

TEST BENCH

Smart watches

IT'S TIME TO EAT YOUR HEART OUT, DICK TRACY

Mark Harris unleashes his inner comic-book hero with watches that alert you to calls and texts

pic credit

BEST FOR STYLE

PEBBLE £110

High-tech watches connect over wireless Bluetooth to smartphones to deliver messages and news, play games and even track your exercise. The Pebble is the slimmest on test, with a plastic case and easy-to-find buttons. Its 1½in monochrome screen lasts around three days between charges and has a choice of a dozen or so faces, including stylish text-based ones that spell out the time. A free app for Android or iPhone takes just minutes to set up, and once linked, the Pebble shows text messages as they arrive, using your phone's address book to identify the sender. It displays incoming calls too, without names, letting you accept or reject them with the press of a button (like all here, you can't actually speak through the watch, Dick Tracy-style). The Pebble can also pause and skip the songs playing on your phone, and comes with basic games. Notifications of tweets, Facebook and some email messages are currently optimised for Android phones only, but more features are being added (see panel). There's a motion-sensitive backlight for night use too.

Verdict Clever, easy to use, and getting better all the time.
★★★★☆
getpebble.com



BEST FOR FUNCTIONS

METAWATCH STRATA £135

The MetaWatch's monochrome screen might be ugly and the layout is cluttered, but the display is legible in even the brightest sunshine and there's a push-button night light. An app for Android or iPhone (the iOS 6 version only) lets you customise the 1in display with your calendar, local weather forecasts, stock quotes and more, plus it can control your phone's music in a way almost identical to the Pebble. The MetaWatch also displays text messages, incoming calls and the subject line of emails. Icons show your phone's battery level and warn you if the handset is out of range, and Facebook and Twitter notifications are promised to be coming soon. Battery life is around three days.

Verdict As powerful (and as geeky) as having a PC on your wrist.
★★★★☆
metawatch.org



BEST FOR TRADITIONALISTS

COOKOO £120

Of all the timepieces here, only the hefty Cookoo looks, feels and acts like a traditional watch. It's tough and waterproof, has analogue hands and runs on a regular watch battery that should last at least six months. The downside is there's no screen on which to read texts or display caller ID, just a vibration alert, a beep or flashing icons for calls, alarms and Facebook posts. A button activates the ability to upload your location via Facebook and control your phone's music. Open up the iPhone app and you can also use the watch as a remote trigger to fire the phone's camera. Text and email alerts are promised; an Android version is due this summer.

Verdict Limited features but easy to use, good battery life.
★★★☆☆
cookoowatch.com



BEST FOR FITNESS FANS

MOTOROLA MOTOACTV £150

The MotoActv is a square gadget that can be slipped out of its plastic watch strap and into an armband or handlebar mount. It tells the time but is primarily an exercise accessory, tracking your walks, runs or bike rides using its pedometer and GPS. The 1.6in colour touchscreen flips easily between showing the time, calories burnt, speed and distance or a map of your route. It links to Android phones only, and can also be used to screen incoming calls and display texts, Facebook messages and tweets, as well as showing the weather forecast. As a watch it's less useful, requiring a button press or special wiggle of the wrist to light up the screen, and needing a recharge almost every day. It's the only watch here not waterproofed for swimming.

Verdict Great for gym time, less so for daily life — or the pool.
★★★☆☆
motorola.co.uk



WATCH THIS SPACE ...

Like smartphones, smart watches are as clever as the apps they run, and at this time virtually all the apps available for the models on test come directly from the watchmakers. They let you change the clock face, set alarms for events in your calendar and potentially connect to social media accounts.

However, Pebble, Cookoo and MetaWatch are encouraging independent developers to write apps. For example, Pebble and MetaWatch are promising fitness apps that

will feed GPS location data from your phone to the watch, showing speed and distance information. There is also a Pebble app in production that shows the range to the next hole on thousands of golf courses.

Which other apps get made will depend on how popular these watches become. They may also be affected by Apple, which is rumoured to be releasing its own voice-recognition smart watch this summer. As yet, though, there is no confirmation that the company will enter the market.