

Time and the digital revolution



Having fought back once against the challenge of new technology, traditional watchmaking continues to thrive in an age where all else is digital. **Robin Swithinbank** explores the reasons for the survival of this ancient art

When I was a young boy, I used to while away the pre-Facebook hours of boredom designing wristwatches. On the dial side, these drawings – sadly long lost – detailed a conventional digital watch. The idea was that when you flipped it over, you'd find a pop-up aerial (seems daft now) to receive a TV signal, a microphone and camera for video calls (rather less so).

That was in the 80s, when the quartz revolution had gripped the watch industry, and the future of watchmaking looked set to shift east to Japan at the expense of traditional Swiss watch houses that had led the way for centuries. More than a thousand Swiss watch companies went bankrupt during what became known as the Quartz Crisis of the 70s and 80s, and a third of the workforce was laid off. It seemed certain we'd all be wearing Dick Tracy watches in time for the Millennium.

But somehow that never happened. The Swiss watch industry fought back, inspired by the late Nicolas Hayek and the cheap, colourful watches he produced under the name Swatch, the moniker a simple compound of 'Swiss' and 'watch'.

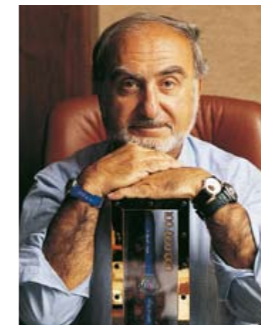
These were mainly quartz pieces – analogue rather than LCD – and they caught on. Hayek made a fortune and, convinced of the romance of mechanical watches, started buying up venerable watch houses like Breguet, Blancpain and Omega. His empire grew, and as he revived each brand, so too the world was reminded of what it nearly lost and the Swiss watch industry boomed. In 2007 it reported exports of CHF17.1billion, a colossal sum unimaginable only two decades before.

Those two decades have also seen incredible digital advances, opening us up to technologies that were unfathomable only half a generation ago. Cast against this digital revolution, the rebirth



Opposite: Dick Tracy and the Samsung watch phone – but is it cool now?

Above: Samsung's SPH-WP10 didn't make the grade
Below: Swatch king Nicolas Hayek
Bottom: the Swatch phenomenon fought off digital contenders, till now



Photography: Rex, Reuters

of age old watchmaking traditions is all the more extraordinary – how many other 500-year-old technologies are still employed on a daily basis to perform as important a task as keeping time?

That in mind, and with some Swiss mechanical watches costing tens, even hundreds of thousands of pounds, you could argue that it's still only a matter of time before electronic watches bursting with modern technology wipe out traditional watchmaking. But you'd probably be wrong. Dick Tracy watches have been commercially available since 1999, when Samsung, the Korean technology giant, announced the SPH-WP10, the world's first watch telephone. It could make and receive calls in much the same way as a mobile phone of the time. But it didn't catch on.

They're still trying, though, and as recently as 2009, both Samsung and LG introduced watch phones, the latter a 3G enabled touchscreen device called the GD910 that can make video calls, play MP3s and was recently on sale for £250. Neither has met with commercial success, at least not in the way the iPod has: 275 million sales since 2001 and counting.

However, taking a chunk out of the mechanical wristwatch market remains a goal of the major electronics companies. Sony Ericsson's LiveView is a wrist mountable device that connects to your phone via Bluetooth, conveniently relaying the time, phone calls, text messages and control of your MP3 player to your ulna. Some reviewers have called this a 'Smartwatch', which could catch on as a term, but given the limited demands of delving into your pocket for your phone and that the LiveView's strap is an ugly nylon Velcro affair, it's hard to imagine there's much clamour for it.

