



**UNCLE
MARK**

◆ 2 0 0 4 ◆

**GIFT GUIDE
& ALMANAC**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction - ii
Digital camera - I
Video game system - 4
Personal computer - 8
MP3 (Music) player - II
Three board games you should know about - 13
Two inexpensive gifts for kids - 15
An old movie you probably haven't seen - 16
Rules for walking in New York City - 17
Umbrella storage system - 18
Buy a permanent calling card - 19
How to leave a telephone message -20
Keep in touch - 21



INTRODUCTION

I wrote this guide to save you time. *Uncle Mark 2004 Gift Guide & Almanac* is a free downloadable guide, helping you make the best decisions for technology purchases or other gifts.

I'm a technology expert living in New York City. Everything I've written about in this guide, I know (and vouch for) from personal experience.

For your part, I expect that you have questions that you don't want to spend a lot of time researching. Sure, plenty of websites and magazines have reviews and ratings of technology - but who has the time? Instead of reading a million comparisons and reviews, why not just get all the answers in one place? So - here are the answers.

One note about this guide. I get no money from the companies whose products I mention. The only way I make money from *Uncle Mark* is from donations (you can donate at unclemark.org), and from referral fees when you buy a product from the shopping page on unclemark.org.

Why am I giving this guide away for free? For fun, for the common good, and to spread the word about my other projects (addyournown.com, thisisbroken.com, gelconference.com, and others). But mostly I wrote this guide to answer, in one place, all the questions I often get asked from friends who are looking for technology advice.



Two final pointers:

1. If you want to be notified when the next guide comes out, then subscribe (for free) to my Good Experience e-mail newsletter. Just send an e-mail to update@goodexperience.com, then reply to the confirmation e-mail, and you're on.

2. If you have any other questions, e-mail me here: mark@goodexperience.com. I might answer them in a future *Uncle Mark* guide.

Thanks for your interest,

(Uncle) Mark Hurst

November 2003

© 2003, Good Experience, Inc.



DIGITAL CAMERA: SONY CYBERSHOT U30

SUMMARY: If you want a digital camera, buy the CyberShot U30. That's your answer. There's no need to read *Consumer Reports* or do a ton of research. I've used this camera for almost two years, and it's the only digital camera I'd recommend.

DESCRIPTION:

Buy the Sony CyberShot U30 because it's really, really small. It's smaller than my wallet, smaller even than a cell phone, which means I carry the camera in my pocket at all times. This is the whole point of having a digital camera: the film is free, so you want the ability to take a picture of anything at any time.

When you get down to it, size is all that matters in digital cameras. This is because most digital cameras are about the same in other criteria:

- Price: Most digital cameras, including the CyberShot, cost \$200 to \$300. (Professional photographers can buy digital cameras for thousands of dollars, but that's not what we're after.)



If you're going to buy a digital camera, get this one: the Sony Cybershot U30. The printed image above is about half the size of the camera in real life.



- Picture quality is about the same from camera to camera, as long as the camera has at least 2 megapixels (and the CyberShot has 2 megapixels).*
- Ease-of-use is about the same for most digital cameras, and the CyberShot is average or above.

Given the same price and quality, then, you should buy the smallest camera you can. The CyberShot is so small that it makes a great conversation starter at parties or meetings. People almost always ask how much it costs, and where to buy it. (Now I can tell them just to read *Uncle Mark*.)

OTHER NOTES:

- The only possible drawback about the CyberShot U30 is that there is no zoom. What you see in the digital display is exactly the picture you'll get. (There's no viewfinder, either - just the small display screen - but I don't find this a problem at all.) I don't miss the zoom function at all. Other small digital cameras have such weak zooms that there's no point in having it (imagine, lugging around that extra size and weight for nothing!).

