

# James's Guide to Tech Consumerism\*

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## Abstract

My take on the best tech gadgets in each class at this point in time, for the busy shopper or rich gift buyer. This is in part a reaction to *Uncle Mark's Gift Guide and Almanac* (<http://www.unclemark.org>), with which I mostly agree—however, I thought I'd give my own version of the story.

## 1 Introduction

First of all: I don't want this document to perpetuate the idea that you have to *own expensive stuff* to be validated or cool or whatever. The coolest gadget-person is probably one who has none of the things listed here, and tinkers with old junk found on eBay and in dumpsters to make it do stuff its designers never dreamed of.

Having said that, people do buy nice expensive gadgets sometimes. So this guide is my advice for *which* items to choose, given that you're going to anyway. Better that you end up with a useful item that will last you a long time, while supporting the companies that get it right.

## 2 Computer

The 15-inch Apple Powerbook is the best computer for the 'average person'. The current Macintosh OS, OS X, is well designed in terms of both ease of use and power. The screen of the 15" Powerbook is large enough to use all day without feeling cramped, and is widescreen, allowing movies (and many modern television shows) to look nicer, as well as providing a more pleasing area to work on multiple documents side-by-side.

There are a couple of distinct classes of people who probably shouldn't buy a Mac: Gamers, and mid-experience-level computer enthusiasts. For gamers, it's simple: Almost every computer game is made for Windows. For the enthusiasts, the Macintosh experience is often frustrating: The system hides and automates many options and settings that Windows users are used to having easy control over. Interestingly, therefore, the Mac is better suited both to novice users who require a simple and intuitive system *and* to high-experience-level users who enjoy the extreme flexibility of the UNIX system upon which it is built.

### 2.1 Alternatives

Those who want greater portability or a secondary machine might consider the 12" Powerbook or 12" iBook (note that these two have the same screen size and are in most ways almost identical—I approve of both).

Those who have a special requirement for another Operating System—Linux or Windows for example—might consider the acceptable Dell Inspiron 700m laptop. While its physical quality is perhaps not comparable to Apple's, its wide-format screen is of good quality and its portability is excellent.

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\*This is the first publication of this document. I plan to keep it up to date from time to time. If you have any comments, corrections or disagreements, please let me know—my email address is at the top.

## 3 Digital camera

There are two kinds of digital camera: those designed primarily to be portable, and those designed primarily to take good quality photos. Since these aims are incompatible, I recommend two cameras here.

I recommend not trying to combine these two aims into one camera. If you want to take nice photos, you will be unhappy with anything less than a real SLR, and if you're not buying an SLR then the advantages of a bulky camera are minimal (except perhaps when buying at the low end—in which case, I recommend a Kodak point-and-shoot such as the Easyshare CX7220).

### 3.1 Portable

The Canon Digital IXUS 40 (also known as the Powershot SD300 and the Ixy Digital 50). It is very small—within about 10% of the size of the smallest optical-zoom-enabled camera currently available—yet it takes 4 megapixel photos that are mostly as good as those of the best bulky medium-sized point-and-shoot cameras several times its volume and weight. Its macro, movie and long exposure modes make it a very capable camera, and its size means you can have it with you as much as you like.

### 3.2 Quality photos

The Canon line of Digital SLR ('through the lens') cameras are well respected, and the best choice is probably the EOS 300D. Its plastic body keeps it relatively light (though all SLRs are quite heavy), while its internal hardware is of the same high quality as the bulkier, heavier professional models from Canon. The quality of images from this 6 megapixel camera is essentially second-to-none in all but a few specific situations.

### 3.3 Alternatives

The other models from the IXUS and EOS lines respectively are good too: If you don't need 4 megapixels, the Digital IXUS 30 is almost identical but with a 3 megapixel sensor (it's also slightly lighter than the IXUS 40). If you want a heavier, more professional digital SLR camera, the 8 megapixel Canon EOS 20D is the best choice.

## 4 Printer

Personally, I think you should think about whether you really need a printer. Most documents are really pretty easy to read on a screen, and most of the time you can send documents to people via email rather than snail mail. I may be a special case, but I print things once every couple of months at most. When you do need to print something, you can always take it to a copy shop where the quality will be better, and long documents will print much faster. You can even do colour, a feature still not really available in home-targeted laser printers.

The best printer for hassle-free use, speed and features is the HP Laserjet 1320N. It has enough speed that you rarely find yourself waiting for it, it prints double-sided (great for saving trees) and it connects into your home network directly for sharing, meaning it doesn't need a 'host' computer to be switched on to use it. Being PostScript-aware, it is also highly compatible—Mac, Linux and Windows can all use it with no hassle. If you don't need printer sharing between multiple computers, the plain Laserjet 1320 is the same in other respects.

As for inkjets: Again, consider whether you need one. The ink is expensive, the quality is much worse than laser for black-and-white pages, and runs out incredibly quickly if you're printing colour photographs. Some printers run at multiple dollars-per-page for full-page photos. Investigate using a copy shop or photo lab to print your photos—it may not even be more expensive, and the quality will most likely be better.

## 5 Computer game console

There are three games consoles currently in the running: The Nintendo GameCube, the Microsoft X-Box and the Sony Playstation 2. All of these are quite old in terms of usual console lifespans, and at least Sony and Microsoft are planning to release new systems this year.

### 5.1 Playstation 2

The best choice for now is the Playstation 2. It has been around for a long time and has many games (being compatible with original Playstation games), especially those of Japanese origin. If your tastes lie in that direction, the choice is simple.

### 5.2 X-Box

The X-Box has two properties that cause it to be chosen over the Playstation in some circumstances: Halo and illegal copying. Halo is a huge game franchise, and has probably sold many X-Boxes all by itself. If you want to play it, you should buy an X-Box.

The X-Box, with its PC-like hardware, has been found to be much friendlier to making and running unauthorised copies of games. With the addition of a mod-chip, some individuals copy games directly onto its hard disk, and with a little know-how they can even burn those games onto DVDs, or download DVD images from the internet. This is probably illegal where you live, but it is nevertheless a significant deciding factor for many when choosing a console.

## 6 Digital music player

There are many digital music players (from plain CD players onwards...). Apple did not even make the first hard-disc mp3 player. But the Apple iPod is the only one you should buy if your main aim is to listen to your music (rather than, say, record radio shows or live music, for which there are more specialised devices that work well). Why?

- iTunes is the best jukebox software, and makes loading music onto your iPod trivial (this alone is a large part of why the iPod dominates the world while its predecessors did not)
- The iPod's user interface is very well-worked-out
- The iPod feels right—no snaggle buttons, no gimmicky features

No other player has really got anywhere near the iPod on this yet. The decision is pretty clear-cut.

## 7 PDA

Palm-powered devices are the way to go. They're small, have good battery life, and the operating system and GUI are well designed for small screens and momentary-attention use such as looking up an address or setting an alarm.

Your choice depends mainly on one thing: Do you have to carry a phone?

- No: The Palm Zire 21 is perfect for you—addresses, notes, ebooks etc in a very small device
- Yes: Then the Treo 650 frees up some pocket space by combining your phone and PDA, and it actually works really well for both.

### 7.1 Alternatives

As these devices become more capable, it's pretty clear that Windows CE/PocketPC is 'growing into' its role to a certain extent. Features such as a vendor-provided Internet Explorer and Windows Media Player are neat, in that they make the experience more like that of using a PC. You have to decide if this is you: Do you want the most powerful, capable gadget, or the most useful organiser and PDA?