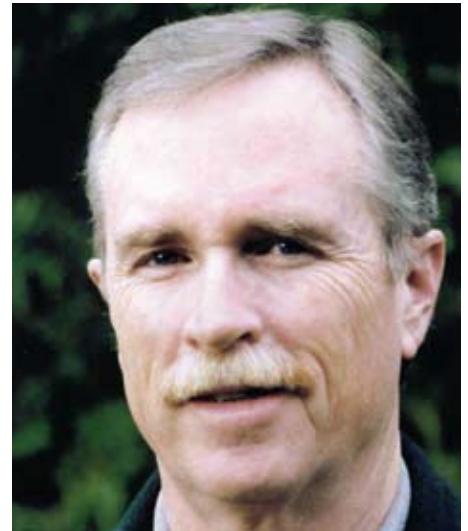


Timothy Perrin

# Post-Christmas Wish List: High-Tech Toys *for Big Girls and Boys*



**Y**ou've taken down the tree and put away the decorations.

You managed to put tab-A in slot-B successfully on each and every gift that came with "some assembly required." You maybe even climbed up a rickety ladder and removed the Christmas lights from around the house (though, if you're like me, that will wait for Spring Break).

Yet somehow, there's still a gaping hole in your gut, a sense of unfulfilled longing.

What's that? You didn't get what you really wanted for Christmas?

The old man disappointed you, did he? He slipped up. He looked at his naughty list and thought he saw your name, so he went and gave your 50" flat-screen TV to that pain-in-the-kiester Harry Ross down the block.

Well, the heck with Santa! One of the great things about being a grownup is MasterCard. And Future Shop is open until 10:00 every night but Sunday, 24/7, online! It's time to buy yourself a present!

Here are Tim's picks for the best high-tech toys of 2007 (AKA Tim's list of the goodies he wishes he'd gotten for Christmas).

## What's that? You didn't get what you really wanted for Christmas?

### Skype Wi-Fi Phones

If you're a regular reader of my column, you know I'm a big fan of VoIP—voiceover IP technology. When Terre and I returned from Europe last Spring, we ditched Telus for a cell phone and Skype, a VoIP carrier. Now, I do all my long distance for next to nothing over the Internet.

The only disadvantage with the arrangement is that we have to have a computer turned on for Skype to work because it's software. You plug a headset into your computer and use the numeric keypad on the keyboard to dial. If you miss the feel of a telephone, there are USB telephones and adaptors that let you use your existing telephones.

But the neatest Skype phones now are from Netgear and Belkin, folks you normally associate with network routers. Netgear's Skype Wi-Fi Phone was first to market but Belkin's seems to offer identical features. From the looks, I expect they're both manufactured in the same factory in Taiwan and

simply marketed under different brand names.

Neither needs a computer or any kind of plug at all. They've got their own network wireless connections and the Skype software is built right into it. All they need is a wireless connection and you can call anywhere in the world. A wireless "hotspot" at Starbucks will work just as well as your home or office wireless network.

Prices at the time of my deadline were US\$225 from <http://www.Netgear.com> and US\$180 from <http://www.Belkin.com>, but some savvy Web shopping will get you much better prices; I expect that competition will have pulled prices down by the time you read this. Already, Toshiba.com (but not Toshiba.ca) is offering the Netgear model for US\$199 and I've found it on eBay for as little as US\$170. Belkin's are just hitting the market so by the time you read this, I wouldn't be surprised to see them selling in the \$130 to \$140 range.

By the way, if you want much the same for free, download the free Skype software for your wireless-equipped Pocket PC. Like most things Skype, it works . . . and it's free! It's what I use.



## FON

If you want to do your part in the quest to unwire the world, here's a way you can help.

FON is a Spanish company that wants to see the world covered in free wireless Internet access, and what better way to do it than to have everybody sharing their home or business wireless Internet connection.

This is different than the way too many people are unwittingly sharing their wireless connection. About two thirds of all wireless networks are unencrypted and unprotected, just asking for trouble. Of the ones that are encrypted, most use WEP encryption, which is easily cracked using software that can be easily downloaded from the Internet.

Make sure your wireless network is protected with WPA encryption and restricted to allow only specific computers to log on by recognizing them by their unique MAC addresses.

The FON system works differently, however. For US\$29.95, FON sells you a wireless router that has 2 channels, 1 encrypted and restricted for your personal use, and 1 public, for the use of other FON members. When you join FON, you agree to share your Internet access, and in return you can use the Internet access of others around the world when you're travelling.

If you're going to Europe, in particular, a FON membership is very useful as the system is quite widespread on the continent.



Even non-FON members can access the network for a very reasonable \$1 to \$2 a day. In fact, that's how the company generates its revenue.

For now, the modems are not available in Canada; you have to get a friend in the US to pick one up for you. But the FON directory system will gladly take your registration and put you on their map.

One last thing. Check the terms of the service agreement with your Internet service provider to ensure that sharing your Internet access is allowed.

US\$30 at <http://en.fon.com/>

## Eye Theatre

Ever wanted a truly immersive movie experience, a sense that you are right inside the action? Then you need the Eye Theater, a wearable movie screen with integrated stereo sound. You put it on like glasses but it's like you're looking at a large theatre screen. You can use it with just about anything that produces video, from a video iPod to your DVD or gaming computer.

US\$230 from <http://www.voipvoice.com>

## Oakley O ROKR Sunglasses

Do you watch the Dog? Sure you do! Come on, own up. Half an hour with Dog the Bounty Hunter and his gang on A&E is one of life's guilty pleasures.

You may have noticed that the Dog, AKA Duane Chapman, proprietor of Da Kine Bail Bonds in Honolulu, is rarely without his shades. And if you look closely, you'll see that a pair of earphones is dangling from those innocent-looking albeit oh-so-stylish sunglasses.

Now, you can be as cool as the Dog with your own high-tech sunnies. Motorola has teamed up with Oakley to produce a pair of glasses that use Bluetooth technology to connect with your iPod, your cell phone, your computer, or your GPS navigation system.

Listening to Vivaldi when a phone call comes in? No problem. Just push the button on the left arm of the

glasses to answer. A tiny hole on the right arm hides a microphone. When you're done with your latest deal, it's back to the *Four Seasons*—and carving S-turns at Big White—with no one the wiser.

Well, they may have heard that snow boarder who went roaring by screaming "Cowabunga!" but you'll be able to explain that, I'm sure.

US\$250 from <http://oakley.com>

## Leadfoot Limiter

And finally, something to save you from yourself. Siemens VDO is working on a system that scans the road ahead for road signs. When it sees a speed limit sign, it informs you of the new limit. If you've got cruise control engaged, it automatically slows you down.

The system can work on restrictions that are only in effect at certain times of the day. It even knows whether you are on a local road or a highway by tying into your GPS navigation system.

It's part of an overall driving assistance package that Siemens hopes to start putting in 2009 model year cars. The whole package includes a lane recognition system to keep you from drifting over the line, night vision, and parking sonar to tell you exactly how far you have to go until you bump the car behind you.

The bad news is that the system is too complex to be retrofitted into older cars. You'll have to buy a new vehicle, undoubtedly high-end, to get this puppy.

But that's what Santa is for, isn't it?

I just can't help wondering how he's going to get my Mercedes E series down the chimney. ▲

**Tim Perrin** has been writing this column since 1993. For the first 5 years, he was a lawyer in Vancouver and the BC Interior, then left the profession in 1998 to write and teach. Now he's returned to law with the firm of Bassett & Co. in Westbank, BC.

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