

Fight feature fatigue: the guide to simple gadgets

When people were given a choice of three models of a digital device, more than 60 percent chose the most complicated model. University of Maryland researchers discovered in a 2005 study. Given the choice to add even *more* features from a list, they did. But when asked to use the device, study participants became frustrated with the options they had chosen. The researchers dubbed this "feature fatigue."

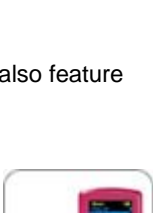


Realizing that more is not always better, some manufacturers are taking the opposite tack: designing products that do one thing well. The Jitterbug phone, aimed at an older audience, has big buttons and a big screen and does absolutely nothing but make phone calls. The new [Chrome browser](#) by Google lets you navigate the web with a few simple tabs and icons.

Here's a look at some of the simplest electronics we have at Circuit City.

Camcorders

When you're shooting home movies, do you demand the ability to fine-tune the color matrix, gamma, knee and black stretch variables? Then invest in a professional camcorder like the [Canon XL2](#).



If you have absolutely no idea what those features are, don't worry. For users who just want to upload skateboard tricks to YouTube, camcorder manufacturers are thinking simple. The compact and popular [Flip Video camcorders](#) let you record up to 60 minutes of video with the push of one button. Plug the attached USB arm into your computer and upload videos in minutes. Our customers recommend the Flip for travel, though they say the 2x zoom is limiting.

These [DXG Technology camcorders](#) and the tiny [RCA EZ205 Small Wonder camcorder](#) also feature built-in software and USB cables for easy uploading and sharing.

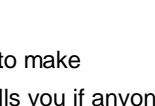
MP3 players

MP3 players can now browse the web, give you directions and play movies (see [iPod touch](#)). But if you want an ultra-simple device, look for one that just plays MP3s. The [iPod shuffle](#) is a favorite—it's tiny, tough and holds up to 500 songs. Our customers also rave about the [SanDisk Sansa Clip MP3 player](#), another small, music-only player.



Cameras

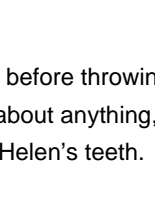
Digital cameras are an exception to the less-is-more rule. Most point-and-shoot cameras aim to simplify photography by *adding* features, such as pre-set modes for different conditions, image stabilization and red-eye reduction. The "Active Child mode" on the [Nikon CoolPix S610](#) even tracks a moving object as it travels out of frame. These innovations make it easy to snap good pictures.



The new [Sony Cyber-shot T77](#) goes one step further. This little camera tries its hardest to make photography foolproof. It automatically focuses on faces, waits for people to smile and tells you if anyone blinks. Minimalists can select Easy Shooting mode, which gives you on-screen instructions and limits the number of settings.

Home theater

Home theater systems, with their nests of cables and spiderweb diagrams, can shatter the confidence of even experienced electronic do-it-yourselfers. The [Onkyo TX-SR806 7.1 Dolby TrueHD and DTS-HD receiver](#), for instance, has no fewer than 90 inputs and outputs. Red, yellow and white? Say hello to teal, green and violet.



Avid audiophiles love sophisticated systems like the TX-SR806. But here's the good news—you can get rich theater sound with a simple 2.1-channel (two speakers + a subwoofer) system. The [Bose 321 GSII DVD home entertainment system](#) gives you the famous Bose sound with only three speakers. Connect three wires and plug it in. That's it. Or go totally minimal with a [soundbar system](#). Our home theater guru Doug Hess reviews three soundbar systems [here](#).

Even the simplest gadgets can sometimes be frustrating. But remember this: call for help before throwing in the towel. Our [firedog experts](#) can set up, troubleshoot and show you how to use just about anything, from cameras to computers. The only thing they can't do is digitally straighten your Aunt Helen's teeth.

—Melissa Barber

haikureviews

August contest winner
[Iron Man](#)
Be your own hero (some assembly required)
—comes in red and gold.
—Jason Glaser, Mankato, MN

Nelly: Brass Knuckles
Big muscles, dope beats, and lots of guest stars—Nelly makes St. Louis proud.
—Erin Graham

LEGO Batman: The Videogame
KAPOW! Holy caped LEGO blocks, Batman! POPI BLAM! This game's not for squares.
—Holly Slonaker

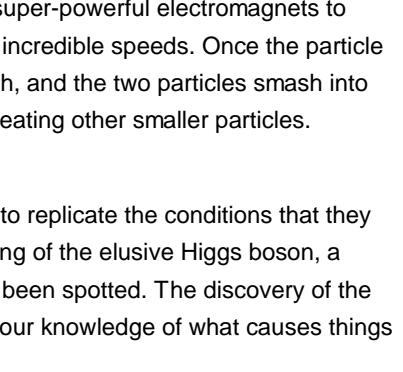
Are you a haiku master?
Write your own haiku about [The Incredible Hulk](#), arriving on 10/21.

