



GADGETS & APPS

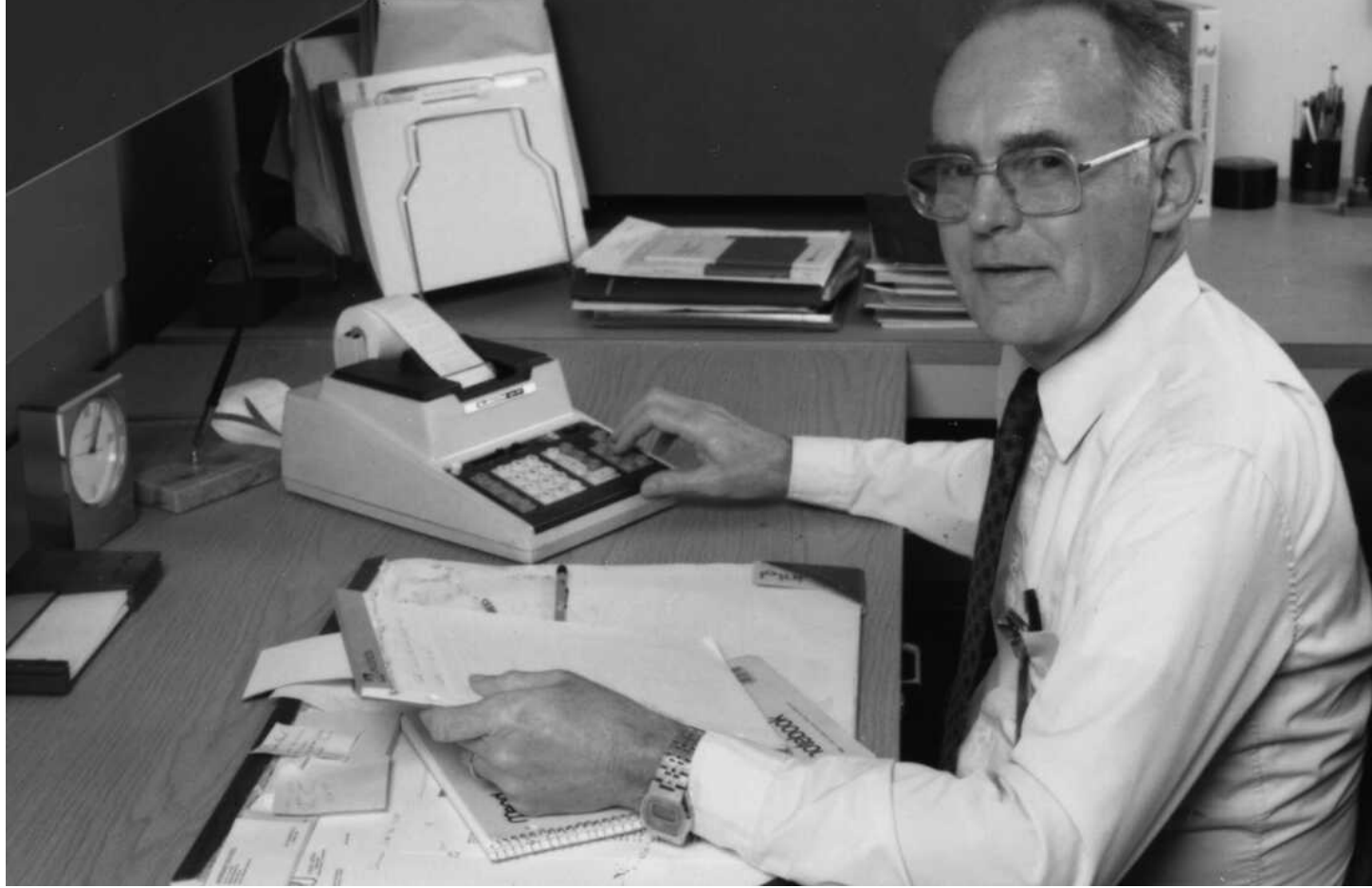
Long Before Most, Intel Chased The Smart Watch

