



Gadgets We Crave

Toys Your Techie Friends Will Love

Elizabeth Corcoran, 11.29.07, 1:00 PM ET

BURLINGAME, CALIF. -The best toys to give, of course, are the ones that you really want to keep yourself. And if you have a techie-inclined mind, you're probably prowling for gifts with a real science twang.

Every blinking robot claims a spot on the tech-toy roster these days. But just because a toy uses a battery doesn't mean that it is educational or that it can give you--or the lucky recipient--any insight into the science behind it.

Just ask Matt Hannifin, who has run the jewel box-like Science Toy Magic Shop in Santa Fe, N.M., for the past six years. Hannifin delights in picking out unusual items that demonstrate the principles of science as if by magic. "No Lincoln Logs," says Hannifin. He checks to make sure the science works, then lets customers play with everything on display in his minuscule shop, which measures precisely 58.2 square feet. Last April, Hannifin even did a presentation on science toys to a special gathering of managers from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

In Pictures: Toys To Tickle A Techie

A couple of Hannifin's current favorites include a Fuel Cell Car and Experiment Kit from Thames & Kosmos, a package that lets you try 30 or so experiments that demonstrate the physics and chemistry behind using solar energy or a hydrogen fuel cell in a toy car.

You could also blow someone away with air. Sixteen-year-old Ben, who works for Hannifin, delights in demonstrating the Airzooka, literally an air cannon that sends a blast of air 20 feet or so. You start by pulling back an elastic "launcher." When you release it, the launch pushes air through a barrel-like container which creates a "toroidal effect." The air inside the device slows down in the center and speeds up along the edges. The result: An unsuspecting victim will suddenly feel a strong "puff." No batteries required.

There's also a nifty laser game reminiscent of chess. Even the folks on the Star Ship Enterprise would have loved this. The pieces have an Egyptian look and mirrored sides that bounce light from a low-powered diode laser at one another and consequently knock each other out of the game.

Too much work? Try the Levitron, which will keep even the most scientifically inclined theorizing about exactly how it works. The Levitron gets touted as an "anti-gravity" device--and in a way, it is. The latest Levitron uses a cleverly arranged collection of magnets to keep a globe spinning. And there are plenty of variations on the theme: A version of the Levitron called "Floating Ideas" gives you a base over which you can float a variety of objects, including models of the space shuttle, a VW Beetle and a picture frame. "The most popular is a floating picture frame," notes Hannifin. "It's great for executives' desks."

Oddly enough, for a guy as versed in the latest tech as Hannifin, he hasn't yet created a Web site. (He will ship some objects, however. Google can help you find the phone number for his shop.)

Hit up tourist spots for other shopping options: Any science museum worth its entrance fee has an intriguing gift shop these days. Silicon Valley favorites include the Tech Museum in San Jose and the Exploratorium in San Francisco.

If you want to go off those well-trod paths, however, there are still more options floating around on the Web.

One gift that will keep the conversation going evening after evening is a copy of the Periodic Table. Not just any old periodic table, but the most photographically breathtaking version ever created, encased in sturdy plastic and enlivened by "lenticular technology," the technique that uses linear lens elements laminated over a specially processed image to create a convincing 3D effect. It is the coolest placemat I've ever seen.

In our house, which is often overflowing with grade-school boys, these elemental placemats have been an astonishing hit. The kids love quizzing each other on the elements. (Really. They do it themselves. Without prompting--or at least without very much prompting.)

Like the best products, this lovely chart of the elements grew out of the passionate interest of its creator, Theodore Gray, one of the co-founders of Wolfram Research, maker of Mathematica software.

And what is one of Gray's favorite sci-toys this season? He loves the Lichtenberg figures from a Web site called TeslaMania. Bert Hickman, who runs the Web site, does things with voltage that no one should try at home. One happy side product: a collection of Plexi-glas paperweights that have been zapped with 5 million electron volt e-beam so it winds up with a fractal pattern display inside. No kidding. The creations look their best when lit up with, say, an LED light. But just imagine bringing this into the office after the holidays.

All of which brings me to one of my favorite gifts: an old-fashioned instruction guide for making cool stuff. Saul Griffith, who earned a Ph.D. at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, teamed up a couple of years ago with a cartoonist to create fun and instructive guides on how to make things yourself. Can't you just see yourself armed with a homemade Marshmallow Shooter?

There's no better way to guarantee a very techie New Year.

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