

My first experience with the Digital ELPH came in early 2005, when I was gifted with an SD200. Turns out that unboxing would lead to a lifelong obsession -- or should I say love / hate relationship -- with the Digital ELPH. I've since donated my SD200 to my dear mother, and it's still pumping out reasonably decent photographs to this day. I can't say the same about the pair of SD850 ISs that I've owned, both of which are currently sitting on a shelf of defunct gadgets after being dropped onto hard surfaces (and in turn, obliterated) during trips to Montreal and Philadelphia, respectively. You'll notice that my own clumsiness didn't stop me from purchasing the exact same camera to replace my first shattered SD850 IS, and I can say with some degree of certainty I'll pick up a Canon to replace it. Probably something a little more me-proof, though. - **Darren Murph**



Stuart Miles, Pocket-lint

Gadget of the decade? Canon 300D - Launched in 2003. "The Canon 300D (or Rebel I think it was called your side of the pond) marks the rise of the consumer digital SLR for me. Without them we would all be looking at blurry pictures on the web.... Oh wait..."

Apple PowerBook G4 (Titanium) (2001)

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Apple next-generation iPad liveblog! **867**



Vital stats

Released in January of 2001 with a starting price point of \$2,599, the original TiBook boasted a 15.2-inch widescreen display, a 400MHz PowerPC processor, 128MB of RAM, and a 10GB hard drive.

History

Along with objects of desire like the iMac, iPod, and iPhone, the titanium PowerBook G4 stands as one of those pivotal moments in Apple design history -- a moment when everyone (even non-fanboys) had to take notice. The laptop broke away in more than just basic design; while it did eschew the previous G3's curved, black plastic housing, it also set the stage for widescreen displays as a standard, brought slot-loading drives to the masses, and transformed the idea of a laptop from mere business accessory to object of desire. Since 2001, the look and feel of Apple's portable computers has evolved, but still remains closely linked to this category-shaping design; a testament to the power of good looks.

Editor's take

In 2001 I couldn't even dream of fantasizing about imagining that I might find enough money to buy one of these, but a much more successful friend had no problem dropping nearly \$3k on the day Apple made them available. While playing one of our many *Myth II* tournaments at his house I remember marveling at how smooth the graphics were on the TiBook (the game was a bit old by then, but still crawled on a G3 I'd bought second-hand). I never managed to scrounge up the dough for the titanium version of the G4 PowerBook, though eventually I scored its replacement, a 15-inch aluminum model that I used all the way into my early days at Engadget. - **Joshua Topolsky**

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In the year 2008



Gigabyte's new M700 UMPC and M528 MID

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In the year 2007



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14 comments



Vital stats

Windows XP - released in 2001 for \$199 (\$99 upgrade price) and minimum system requirements of a 233MHz processor, 64MB of RAM, 1.5GB of disk space, and SVGA display.

OS X - released as "public beta" in 2001 for \$29; final 10.0 version released later that year for \$129. Preloaded and set to boot by default with the release of OS X 10.1.2 in 2002. Minimum 10.0 system requirements were a G3 or G4 processor, 64 MB of RAM, and 800MB of drive space, although the "recommended" configuration was 128MB of RAM and 1.5GB of storage.

History

Both Microsoft and Apple started out the decade by offering customers a fresh start -- Windows XP brought the entire Windows family onto the vastly more stable NT kernel, while OS X represented a dramatic wholesale change for the Mac. It took OS X some time to become a usable daily OS, but XP quickly became everyone's favorite version of Windows -- so much so that it's still being sold on netbooks to this day. Sure, you can argue about how much Apple and Microsoft openly riffed on each other's ideas as the decade wore on -- some in-window file previews here, a little fast user switching there -- but you simply can't deny that XP and OS X each set a new standard for computing.