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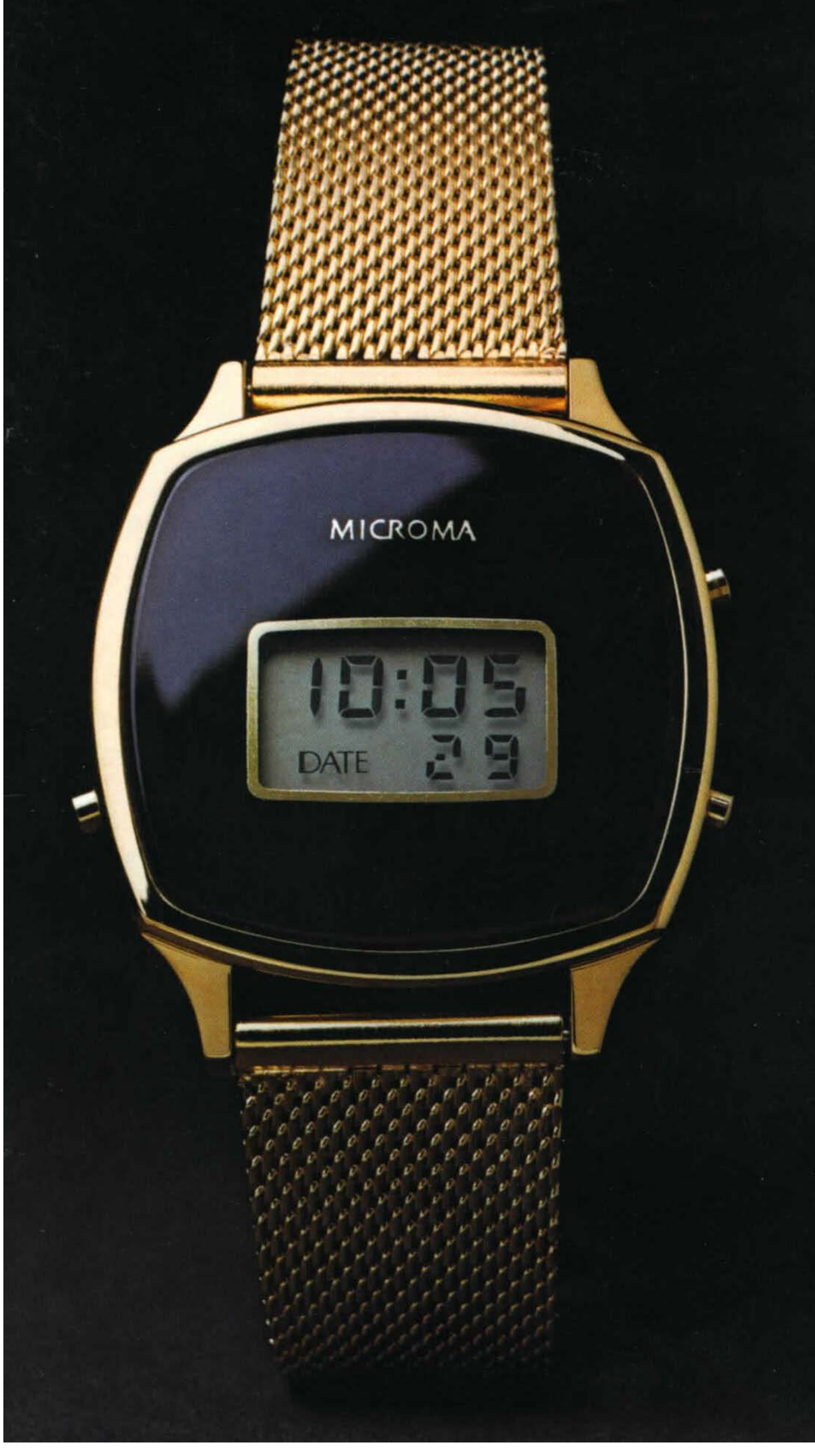
Intel co-founder Gordon Moore, circa 1980, wearing his Microma wristwatch.
Courtesy of Intel

In the past couple of weeks, several major companies — Samsung, Sony, Qualcomm — have announced they will release smart watches this fall. As the name suggests, the gadgets do more than keep time.

The latest spate of computerized watches promise to do everything from working as a phone to taking photos and fielding emails. Smart watches have actually been around for a long time, but they've never really taken off as a product.

The first time that smart watches showed up in popular culture probably goes back to 1946 and the cartoon detective Dick Tracy. Tracy's watch doubled as a walkie-talkie.

The cartoonist and creator of Dick Tracy, Chester Gould, actually got his inspiration from real-life inventor Alfred J Gross. Gross died more than a decade ago without ever seeing the smart watch get popular.



A Microma model, circa 1978. Intel's early Microma watches retailed for around \$300, but prices fell significantly as the market for LCD watches grew.

Courtesy of Intel

There's a reason, however, that people keep trying to make smart watches, says Marc Weber, a curator at the Computer History Museum.

"What do people put on their wrist? They put on functions that they need to know frequently," Weber says. "Things they're constantly looking at." He says that's why wrists became a popular place to look at the time.

Watches gained popularity along with the railroads and factory work, when people started having a greater need to know exactly what time it was. Weber says that initially pocket watches were popular.

"Today, the phone in your pocket is more like a pocket watch," he says, "or in your purse, and the wrist computer is the equivalent of the wristwatch."

Wristwatches ultimately became a lot more popular than pocket watches. Samsung, Sony, Qualcomm and others are hoping that's the path for smart watches.

There are heaps of electronics scattered along the road to the perfect smart watch. For example, back in the 1970s, Intel purchased a watch company called Microma Universal. Intel co-founder Gordon Moore says the company released the first watch with an LCD — liquid crystal display — and hoped to do more.



The Microma watch was the first watch with a liquid crystal display, but the limited technology of the time prevented Intel from achieving much else with it.

Courtesy of Intel

"The thought at the time was that the wristwatch could become much more than just a watch," Moore says. "You could add functions to it."

Intel's efforts failed. The technology simply hadn't reached a point where chips were small and powerful enough to do much inside a watch other than tell time. Moore wore his watch for years afterward as a reminder to stay out of the consumer watch business. He says he called it "my \$15 million watch," to remind himself how much the company lost in the endeavor.

There's a reason it's hard to nail the right design for a smart watch. Jakob Nielsen, who studies what makes technologies usable and popular, says wristwatches' small size makes it hard to give them a lot of functions.

"You have to potentially push buttons or understand menus," Nielsen says. "And if that's very clunky, then they will fail because then you have to spend so much time fiddling with the thing before you get any information."

Nielsen does think we're close to having the technology and the need for a smart watch. For example, voice recognition could make buttons and touch screens unnecessary. And these days, easily looking up the weather, checking email and accessing a phone quickly have become as important as checking the time was in the early days of the railroad.

The question now is whether there's a company out there that can finally fit it all comfortably on your wrist.