**Note: People ask me all the time how many megapixels they need in a digital camera. The answer is 2. At 2 megapixels, images are (a) plenty big enough for the computer screen, and (b) they print just fine, up to 5x7-inch prints. There's no need to get a digital camera with more than 2 megapixels.*

*If you get more than 2 megapixels in a camera, you can make prints that are much bigger than 5x7. Who cares? It's overkill for normal users who print 4x6 or 5x7 prints for photo albums. In fact, one disadvantage is that at 3 or 4 megapixels, the images are *way* too big for the computer screen, requiring you to resize pictures before you e-mail them to anyone. A hassle.*



- The camera comes with rechargeable batteries, a battery charger, a “memory stick” holding 8 megabytes, a cord to connect the camera to your PC, and a CD with software for both Windows and Mac. (The software does work, but the user interface is terrible - same with most other cameras.)
- Separately, you should buy a 128-megabyte memory stick, which can hold 250 pictures. It costs about \$50. The 8-megabyte stick which comes with the camera only holds 15 photos - how lame is that?

WHERE TO BUY THE CAMERA AND MEMORY STICK:

- Amazon.com. Uncle Mark gets a referral fee if you buy it at this URL: <http://tinyurl.com/vk72> (also find this link in the Shopping section at www.unclemark.org)
- B&H Photo: If you live in Manhattan, go to the B&H store on 9th Avenue and 34th Street. You can also buy from B&H online, although Uncle Mark gets no referral fee: <http://www.bhphotovideo.com>
- Remember to also buy the 128 Megabyte memory stick, as described above.



VIDEO GAME SYSTEM: NINTENDO GAMECUBE

SUMMARY: Nintendo GameCube has the highest quality games.

DESCRIPTION: There are three main game systems to choose from:

- Nintendo GameCube
- Sony PlayStation 2
- Microsoft Xbox

I like the Nintendo GameCube because it has the highest quality games. For example: The game design, graphics, music, characters, playability, and overall experience of the game “Super Mario Sunshine” (made only for the GameCube) is far superior to almost any game you’ll find on the PlayStation 2 or the Xbox.

The advantage of the Sony Playstation 2 is that there are more games available for it - but they’re lower-quality games than those for the GameCube. It’s a little like the long-standing rivalry between



If you're going to buy a video game system, get the one with the highest-quality games: the Nintendo GameCube.

Macintosh and Windows PC's: the Mac is a higher-quality computer, but Windows computers have more (lower-quality) software available.

If you want to play high-quality games, buy the GameCube. Yes, there are more games available for the Playstation 2, but why wouldn't you want to play the best games available? Buy the GameCube.

The other major game system, the Microsoft XBox, is my least favorite choice. It has the same number or fewer games than the Playstation, and the quality isn't anywhere near that of the GameCube games. Don't bother.

OTHER NOTES:

- If you want a good multiplayer game, buy "Super Mario Smash Brothers: Melee," available only for the GameCube. You may have to buy extra controllers (joysticks) at \$30 each to fill all four slots, but it's worth the expense. Smash Brothers, in my opinion, is the best multiplayer video game ever created. (There is a one-player version in the game, but the multiplayer "melee" mode is much better.) The game features major Nintendo characters - Donkey Kong, Mario, Zelda, etc. - all fighting each other. There's no blood or gore - just kicking and punching, and some cartoon props.



Best of all - this is the key to the whole game - there's a handicap function (make sure to set it on "automatic") which makes the game fun for everyone. If you lose a game, you get *stronger*. The winner gets weaker. Pretty soon, the player who just learned how to play five minutes ago is beating the die-hards who've been playing for months. And there's plenty reason to keep playing: each character has special moves you can learn, as you get better.

I highly recommend buying a GameCube, buying "Smash Brothers," and buying some extra controllers - remember that it's best as a *multiplayer* game. In fact, you could buy the GameCube and *no other* game, and it would be worth the investment.

- The cost of the GameCube recently came down to below \$100. Smash and Sunshine each cost about \$30 new. Not counting new controllers for your friends, you could be playing Smash under \$150. Great investment.

If you still want to buy other games for the GameCube after you've bought "Smash Brothers", here are a couple of ideas:

- Super Mario Sunshine: a great one-player adventure game (there's no multiplayer mode). You walk Mario through various adventures, cleaning up the environment of a small tropical island and fighting off cute Nintendo beasties. No blood and gore - just clean, even cutesy, cartoon fighting. As noted above, the experience of playing this game is unmatched on any other game system. Like "Smash Brothers," it's made only for the GameCube.



