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THE DIGITAL PAGE

WEEKLY GUIDE TO ENTERTAINMENT TECHNOLOGY

10 things that just work

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Today's gadgets are loaded with more features than most of us will ever need. It costs manufacturers little to add an FM radio to their cell phone or dozens of viewing controls to an HDTV, so they stick on features in hopes of winning as many sales as possible.

And it works, because a study in a recent issue of the Harvard Business Review indicates that when shopping for gadgets, we want everything. But according to the study, when we get our gadget home, all the bells and whistles get in the way of finding something as basic as the on/off switch.

Frustrated, we've started searching for toys that just get the job done. Here are some of our favorite no-frills-just-thrills gadgets, games and software. If you have something you like, send an e-mail to ctc-tempo@tribune.com with the word "GADGETS" in the subject line.

VIDEO

GOOFPROOF CAMCORDER: Our recent review of the simple but effective RCA Small Wonder (\$129.99; www.mysmallwonder.com) video camera sparked so many e-mails from readers that we decided to put it at the top of this list of gadgets that get the job done. The Small Wonder and its twin, the PureDigital Point & Shoot video camera (\$129.99; www.puredigitalinc.com), have basic controls for zooming and -- that's it. No focus, white balance or other options. It fits in your palm, runs on two AA batteries and captures 30 minutes of video and audio. Just point, shoot, connect to your Mac or Windows PC and download the video, so you can e-mail it to Grandma or your baby sister or anyone else you like.

PHONES

CELL PHONES THAT JUST MAKE CALLS: Proving that basic doesn't mean blah, these mobile phones are best at making and holding onto calls, instead of trying to dazzle you with cameras, games, ringtones and Web surfing (these phones may or may not be available in your area; prices are with two-year new-service contract). For Verizon Wireless customers, we recommend the Nokia 2128i (\$29.99; www.verizonwireless.com). For Cingular, we like the Samsung SGH-x497 (free after \$29.99 rebate; www.cingular.com). And for Sprint, check out the Sanyo VI-2300 (\$19.99 after \$150 rebate;

Advertisement



www.sprint.com).

AUDIO

SPEAKERPHONE FOR YOUR CELL PHONE (and your Skype calls, your landline . . .) Anything with a headphone jack can be plugged into the versatile ClearOne Chat 50 USB Plus (\$180.99; www.pcmall.com; 1-800-555-MALL) to give you an instant boombox or a speakerphone. Connect your cell phone and talk hands-free. Hook up the Chat 50 to your computer when you make free Internet phone calls via Skype, and you have a speakerphone that's clear and doesn't have the annoying pauses in conversation that some speakerphones give you -- throw away that bulky headphone-microphone headset you've been using. You can even plug in your MP3 player so you and the person you're calling can converse with romantic background music.

INTERNET

THE SITE THAT SEARCHES FOR NEW MUSIC YOU'LL LIKE: Go to www.pandora.com and enter a song you like. Software behind the scenes will play complete versions -- not 30-second snippets -- of songs that are related not just by genre but by arrangement and harmonic structure. It's more fun than it sounds. As Tribune editor Lilah Lohr says, "I'm nuts about this streaming music site. It's easy to use and fascinating to play with. You start by creating a 'radio station' with an artist or song or album you like, then watch as the Music Genome Project software figures out similarities and plays other tunes you might like too. You can mark each song thumbs up or thumbs down, and the software adjusts accordingly. Note: No classical music right now. It's free at the moment; might not be forever."

MUSIC

MUSIC FROM THE NEXT ROOM: Got iTunes? Get this. Plug your bedroom computer into the StarTech MP3 Airlink (\$92.99; www.startech.com) transmitter, about the size of a deck of cards, then plug your kitchen boombox into the MP3 Airlink receiver and make your iTunes playlist mobile, even if your computer is not. A couple of caveats, though: The MP3 Airlink operates on the 2.4 GHz frequency, so there may be interference from microwave ovens and cordless telephones (to minimize interference, the device has eight selectable channels). And the transmitter and receiver can be separated by only 30 feet if there's a wall between them (but effective range is 100 feet if there's nothing between them).

HANDHELDS

LITE-WEIGHT GAMING ON THE GO: The new Nintendo DS Lite (\$129.82; www.walmart.com) handheld gaming system is smaller, more portable and cooler than the original. Thrill to "BrainAge," "Sudoku Gridmaster" or "Legend of Zelda" (it plays hundreds of GameBoy Advance games too), using the included stylus like a joystick on the touch-sensitive screen. A couple of controls have been moved, and the screen is brighter, and best of all, it's white. While Sony's PlayStation Portable plays Hollywood movies, goes on the Web and stores music and photos as well as plays games, it sometimes makes you jump through hoops that novices aren't interested in. Nintendo DS Lite, on the other hand, is the ultimate in plug-and-play handheld gaming.

VIDEO GAMES

TAKE ME OUT AT THE BALLGAME: Baseball moves too slowly for me, unless I'm playing Midway's "MLB Slugfest 2006" (\$19.99; www.amazon.com). Realism is reserved only for the nicely rendered ballparks. This simulation-style game turns good pitches into curlicues and great pitchers into unhittable balls of fire. Batters start smoking as their average heats up and if they get consecutive hits,

they're on fire. The play-by-play announcer and the color analyst go off on hilarious tangents while keeping an eye on the action. "Slugfest" is great fun but doesn't overlook the nuances of baseball, making it perfect for the whole family and even non-baseball fans like me.

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