

A short list of high-speed, high-def tech gifts



By Michael Lasky on December 16, 2015 in [Best Hardware](#)

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Sure we still need Windows, but much of our personal communications and entertainment — and some work — is running on smartphones, tablets, and various other Internet-attached devices.

So it's only natural that we look for fast and agile tech accessories that suit our evolving lifestyles.

Here, then, is my admittedly diverse but personally vetted gift guide to devices that enhance the enjoyment of video, audio, gaming, and photography — on and off the PC.

Linksys router is powerful, smart, and fast

If your home Wi-Fi network is staggering under the load of laptops, tablets, smartphones, Blu-ray players, and numerous other Internet-connected devices; if you're addicted streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime, you have good reasons to consider purchasing the pricey **Linksys WRT1900ACS** ([site](#)) router. U.S. \$230 gets you excellent connection speeds, wide-area coverage, and some innovative advanced features.



Figure 1. The *Linksys WRT1900ACS* has the power to support numerous data-hungry Wi-Fi devices. *Source: Linksys*

This router is brain-dead simple to set up; simply connect it to power and attach the included Ethernet cable to your broadband modem. You're now ready to connect your Wi-Fi -based devices.

If you want to customize the routers settings, it offers several ways to do so, including apps for iOS and Android devices plus the free website, linkysmartwifi.com. Both options have intuitive configuration menus. Changing router settings over Wi-Fi could be risky, but the WRT1900ACS is one of the first routers to support virtual private networking (VPN), which gives users secure remote connections (if they're in the same room as the router).

With 802.11AC data rates, this router supports the fastest throughput standards (up to 1.3Gbps) currently available for home Wi-Fi. Of course, many Wi-Fi devices still don't support AC, so the WRT1900ACS simultaneously handles slower 802.11B/G/N. Linksys also included 512MB of RAM for faster and smoother media streaming. Finally, the router's four antennas give excellent range.

Wi-Fi devices such as streaming-media boxes often need more bandwidth than, say, your Internet-connected thermostat or the tablet you're using to shop for Aunt Minnie's Christmas gift. So the Linksys Smart Wi-Fi apps let you drag and drop connected devices between high-priority and normal-priority device lists. To help with this task, the Linksys apps display a live Network Map, which shows devices by connection type. Other customization options include guest accounts, parental controls, and access permissions to the dual band.

Two ports — one USB 3.0, one USB 2.0/eSata — let you set up an external hard drive that's easily accessible (with permission, of course) to everyone on the network, a feature the small businesses will find useful.

If you have a household or small office replete with Wi-Fi-enabled gadgets, you need a router that can support the load. The Linksys WRT1900ACS easily fits the bill.

Extending Ethernet when Wi-Fi doesn't reach

There are places where even the best Wi-Fi router can't provide needed coverage. In those cases, TP-LINK's \$90 TL-PA8030P AV1200 Ethernet-adaptor kit ([site](#)) might be the easy solution.

Powerline Ethernet typically uses two of three wires in your AC electrical system to carry data to any corner of the house. The technology has been around for years, and it has gradually become faster and more resistant to interference. TP-LINK's device is the first I've tested that uses all three wires and MIMO technology for greater range and reliability. That makes it especially suitable for streaming-media applications.

The AV1200 also has **three** Ethernet ports, which I used to connect a Roku streaming box, a Blu-ray player, and a high-def TV — all from one AC socket. (There's also a power pass-through, so you don't lose the use of the wall socket.) In my informal testing, it supported all three devices simultaneously without a hiccup.



Figure 2. The *TP-LINK TL-PA8030P AV1200* adapters extend Ethernet over AC powerlines and include a generous number of ports. *Source: TP-LINK*

The device is rated for up to 1200Mbps, but your speed will depend on the condition of your AC circuits and other local factors. The plug-and-play set-up process was quick; I spent most of the time plugging the two adapter boxes into outlets and connecting one of the two included Ethernet cables to a free port on my router. Note: As with all powerline/Ethernet devices, the AV1200 must be plugged directly into a wall outlet — you can't attach it to a power strip.