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Editor's take

If you had found me right after I'd installed OS X Public Beta for the first time in 2001 and told me how dramatically the OS would change over the next decade, I'm not sure I would have believed you. There was a gigantic difference in feel between installing Windows XP and OS X Public Beta -- with XP you got that fun sense of having a whole new computer, fast and ready to take on whatever you could throw at it, while with OS X you just sort of stared at the huge icons and wondered, "Now what?" It was clear Apple had a lot of work left to do -- although by 10.3 or so I'd deleted my Classic partition and wasn't looking back. But hold up: OS X 10.3 looks and feels dated by today's standards, while XP looks and feels like... XP. Where Apple did an fantastic job of relentlessly improving and iterating OS X over the past decade, Microsoft set the bar so high coming out of the gate that the biggest threat to Windows 7 is the installed base of XP users who are still happy with their machines. That's pretty amazing. - *Nilay Patel*

Honorable / dishonorable mentions

- **Ubuntu / Linux** - The long promised, long hoped for consumer-friendly Linux finally found a face in Ubuntu. As the distro began its reign over the desktop, we also witnessed a newfound ubiquity of Linux in such disparate projects as Amazon's Kindle, Palm's webOS, and Google's Android.
- **Windows Vista** - No matter how many service packs or Mojave Experiments Microsoft ran through, it could never wash the original taste of Vista (spendy, slow, incompatible) out of consumer's mouths.

Apple iPod (2001)



Vital stats

Released on October 23, 2001, with 5GB of storage that held 1,000 128kbps MP3s, a two-inch black and white screen, a mechanical scroll wheel surrounded by four buttons, and FireWire connectivity only.

History

It wasn't the first MP3 player, and it certainly wasn't the cheapest, but the original iPod radically reshaped the idea of how digital music should work. With a dead-simple interface, compact (for the time) minimal good looks, and seamless integration with iTunes combined into one package, the iPod instantly got everyone's attention -- and when the iTunes Music Store launched in 2003, it became unstoppable. While the dedicated PMP category is starting to fade in the face of smartphones and the iPod itself is transforming into something entirely different with the iPod touch, it's the original iPod that started this whole crazy gadget thrill ride.

MORE INFO

[Steve Jobs says it again: no video iPod](#)

[The iPod family cemetery](#)

[How-to: get music, videos, and photos off your iPod or iPhone](#)

Editor's take

It's hard to imagine that there was a time when people had no idea how to use an iPod. I distinctly remember teaching my friends how to use my brand-new 2G in the car right after I'd first gotten it, and it just didn't take very long at all -- unlike the Rio players I'd had before, which no one could figure out and always ended up on the floor. Now, of course, there are dock connectors everywhere, iTunes is the biggest music retailer in the world, and the iPod and music seem like an afterthought to the iPhone and apps, but man -- I'll still take a first-gen iPod loaded up with the Clash and the Afghan Whigs and blaze down Lake Shore Drive in my old Mustang any day. - *Nilay Patel*



Jacquie Cheng, Ars Technica

"When the first iPod was released in 2001, my initial reaction was a huge yawn. Another MP3 player? But, as it turns out, the original iPod was a pioneer in many ways, even if it wasn't the first MP3 player to ever hit the market. The UI, coupled with iTunes desktop software (and eventually the iTunes Store) eventually made it an iconic device that would forever (or at least for the next decade) be copied, both by Apple itself and its competitors."

TiVo Series2 (2002)



Vital stats

Released in 2002 for \$299, the original TiVo Series2 featured a 60GB hard drive that recorded 60 hours of SD video at "basic quality." Later units would come down in price to \$149, add more storage, and eventually feature dual tuners.

History

TiVo had launched the DVR category with the original Series1 in 1999, it wasn't until the Series2 came out in 2003 that things started to blow up: prices came down, the addition of USB ports brought networking to the table, and dual tuners were (finally!) added in 2006. Sure, the cable companies completely drank TiVo's milkshake soon thereafter, but the Series2 was fundamentally so much better than the competition that cable and satellite providers are still playing catch up -- sure, the TiVo Series3 and TiVo HD now support HD recording and offer an array of streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Video on Demand, but the TiVo experience is still fundamentally the same. Whether or not TiVo can continue to survive without some radical changes has been an open question for some time now, but the Series2 will forever live on as the archetypical DVR for an entire generation.

