

Tech gifts for the geek who already has everything

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It's the holiday shopping season, so it's time to answer that all-important question: Do you know what to get the geeks in your life?

These days, they have smartphones, big-screen TVs and laptops, and probably a tablet and a [video game console](#) or two - those products account for more than half of all electronics spending in the U.S. So what do you get your geeks if they have all that? Well, in my book, it's time to focus on accessories - or on completely unrelated gadgets.

Here are some hints on how to give your tech enthusiast a happy holiday this year.

SPIFFING UP THE SMARTPHONE

There aren't many geeks that lack smartphones, but many may be looking to upgrade. iPhone fans have a cool new option in the iPhone 6 (starting at \$200 with a two-year contract), which sports a bigger screen than past models and the ability to make wireless payments. Android fans have plenty of models to choose from, but my favorite is probably the HTC One (M8) (starting at \$100 with a two-year contract), which has an elegant and solid aluminum case and some compelling photographic features.

But the real action this year with smartphones is in all the cool things you can connect to them.

Smartphones can now control your lights, appliances and door locks. Belkin's WeMo Insight Switch (\$60) allows consumers to use their [smartphone](#) as a remote control inside or outside the house to turn lights and other powered devices on or off. Not only can you control Oort's SmartLED light bulb (\$40) remotely, but you can change the color of its light on a whim, picking from among 16 million different choices.

A whole new generation of robotic toys has hit the market that you can pilot with smartphones, using their touchscreens and other sensors. Parrot's Rolling Spider (\$100) is a miniaturized version of its groundbreaking AR Drone that can take pictures, hover in place and roll along the floor. Sphero 2.0 (\$100) is a robotic ball that can zip around the ground and be used to play games involving knocking over objects or navigating through obstacles.

If your loved ones are into fitness, or you are trying to encourage them to be healthier, you could consider a fitness band. These devices - which typically look like rubber bracelets - track workouts, casual activity and sometimes sleep patterns, allowing users to monitor them on corresponding smartphone apps that also track calories and to set fitness goals. Among the most popular are Fitbit's Flex (\$100) and Jawbone's Up (\$65).

With ready access to Spotify, Pandora and other streaming services, smartphones serve as a conduit to a universe of music, largely replacing iPods and other portable media players that were once popular gifts. A pair of high-quality headphones are still useful, though. The over-the-ear kinds have dominated in recent years, led by Beats by Dre; its Studio Wireless set (\$375) connects via Bluetooth. For my part, I'm still partial to in-ear headphones; I've long loved Etymotic's line of noise-isolating earbuds, particularly its hf3 (\$150), which also works as a headset for phone calls.

If you want to share your music instead, you can use your smartphone to channel songs and albums into your living room or kitchen with a wireless speaker system. There are plenty on the market, ranging in price from less than \$100 to well more than \$400. Some of the more notable ones: Radio Shack's Auvio Universal Expanding speaker (\$16), Bose's SoundLink Color (\$130) and Brookstone's water-resistant Big Blue Party (\$300).

Still unsure? A gift card to Apple's App Store, Google's Play Store or Amazon will allow your geeks to buy the apps they want.

TRICKING OUT THE TELEVISION

While the smartphone has become the center of computing, the TV still is the focal point of the living room. The latest in TV technology, ultrahigh resolution or 4K displays, offer super sharp pictures on larger screens. Prices on such TVs have plunged this year; you can find 55-inch 4K models on sale for as little as \$1,100 and 65-inch 4K TVs for as little as \$1,800.

But with little 4K content to watch, there's no need to rush out and buy a new set, especially if you or your loved one have a relatively recent HD flat screen. Instead, take a look at how you can deck out that set.

Digital media players are a good place to start, allowing users to easily connect to a range of online video services. The best choice for your geeks likely depends on their other devices. Apple TV (\$100) remains a popular choice for Apple fans, because it makes it easy to watch content stored or channeled through iPhones, iPads and Mac computers. Amazon's FireTV (\$100) pairs well with the company's Fire tablets, which can beam video to it, and allows users to play hundreds of smartphone games on their TVs in addition to watching videos. Google's Chromecast (\$35) allows users to beam apps and video from iPhones,

Android devices and the Chrome browser on their PCs. Roku's Streaming Stick (\$50) works with both Apple and Android devices and offers a far the best selection of Internet "channels." In addition to watching Hollywood productions, you might want to watch your own videos on your big screen. While smartphone are convenient video recording devices, dedicated video cameras can offer better images. Action cams have been all the rage lately, allowing users to share their experiences of skiing, climbing, riding roller coasters and more. GoPro's Hero 4 Black (\$500) can record 4K video or up to 120 frames per second. Sony's POV Action Cam (\$300) offers a high-quality alternative to the GoPro line and includes a built-in GPS antenna.

The other big use for TVs is for playing games. Sony's PlayStation 4 (\$400) is the leading console of this generation so far, but Microsoft's Xbox One (\$350) is similarly powerful, offers a similarly compelling lineup of games - and is now less expensive.

If your geek already has a new console, consider getting some games. Among the latest include a bunch of surefire hits, including "Halo: Master Chief Collection" (for Xbox One only, \$60), "Grand Theft Auto V" (\$60), "Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare" (\$60) and "Destiny," (\$51) a first-person shooter from the team that created the "Halo" series. For younger gamers, check out "Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham" (\$50 to \$60, depending on console), Super Smash Bros. (for Nintendo's Wii U only, \$60) and whatever version of Minecraft they may not already own (console version, \$20; PC version, \$27).

Most TVs have crummy speakers that offer tinny sound. You can improve on that with a soundbar, a speaker that typical sits underneath the TV. Sharp's HT-SB602 (\$400) includes a separate subwoofer for bass tones and gets top marks from Consumer Reports. So too does Vizio's S3821w, but at a much more reasonable price (\$160).

DOING INSTEAD OF WATCHING

Not everything in tech revolves around smartphones or TVs. One cool emerging area is 3D printers, which usually connect to your old fashioned PC. These devices work somewhat like inkjet printers, but instead of using ink to print letters or two-dimensional graphics, they print three-dimensional objects using layer upon layer of quickly hardening melted plastic.

MakerBot, which has helped popularize the technology, now offers the Replicator Mini (\$1,375), its least expensive model yet. You can also find even less expensive - if often less capable - 3D printers, including XYZprinting's Da Vinci 1.0 (\$500). For even less money, you can get the 3Doodler (\$100), a penlike device that allows you to create 3D objects by hand, no PC required.

Another cool new area has been in low-cost modular electronic components that can be used to teach kids about circuits and sensors or easily assembled to create custom devices and toys. Little Bits Electronics offers a collection of kits (starting at \$100) that allow users to build everything from a miniature Mars rover to funky custom electronic instruments. Squishy Circuits kits (\$25) allow kids to connect LEDs and motors using circuits made out of dough. Maker Shed, a store run by the folks who publish Make magazine, offers a large assortment of electronics kits for everyone from kids to advanced adults. Among them are a robotics starter kit (\$80) and a fun, if pointless, Useless Machine kit (\$35).

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