In my tests, streaming media via Wi-Fi occasionally resulted in momentary delays and slightly fuzzy images. But all that disappeared with the hardwired TP-LINK AV1200.

Mionix Castor: The mouse that roars

Designed as a highly responsive mouse for right-handed gamers, the \$70 Mionix Castor ([site](#)) proves to be one of the most comfortable pointing devices I've ever tested. It's also highly flexible; it has virtual software (it doesn't make Registry entries) for customizing **six** programmable buttons, DPI settings, and LED back-lighting. Its tail is a six foot, reinforced USB cable.

This pointing device might be a great gift for avid gamers, but it's equally comfortable and useful for the rest of us. It has a grippy rubberized surface and third- and forth-finger groves for greater comfort over hours of use.



Figure 3. The *Mionix Castor* is a quick and agile mouse. *Source: Mionix*

Adjustable DPI settings, crucial for gamers, are equally important for fine-art renderings and image editing. Macro support lets you record and play back often-repeated functions. The Mionix uses a fast 32-bit ARM processor to enable gaming features without compromising tracking accuracy. That translates to equally accurate pointing and clicking with non-gaming applications.

Your Aunt Minnie will probably tell you that a perfectly good mouse will set you back only 5 or 10 bucks. But if you value comfort and speed, the Mionix Castor is a worthy critter.

A mountain of sound: JBL's Everest headphones

Harman JBL is known for high-fidelity headphones. But the company reached into a higher zone with its Everest Elite 700 Elite. Designed to work either as a Bluetooth headphone for mobile devices or a wired headset for desk-based computers, the \$250 Everest Elite ([site](#)) is clearly targeted at audiophiles. As I listened to pop and classical music in turn, they delivered a rich range of sounds. The bass wasn't especially deep, but the mid-range and treble were nicely balanced.

Part of the headphone's exceptional and immersive sound quality is achieved through its noise-canceling technology. Unlike most other headsets with noise cancellation, the Everest Elite lets you set the level of cancellation — you can dial in the amount of ambient sound to let in. With full noise cancellation, even the drone of a vacuum cleaner is blocked. But a quick button press gives me back more awareness of my surroundings.



Figure 4. JBL's pricy Everest Elite 700 headphones deliver excellent sound and adjustable noise cancellation. Source: JBL

JBL's TruNote Auto Sound feature is designed to automatically calibrate sound to your preferences. Free, downloaded iOS and Android apps let you quickly control equalizer settings and set other controls.

The headphones recharge via a USB port, and the fixed internal Lithium battery is rated at 15 hours per charge. Unlike many other headsets, the microphone is not on a boom; it's built into the earpieces.

If you're looking for a headset to chat with Aunt Minnie over Skype, the Everest Elite 700 is obviously overkill. But audiophiles are used to paying a premium for quality sound. For that group, these headphones should not disappoint.

Drive HD: Dash cam records your ride and more

Dash-mounted cameras have a few uses: primarily recording your drives, documenting an accident, or defending a traffic ticket. If that's all you want, buy a GoPro.

Cobra's Drive HD Dash Cam (CDR 855 BT) records 1080p HD video, but does a bit more than the typical dash-cam. Priced at \$170, Drive HD ([site](#)) includes Bluetooth, which you can use to transfer GPS data from your phone to the Drive HD's recorded video. And a free iOS or Android app lets the device connect to the iRadars community via your phone, delivering alerts to red-light and speed cameras plus active police locations.



Figure 5. Cobra's Drive HD Dash Cam not only records the action ahead, it connects to smartphones with Bluetooth for GPS iRadars data. Source: Cobra

The camera has 8GB of built-in memory, but you can expand that with an optional microSD card (32GB, max). The internal batteries are rated for up to 30 minutes of recording time — that's not very long, but the kit comes with a 12-volt power cable.

The device's lens covers a broad 160 degrees, and its motion detector will automatically wake up the camera and start recording when it senses movement outside the car. That's handy for security — as long as a thief doesn't steal the camera. An internal sensor will also save any recorded video if it detects an impact. That might be useful when Aunt Minnie backs into your front bumper.

Want to use the Drive HD for action videos? It easily detaches from its mount. Use it on hikes or for inside videos and stills as well.

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