MORE INFO

[The Engadget Interview: Mike Ramsay, CEO of TiVo](#)

[Ten years of TiVo: how far we haven't come](#)

[TiVo Series2 DT hands-on review](#)

Editor's take

TiVo hacking is still quite popular, but it's settled into a nice little groove -- people know what's possible with the current hardware and software, and they're trying to perfect it. That's nothing at all like the excitement around the Series2 when it first launched -- I remember anxiously digging through Linksys USB-to-Ethernet adapter boxes at Best Buy, trying to find specific serial numbers that indicated a supported chipset so I could put my new Series2 on the LAN and just poke around to see what was what. The first time I ever downloaded a show onto my computer? Heaven... until I had to let the transcode process all night so I could put it on my iPod. We're still a long way from the perfect cable box, but TiVo's been the closest for the longest -- I just hope it can stay alive long enough to get to the finish line. - *Nilay Patel*



Ross Rubin, Executive Director, Consumer Technology, The NPD Group

"At first glance just a VCR that had its tapes switched for a hard drive, TiVo reached beyond its hardware and service to become that rarefied generic verb describing a how we watch television, wreaking havoc with how broadcasters and advertisers thought about programming. The company knew from the beginning that its idea was huge, but it's never been able to capitalize fully on its revolution as cable companies have pushed generic competitors. Moving beyond the DVR, TiVo is now home to a wide range of interactive TV services, but has been stymied by its low subscriber base."

Dishonorable mentions

- **CableCARD** - We'd love to be able to name CableCARD as the home entertainment gadget of the decade, a wonderful little plug-and-play module that finally wrested control of our entertainment centers away from the cable companies. But it wasn't and it didn't.
- **Blu-ray / HD DVD** - Instead of a single next-gen movie format, the industry gave us two. A bloody war ensued that slowed adoption of both formats. Blu-ray emerged the victor, but as internet HD distribution picks up, it will probably never reach the level of ubiquity that DVD has.

Motorola RAZR V3 (2003)



Vital stats

Released in 2004, \$500 pricetag (after rebate), VGA camera, 2.2-inch 176 x 220 LCD, 110 million+ sold.

History

As mobile phones, now priced within reach of most folks, began to reach some sort of ubiquity, and smartphones were stepping into the realm of real usability, Motorola did something... different. It built an object of desire that just happened to be a phone. The RAZR V3 was unlike anything before it, seemingly carved out of aluminum, a sliver of a thing. It didn't even matter that the feature set was a little dated at the time of introduction, or that it was oddly oversized when opened and held against the face -- even the \$500 price seemed appropriate in the face of such visceral attraction. But then the price started to fall. What was once an object of distant, decadent desire was within reach for a new class of people, and every slash in price seemed to increase the handset's popularity exponentially.

MORE INFO

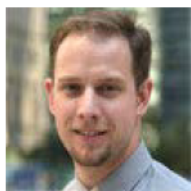
[Hands-on with Motorola's RAZR V3 for Cingular](#)

[RAZR V3c debuts on Verizon](#)

[The Motorola RAZR 2](#)

Editor's take

I remember the first RAZR ad I saw on TV, which showed the phone flying through the screen, violently slicing whatever lay in its path. When it at last came to rest and I realized I was staring at a phone, I exclaimed this improbable fact to everyone in the room and knew I wanted it for my own. I finally purchased the phone the next year, after a short, painful time spent with the N-Gage QD. It survived my first year as an Engadget editor, an attempted mugging, and even embarrassing subway rides next to other members of the 110 million-strong RAZR club, all of us tapping away on our little Java applets (mine was a Tetris clone) and dreaming of nothing better. If I suddenly had no use for a smartphone, I'd switch back to my old battered V3 in a heartbeat. - **Paul Miller**