- Rogue Squadron 1 or Rogue Squadron 2: if you're buying for a Star Wars fan, this is a decent implementation of a flying/shooting game. The design and playability aren't as "tight" as in Smash or Sunshine, but it's worth trying out - especially for a Star Wars fan. This game is available on other game systems.
- The only possible disadvantage of the Nintendo GameCube is that some gamers - especially the hard-core gamers - look down on the GameCube as only offering "kiddie games," with cutesy characters and no blood or guts. If you're buying for a PlayStation 2 fan, for example, I'd recommend Rogue Squadron 2, as described above, for the PlayStation 2.



PERSONAL COMPUTER: APPLE MACINTOSH

SUMMARY: Without question, buy a Mac - unless you *must* be compatible with your work or school computers.

DESCRIPTION: What's better, Windows or Mac? This debate has raged for years - almost 20 years, since Apple introduced the Macintosh computer in 1984. Mine won't be the last words on the subject, but I can give you the reasons behind my opinion.

When people ask me which computer they should buy, I always ask first if they *have* to be compatible with an existing Windows network (like the network of school or office computers). If they do, I tell them not to bother with a Mac. Regardless of whether there actually are compatibility issues (and there often aren't), the techies who run the PC-based network would never let it stand.

However, if the computer is for home, or a small business, or for any environment that doesn't require plugging in to some internal Windows network, then I always recommend a Mac. Always always Mac.



A Macintosh is always a better choice than a Windows PC, unless you have to connect to an existing (office or school) Windows network.

TWO REASONS TO CHOOSE A MAC OVER WINDOWS:

1. Macs are easier to use.

The whole point of using a computer is to get stuff done. If you have a choice between getting it done more or less easily, why would you choose the harder option? This has always puzzled me about people choosing Windows PCs - why would they choose to be less productive? The Mac was designed from its inception to be an elegant, easy-to-use system; Windows was built in pieces, leaving it unstable (think of a house of cards) and inconsistent and confusing in its user interface.

Some people argue that Windows has improved over the years and is now as easy to use as the Mac. I'm a usability expert, I've used both systems, and these people are wrong.*

2. Macs are more secure against viruses.

Unfortunately, if you use a Windows PC, you're constantly vulnerable to the latest Internet viruses - of which there are new strains almost every week. Using a Windows PC today - especially if you use the most vulnerable e-mail program available today, Microsoft Outlook - is a constant risk to all the files and other work you do on the machine.

Macs have little or no risk of catching an Internet virus. Fewer viruses are written for Macs, and the Macintosh operating system (called "OSX") is inherently more stable than Windows. The end result is that you're less vulnerable to attack when using a Mac.

** It's telling that the argument is that Windows has *finally caught up* to the Mac. See? Not even the most biased Windows fan will deny Mac's history as the superior system.*



OTHER NOTES:

- There is another set of questions about what *kind* of Mac to buy - iMac, iBook, PowerBook, etc. Given that it's a big purchase with lots of configuration options, I'd recommend visiting to the Apple Store in your area, if there is one, and asking one of the store clerks. Otherwise, try shopping at Apple's shopping website, <http://store.apple.com>. (The site could use some substantial improvement, but it's the best website for Mac information at the moment.)
- If you'd rather not navigate through all the options and want a good Mac to buy right now, here's what I'd suggest:
- If you want an inexpensive desktop model, buy the iMac. Any model, any configuration should be sufficient.
- If you want an inexpensive laptop model, buy the iBook. Again, any model should be fine.
- If you're a more advanced user who might want to plug in a lot of accessories (external hard drives and the like), get the PowerBook (the more expensive laptop model).
- I've linked to all three of these models in the shopping section at unclemark.org.



MP3 (MUSIC) PLAYER: APPLE IPOD

SUMMARY: An excellent gift idea for anyone who has a computer and likes music.

DESCRIPTION: This whole Uncle Mark project came about when a middle-aged couple asked me awhile back what gift they should buy their teenage nephew, who was about to graduate from high school. I told them the answer immediately: get him an iPod. Turned out it was the best graduation gift he got from anyone; they came off looking like heroes, and I started thinking about how I could spread this knowledge.