Send your haiku to citylife@circuitcity.com by 9/30, and if yours is the best, we'll publish it in the next edition of *city life*! Remember, your haiku should follow the 5-7-5 syllable format.

How does that work?

Q: How does a particle accelerator work?

A: There were two announcements last Tuesday on the technology front. Yes, [new iPods](#) were unveiled. And the pocket-protector crew in Switzerland finally got the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) up and running. This is really cool, but I figure there had to be at least a few of you out there who were wondering what a particle accelerator is, what it does and how it works.



What it is
A particle accelerator is a large circular tube that uses a series of super-powerful electromagnets to propel subatomic particles (usually protons) around and around at incredible speeds. Once the particle reaches a certain speed, another particle is introduced into the path, and the two particles smash into one another, releasing a (relatively) large amount of energy and creating other smaller particles.

How it works
By smashing these particles into one another, scientists are trying to replicate the conditions that they believe existed immediately after the Big Bang, including the creating of the elusive Higgs boson, a particle that's believed to have existed, but that has never actually been spotted. The discovery of the Higgs boson would fill in a sort of missing link, and could advance our knowledge of what causes things to have mass, and even open the door to other dimensions.

Why it matters
So what's so special about the LHC? First of all, the size. It has a circumference of 17 miles, and crosses the Swiss-French border in four places. Once it's in full operation, the LHC will produce so much data that it will take 80,000 computers around the world to analyze all of it. The LHC will give scientists the best chance of discovering the Higgs boson currently possible, but it will probably be 2010 before anyone will know for sure if it's been found.

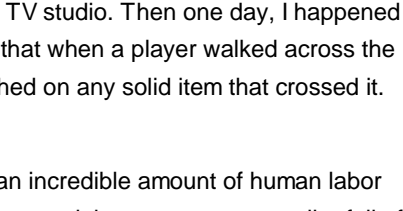
There have been a number of people who have expressed fears that the LHC will be capable of creating tiny black holes, which could expand and eventually swallow up the entire Earth. However, the LHC scientists have stated that despite its size, the collider isn't even capable of producing the tiniest black hole, and Stephen Hawking has gone so far as to call the collisions taking place inside the LHC "feeble" in comparison to collisions taking place constantly throughout the universe. But no one will really know for sure until the real research starts on October 21.

—Matthew West

Thanks to everyone who sent in questions last month! You can continue to email your questions to howdoesthatworkmat@gmail.com.

Technobabble: Drawing a line in the field

The publishers asked if I could somehow work some mention of football into this month's column. Anyone who knows me knows that I'm the last person who should be writing about [football](#). But the request got me thinking, and I realized that something's been nagging at me since I first came across it years ago.



First down, no yellow feet
If you watch football on [TV](#), you're familiar with the first down line that appears on the screen as the players are running around. It's usually a bright yellow line that moves with each play, and it's pretty obvious that it's not really on the field but is superimposed for TV broadcast. Since I don't really pay attention to games, I never thought much about it. I figured it was just some simple overlay done in the TV studio. Then one day, I happened on a game while flipping through the channels and noticed that a player walked across the line, his feet didn't turn yellow. In fact, the line never once encroached on any solid item that crossed it.

A lot goes into that line
It turns out that adding the first down line to your TV screen takes an incredible amount of human labor and technology. It's actually created by a company called Sportvision, and they use a tractor trailer full of equipment—including eight [computers](#) and at least four operators—to make it happen. The system needs an incredible amount of data and needs to solve a number of problems:

- It needs to know the orientation of the field in relation to the TV camera covering the field so that the line can be "painted" with the correct perspective;
- The system needs to be able to detect camera movements, including pans, zooms and focusing;
- It has to be powerful enough to refresh the line 30 times a second to keep up with your TV's refresh rate;
- It has to be able to tell when players, referees and flags cross the line.