Eric Zeman, Phone Scoop

Tech of the decade? Multitouch. "The theory behind multitouch displays was first proven to be possible in 1991, but no one capitalized on it until the 2000s. Though multitouch itself wasn't exposed to the public at large until January 2007 when Apple unveiled the original iPhone, the speed at which multitouch has proliferated and spread across the technology world in the last three years is incredible. The first thing everyone asks about a new touch phone is "does it have multitouch?" Why is this? Multitouch enables whole new (enjoyable) ways to interact with electronic gadgets -- as we are beginning to see more and more."

PalmOne Treo 600 / 650 (2003 / 2004)



Vital stats

Released in 2003, the Treo 600 sported a 144MHz ARM CPU, 32MB of RAM, 160 x 160 color display, VGA camera, Palm OS 5, SD slot, and came in both GSM and CDMA variations.

History

As a reader of Engadget, you probably know that our interest in Palm (and its smartphones) goes way back... back to our roots. In 2004, site founder Peter Rojas [spoke to](#) the *New York Times* about the Treo 600, explaining what happened when leaked photos of the device emerged online. In his words, "People were going crazy." Seriously. You may not realize it, but before the iPhone was even a twinkle in Apple's eye, the Treo line of smartphones had already been fulfilling the earliest promises of Moore's law and convergence -- they were really the original "do everything" devices that fit in your pocket (well, kind of). The Treo 600 and its follow-up -- the 650 -- truly set the stage for many of the innovations we take for granted these days; mobile web and email, touchscreen interfaces, built-in (and video capable) cameras, developer communities providing scores of applications, and easy desktop syncing. The Treo set up the pins, and modern smartphone makers are just knocking them down.

Editor's take

I missed the boat on the 600, but couldn't wait to get my hands on the 650. After a long series of disappointing encounters with dumbphones, I decided I really needed something more attuned to my special needs as a tinkerer. The idea that I could install whatever launcher I wanted, check Engadget while I was having lunch, or play TurboGrafx-16 games in a waiting room was fairly mind-blowing to me. The dream of the magical, changeable box became more concrete than ever before with the introduction of these devices. And just as the iPhone has become largely about the apps, the Treo was attractive not simply because of the platform itself, but the community that had risen up around it. Applications like Butler, the aforementioned TG16 emulator, and powerful utilities like LauncherX showed the possibilities of an open, active developer base matched with the right hardware. Despite the advances we've seen in the years since the Treo 600 made its way into the world, the basic concepts behind these devices remain largely the same, and the blueprint can be traced right back to Palm. -

Joshua Topolsky

Honorable mentions

- **BlackBerry** - We could try to explain the importance, impact and popularity of the BlackBerry this decade, but instead we've given it its very own decade feature to tell its tale. Unfortunately, no single BlackBerry ever really satisfied our pure gadget lust in the way the Treo did.

- **G1 / Android** - If you thought Apple's entry into the phone-building space was unlikely, you were probably dumbfounded by Google's entry. The G1 and its open source-ish Android OS arrived too late in the decade for its full impact to be felt, but if the recent uptake is any indication, we're going to be seeing plenty of this OS in the decade to come.

Kara Swisher, All Things Digital

Tech of the decade? Mobile phone / email devices.

"From my suitcase cell phone in the 1980s to my Nokia brick in the 1990s to my Palm in the early 2000s to my beloved BlackBerry to the iPhone, these have been my most satisfying relationships ever. Yes, I am a loser."



Microsoft Xbox 360 (2005)



Vital stats

Released in 2005, \$399 pricetag, 20GB HDD, DVD drive, 34 million+ sold.