There's no question that the iPod is the gift to get, if you (or your giftee) doesn't already own one. The iPod is a little handheld device that holds and plays digital music files (mp3 files, if you know the jargon). The music isn't there when you buy the iPod; the user has to use their computer to transfer the files onto the iPod.

Think of it this way: Instead of carrying around your collection of 100 CDs in a big carrying pouch, you can use the computer to transfer your CDs' music files onto the iPod - and then your whole music collection would be on one handheld device. I have a 20-gigabyte iPod, and it can hold about 300 CDs of music. Incredible.



The Apple iPod is a great gift for anyone who doesn't already own one.



OTHER NOTES:

- Yes, the iPod works for both Windows and Mac.
- If you have enough music on the iPod, one fun thing to do is set it to play random songs from any album: suddenly, it's like listening to your own radio station.
- There are several sizes of iPods: of course, the bigger ones hold more music and are more expensive. All the sizes, and prices, are available on the shopping page at unclemark.org.



THREE BOARD GAMES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

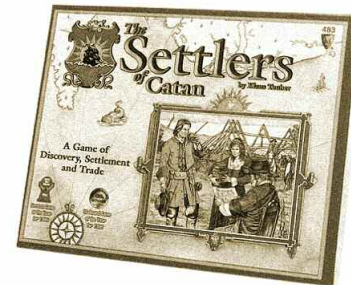
SUMMARY: *Settlers of Catan* and *Carcassonne* are two board games that almost anyone would enjoy playing. *Lord of the Rings: Confrontation* is great for Tolkien fans.

DESCRIPTION: This is not a technology suggestion - these are board games. (Remember them?)

Board games have made something of a comeback recently. *The New York Times* reported a few months ago that young Manhattan hipsters are spending Friday nights playing board games, of all things. Part of this resurgence is because new and creative games have been coming out recently, so that we have more choices than just Monopoly, Scrabble, and the classic “party games” (Pictionary, etc.)

Either of these board games would make a great gift for yourself or someone you know - age, say, 12 and up - who likes to play games.

Settlers of Catan (3-4 players): Hugely popular among game-players. You build roads, then cities, on an island that contains various resources for those building projects. Lots of building and trading of resources.



Settlers of Catan is a hugely popular, very well-designed board game that most people still haven't even heard of. Well worth a look.



Carcassonne (2-5 players): An elegant, simple game of tile-laying. Every game is different, as the players create the medieval city of Carcassonne together each game. I've played this game dozens of times already, and I'm just getting warmed up.

Lord of the Rings: Confrontation (2 players only): Unlike the other two board games, I wouldn't recommend this for a general audience. However, if you are buying for a *Lord of the Rings* fan, this is a great gift idea that they probably haven't heard of. This game is sort of like the classic game of Stratego, where two players move pieces against each other, only revealing the pieces' identities when they engage in battle. Despite a couple of ambiguities in the rules, this game is really well-designed and fits well with the popular *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy. Recommended.

Note that Carcassonne is great as a two-player game, but can accommodate more; Settlers requires at least *three* players; and Lord of the Rings is two players *only*.

All three of these games are available on the shopping page at unclemark.org.



TWO INEXPENSIVE GIFTS FOR KIDS

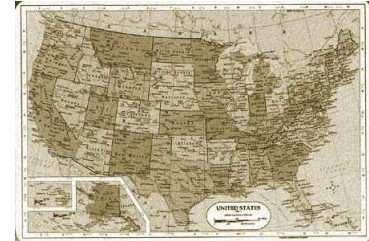
SUMMARY: The 50 States placemat and the card game, Five State Rummy, are fun, educational, and surprisingly inexpensive.

DESCRIPTION: These two gift ideas are all of the following: well-designed, inexpensive, educational, and fun for both adults and children.

The 50 States placemat is, as the name suggests, a laminated plastic placemat showing an easy-to-read map of the United States. Junior might drip his mashed potatoes on Utah, but at least he's learning something. Heck, *I* eat my meals on this placemat. But then I'm something of a map fanatic.