Apple, generally considered to be the only



manufacturer capable of taking us beyond the tipping point with new technology, has yet to deliver an 'iWatch', but its latest iPod Nano is small enough and sufficiently versatile to have spawned a number of third-party developed watch straps, tailored so it can be worn on the wrist. The iStrapped, a cheap silicon housing for the Nano, is available in a dazzling array of colours and it

Above: Apple's iPod Nano can be worn on the wrist – if you want
Below, left to right: Zenith's El Primero; Jaeger-LeCoultre's Grande Reverso Duodate; TAG Heuer's Carrera Heritage

costs the same as a middle-of-the-road sirloin. But as a serious competitor to products intended as watches first, it's unconvincing.

There are watches out there that rely on solar power or can change the TV channel, but essentially the digital revolution has yet to have a major impact on our choice of wristwatch. Why aren't we all walking around talking to each other via our watches and instead forgoing technology for watches made the way they always were?

Two answers spring to mind. First is that a watch screen is too small. The functionality we want from a portable device (email, television, video calling etc) works better on a Smartphone or a tablet. Second is that, actually, Dick Tracy isn't cool. The fact that watch phones first existed in comic books, the domain of teenage boys – and men who would still be teenage boys – is a real turn-off. When I was eight, I thought my TV wristwatch would impress the girls. Now, thanks in no small part to Don Draper and his Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso, I know otherwise.

As a testament to this, watch companies don't seem in the slightest bit alarmed by electronic alternatives, and if this year's spring watch fairs are anything to go by, watch design is going backwards rather than forwards – at least in the sense that classical and even vintage design cues



Above: Jorg Hysek's HD3 Slyde uses an LCD touchscreen to display standard complications
Bottom left: MB&F's HM4 Thunderbolt may look built for the Space Age, but its sole purpose is to tell the time
Bottom right: Vagabondage II from FP Journe, winner of the Best Technical Innovation award in 2010

are informing part, or in some cases all, of the leading watch houses' new collections. Patek Philippe has never done anything else; Rolex sticks willfully to its core collections; TAG Heuer's most important watch this year is called the Carrera Heritage; and Zenith has rebuilt its reputation almost overnight by centring its offering around two in-house movements: the Elite, launched in 1994, and El Primero, the brand's legendary chronograph movement of 1969.

If there are signs of evolution, they come from watch brands straddling the divide between the old and the new. HD3 Complication is a Swiss company led by design genius Jorg Hysek. The HD3 Slyde, unveiled at the GTE watch fair in January, is a unique bit of kit that portrays both the time and complications, like a chronograph or a moon phase, via an LCD touchscreen. The genesis of these complications lies in Haute Horlogerie, but in the Slyde they are pieces of software, downloaded from the Internet and uploaded onto the watch, a sleek, sporty looking thing straight from the avant garde school of design. These are stored on the watch and the wearer can simply swipe from one to the next, just as on an iPhone. It's a novel twist on telling the time, made even more fascinating by the promise of further downloadable complications in the future.

Tellingly, though, Hysek has stated that he has no vision for adding 21st century complications to his watch. No phone, no texting, no email, no Twitter – just additional functions that have been around for decades, if not centuries, only innovatively repackaged. And this seems to be

where watchmaking is heading. Other brands stealing the limelight are relying on imaginative reinterpretations of existing complications to engage the nerdier (not to mention extremely wealthy) end of the watch buying spectrum.

The eccentric watches of Max Büsler's watch house MB&F look like nothing ever made before, but fundamentally they still tell the time via a mechanical movement and a big hand and a small hand. And Urwerk's 200 collection could easily have been beamed back from the year 2169, but ultimately the micromechanics involved simply relay what time of day it is.

FP Journe is a great innovator and has been frequently recognised as such. His Vagabondage II recently won the Best Technical Innovation award at the 2010 Champions of Time event in China. The watch in question displays the time digitally, with jumping hours and minutes, but the digits are still controlled by a beautifully crafted mechanical movement in 18K rose gold – there is no coding involved. And that's how it's going to be for some time.

Which, in a way, is a pity. No matter that these are remarkable creations, nor that a Patek Philippe remains one of the most desirable objects on the planet, the small boy who once imagined communicating with extraterrestrials via his wristwatch will have to wait a while longer for his dream to become a reality.