History

There were many reasons to doubt the Xbox 360 upon its launch. It wasn't Microsoft's fault, they'd made a good first effort with the Xbox, and Halo was clearly a juggernaut, but the PS2's overwhelming success made Sony look nigh invincible in the space. Once the specs started pouring in for the PS3 like 1080p games, Blu-ray, and PSX / PS2 backwards compatibility, the Xbox 360 was starting to sound like the Dreamcast of its generation. But then it wasn't. It beat the Wii and PS3 to market by a full year, managed to keep a price point that was significantly lower than the PS3, and as previously promised PS3 exclusives started to migrate to the increasingly entrenched 360 it was clear that Microsoft had pulled off a major coup. If it had merely been a cheaper, earlier version of the PS3 it might've eventually fallen by the wayside, but Microsoft's audacious approach to *charging people* to play online with Xbox Live Gold actually ended up as the console's greatest strength, and a key to its staying power.

Editor's take

You don't remember a console for the chips inside or the case design, but the games you played. For me those games were Gears of War and Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. I bought the 360 in 2006, and always felt a little out of step with what my friends were playing -- particularly as the catalog has ballooned in 2008 and 2009. But these two games forged the perfect intersection with my Xbox Live friends list. I spent untold hours hopping from match to match with a group of peers, shouting cries of despair into my wired headset as I continually fulfilled my role as "the weakest link" on my team. Those two games were everything I'd ever tried to emulate growing up with a game of laser tag, a pair of walkie

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[Xbox 360 hands-on preview](#)

talkies or an elaborately constructed Lego battlefield, and I got to share them in real time with real people thanks to technologies so complicated and market forces so beyond me that I'd really prefer not to even think about them. - *Paul Miller*

Honorable mentions

- **Sony PlayStation 2** - If you're going by sheer sales, the PS2 is the clear winner of the decade. The console not only dominated living rooms and popular imagination in a way only recently matched by Nintendo's Wii, but the depth, breadth and quality of its catalog is one to be envied by every console since the SNES. We went with the Xbox 360 for its innovation in online play, but we still have a nice backlog of PS2 titles to play through -- perhaps enough to get us through the next decade.
- **Nintendo Wii** - Its low-end graphics and dearth of fully realized 3rd party titles has made it the bane of the self-styled "core gamer," but the implications of Nintendo's revolutionary motion-controlled gaming are hard to overstate. The fact that Microsoft and Sony are scrambling to build their own motion control answers to Nintendo's juggernaut should be proof enough that we've only seen the start of Wii-style gameplay... and Wii-style injuries.

Apple iPhone (2007)



Vital stats

Released in 2007, \$499 / \$599 pricetag for 4GB or 8GB model, 2 megapixel camera, 3.5-inch 320 x 480 LCD, 30 million+ sold.

History

When Apple released the first iPod in 2001, mobile phones were very different animals than they are today -- there may have been a vague sense that we'd someday do a significant portion of our computing from our pockets, but the industry possessed neither the technology nor the vision to make it happen. Over the years, PDAs and phones inevitably started to merge en masse; Treos and BlackBerrys helped define the term "road warrior" (much to the chagrin of businessfolk who'd valued their personal time) and geeky segments of the consumer market started to hop on board. The "ah-ha" moment, though -- the turning point that would transform smartphones from niche accessories into must-have status symbols -- would ultimately take a fundamental rethinking of the genre, and that's exactly the sea change the iPhone provided. Of course, the industry saw the merger of the iPod and the cellphone coming from a mile away, but by the time the iPhone was officially unveiled by Steve Jobs on January 9, 2007, virtually every prediction and false "leak" was hilariously incorrect -- proof that it took a deep realignment of the way the world thought about mobility to make the device possible. The rest, as they say, is history: as we close out the decade, full touch is the new black, finger-friendly UIs are virtually required, and world-class industrial design is a given. The game has changed.