And that's not even the half of it. Key to the process are special camera mounts that detect the movements and digitize them, as well as a computerized 3D model of the football field that helps the system account for crests and irregularities in the field. Equally important is a color palette built into the computer system. This helps the computers recognize when something that's a different color than the underlying grass crosses the line.

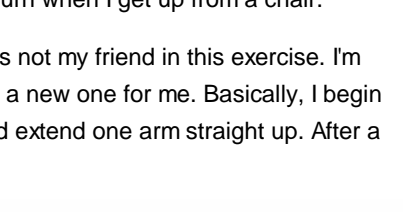
The geeks behind the game
When a game is in progress, the Sportvision system collects all of the data from the camera mounts and then combines that with the data from the 3D map and the color information in the video feed. T wo people, a spotter and an operator, manually enter the correct yard line information into the system. The spotter sits in the press box, and the operator sits in the production trailer. Two other people in the trailer work to make any manual changes necessary, including adding colors to the computer's palette. This usually happens due to changing field conditions, including snow and mud. Once all of this information is collected and combined, the yellow line finally appears on your TV.

So this Sunday, when you're sitting down on the couch watching your favorite team win (or lose), give a shout-out to the four guys putting in the hard work to make sure your favorite player's foot doesn't turn yellow when he crosses that first down line. They're the geeks behind the game.

—Matthew West

Me fit via Wii Fit: Strong like bull

998...999...1,000! Whew, 1,000 push-ups without even breaking a sweat. Man, this strength training is a piece of cake! I can tear telephone books in half with my bare hands! I'm a bald Samson...



Okay, I lie. 1,000 push-ups? I'm still struggling with 6. I confess that I went on vacation last month where there wasn't a [Wii](#). I was hoping to make working out a habit, but breaking good habits is easy. I'm a champ at that.

Anyway, after finally getting back on that horse that is [Wii Fit](#), I discovered that my active inactivity didn't hurt me too much. In other words, I'm still overweight. However, I'm still progressing towards the lighter end of the overweight spectrum.

Strength training the Wii way
This time around, I focused on the strength training exercises, which use my impressive body weight to work various muscle groups. Most of the scoring is based on shifts in weight on the Balance Board during repetitive motions, like raising and lowering my leg on the leg lift.

Some exercises incorporate the [Wii Remote](#). The tricep extension requires me to move the remote up and down by bending my elbow over my head. (Difficult, no?) And there's one exercise that's *really* tough: holding the remote in my outstretched hand, perpendicular to the ground, as I move from a prone to a standing position. Might sound easy to you, but hey, I feel a burn when I get up from a chair.

The one I have real trouble with is the push-up/side plank. Gravity's not my friend in this exercise. I'm sure everyone knows how to do a push-up, but the side plank was a new one for me. Basically, I begin in a push-up position, rotate my body to the side, cross my feet and extend one arm straight up. After a few of those, I was a quivering mass of jelly on a biscuit.

A Wii end note
Someone who is actively training with weights may find these exercises a tad too easy. But, for the casual exerciser, Wii Fit is a great way to get started. As you progress, Wii Fit gives helpful suggestions for more exercises based on the ones you've done. A downside is that you have to manually navigate to the other exercises on the list. (I'm already exhausted. Give a guy a break.)

Now that I've gone through all the activities the Wii Fit has to offer over these past few months, I can honestly say that it has helped me get off the couch and shed a few pounds. Ah, the sweet taste of success. Speaking of sweet taste, where did I put that cake?

—Aaron May

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In the 1950s, households set small lamps on top of the TV sets in hopes of cutting down the glare from the bright screen. These decorative "TV lamps" are now collectors' items.

HDTV may be the hottest product in home entertainment, but its roots trace all the way back to 1970, when the Japan Broadcasting Corporation began researching high-definition television technologies.

The first fully functional laptop computer, the Osborne 1, weighed 24 pounds and cost nearly \$1800 in 1981—over \$4300 in today's dollars.

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Springtime comes early. One thousand flowers blooming. Where is my iPhone?

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Welcome to Circuit City's lively interactive community! New this month:

Blog: History of the iPod
It's hard to imagine life before the iPod. Take a look back at how it all started and see it develop into the American staple it is today.

September's photo contest
This month's theme is "Sunrise, Sunset." Send in your best horizon photo and you could win a Canon Digital Rebel.

Forums: Choosing between plasma & LCD
Not sure how to choose? Get the inside scoop on the pros and cons of each.

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Display tech showdown: The battle of plasma vs. LCD vs. OLED.
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