MORE INFO

[The Apple iPhone](#)

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Ryan Block, gdgt

Tech of the decade? 3G. "3G changed everything. I don't think it would be overstating the case to assert that mobile broadband -- specifically, 3G, but soon LTE, etc. -- is nearly as transformative a technology as the internet itself. I'm sure a lot of people would vouch for the iPhone (1st-gen, 3G, or 3GS, take your pick) as the most important piece of tech in the last decade, but I'd argue that Apple -- and all smartphone makers, for that matter -- would not have had a clear path to making smartphones a viable mass-market consumer product without being able to fulfill a basic expectation and need for speedy data access. (Of course, if you're an AT&T customer, those expectations have probably been lowered significantly by now, but you get where I'm going.)"

Editor's take

I remember the introduction of the iPhone like it was yesterday: Team *Engadget* was holed up in a dingy, smelly hotel conference room south of the Las Vegas Convention Center in the thick of CES while our then-Editor-in-chief, a guy called Ryan Block, had taken a quick jaunt up to San Francisco to cover Macworld live. I can't describe the feeling in that room, the feeling I had as I was preparing our iPhone announcement post -- my heart was pounding. It was as though we knew what to expect and had absolutely no idea what to expect at the same time. It's something I haven't felt before or since, and I think most of the editors here would tell you the same. For a device -- any device -- to create that kind of emotion in a room full of jaded gadgetheads is pretty amazing, and I'm honestly not sure we'll ever experience it again. Not with Apple, not with anyone else. It's not that there won't be incredible phones introduced year after year after year -- there will -- it was the culmination of years of speculation coupled with the feeling that the entire game had just been rewritten in a profound way. - **Chris Ziegler**



Michael Gartenberg

"The culmination of Apple's mobile efforts which began with the iPod, the iPhone integrated that functionality into a phone and then took smartphones to a whole new level and introduced the mass market to the mobile internet. Apple single handedly jumpstarted the mobile applications market while simultaneously re-defining the carrier and handset vendor relationship."

ASUS Eee PC 900 (2008)



Vital stats

Released in 2008, \$549 for 8.9-inch display, 12GB SSD, 1GB of RAM, was available with both Windows XP and Xandros Linux.

History

Where the Eee PC 701 and its Xandros Linux OS was aimed at kids and "housewives" (seriously, an ASUS representative said that at the time), the succeeding Eee PC 900 was the realization that netbooks had wider market appeal when preloaded with Windows XP. Whether it was business-minded folk or just those looking to connect to the web on-the-go on a device larger than a smartphone, the small and very affordable laptop made a lot more sense than anyone ever could have imagined. The 900 series was officially launched in April 2008 and though Intel's future Atom platform was still being developed by those silicon "rockstars" at Intel, the 2.2-pound mini-notebook had an 8.9-inch display, Intel Celeron M processor and 12GB of flash storage (an odd pairing of one 4 GB SSD and one 8 GB SSD). ASUS sold more than a million units in the first couple of months which resulted in global shortages of the liliputian laptops. In the U.S. the 900 was the first netbook to be sold at Best Buy. Shortly after the 900's worldwide success and the release of Intel's Atom CPU, all major laptop manufactures brought netbooks to market with 9 or 10 inch displays.

MORE INFO

[Asus' new Eee PC 701 joins the laptop-lite fray with a bang](#)

[Hands-on with the 9-inch Eee PC](#)

[ASUS Eee PC 900 review roundup](#)

Editor's take

It is funny to think that the word netbook wasn't even around when I first got my hands on the Eee PC 900 (us crazy kids called them mini-notebooks back then). For the first few months, I took my "cute laptop" (as people would remark) everywhere. And the fact that I could fit it in my purse never seemed to get old. Though I like imagining that my first few months with the 900 was all rainbows and butterflies, it really wasn't. I hated the small touchpad and its rock-solid mouse bar and I couldn't stand the cramped keyboard and screen. It was those frustrations that ASUS and others took note of and improved in today's ever-so-popular 10-inch netbooks. The *New York Times* recently included the word netbook on its [Buzwords of 2009](#) list; there's no mention of the Eee PC 900, but it silently takes the credit for jump-starting a whole new category of mobile computers about two years ago. - **Joanna Stern**

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