Five State Rummy is a simple but fun card game in which you try to collect five geographically contiguous states (like Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin). The cards are beautifully designed, with extra info (state bird, flower, and capitol) also on each card but not distracting from the game.

Both of these items are available on the shopping page at unclemark.org.



The 50-state placemat is a well-designed, fun-to-read map.



ALMANAC

AN OLD MOVIE YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T SEEN: *Barry Lyndon*

SUMMARY: This Stanley Kubrick movie from 1975 is excellent; strangely, no one seems to have heard of it.

DESCRIPTION: I forget how I originally heard about *Barry Lyndon*. Upon watching the movie, however, I was surprised to find that it is one of the best movies I've ever seen.

A three-hour costume drama set in western Europe in the 19th century - sounds fun, huh? But listen: even if you're not into costume dramas, it's worth your time - and after watching it, you'll be able to give all your friends a pointer to a good movie *they've* never heard of. Definitely worth a rental fee.



RULES FOR WALKING IN NEW YORK CITY

SUMMARY: If you have to walk slowly in New York City, at least don't make any sudden movements.

DESCRIPTION: Walking in New York is like driving on a highway. There are rules, and there are safety risks if people don't follow them. Even if you don't live in New York City, you can apply walking rules to wherever you live and walk.

Here is the most important walking rule: **Don't make sudden changes in course.** Don't suddenly stop, or change your speed. Don't change directions suddenly for no reason, and don't make a surprise about-face. Just like driving on the highway: don't act unpredictably. If you have to walk (or drive) slowly, at least do it predictably, so that people around you can travel safely.

There are other rules (stay to the right when turning a corner, don't stop at the end of the escalator, etc.), but those will wait for another time. In the meantime, *The New York Times* wrote a story on their own walking rules in July 2002. The article is available for free here (site registration required): <http://tinyurl.com/vlrv>



UMBRELLA STORAGE SYSTEM

SUMMARY: A simple system that guarantees you'll never get wet in the rain.

DESCRIPTION: Here's the easiest, most efficient system for always having an umbrella on hand, 365 days a year, guaranteed. It just takes an easy setup (steps 1 and 2) and a tiny amount of discipline after that (steps 3 and 4).

HERE'S THE SYSTEM:

1. Buy two umbrellas.
2. Put one umbrella at home, and the other at work (or school).
3. Before you leave home or work, check to see if it's raining, or likely to rain. If it is, take that umbrella with you.
4. (This is the hard part.) When you return to that location (home or work), bring the umbrella *back* and put it back where it was. This is the hardest part of the system because it's often not raining on your return trip, and it's hard to remember an umbrella when the skies are clear. But if you forget to bring the umbrella back, the system breaks: you're vulnerable the next time it rains when you're at that location.
5. If you lose your umbrella at a restaurant, in a cab, etc., buy another one immediately and replace it in the appropriate location. Better to fix the system earlier than later.



BUY A PERMANENT CALLING CARD

SUMMARY: Have an easy, immediate Plan B for telephone calls on the road.

DESCRIPTION: I've had the same AT&T calling card number for almost 15 years. I don't actually have the card; I just know the 16-digit number, and I dial it whenever I need to make a call at a pay phone.

Yes, I have a cell phone, but occasionally I'm not carrying the phone, or (in certain locations, or in a crisis like the East Coast blackout a few months ago*) cellular service can go down altogether. In those cases, it's nice to have a backup plan for telephone calls. I use my AT&T calling card.

Every pay phone in the country accepts this number; I think international phones do, too, if you call the right access number. Sure, the call is expensive - perhaps double what you'd pay via your cell phone. But if you only use it as an emergency backup, it's not an excessive cost. (There's no monthly charge, either, so if you don't use it, you don't have to pay anything.)

I chose AT&T because I knew the company would be around for awhile. This way, I know I'll keep the same calling card number indefinitely: I only have to memorize one number, one time, and I have backup phone access for (now) over 10 years, with no monthly fees.

Apply for, get, then memorize your AT&T calling card number: 1-800-224-5610 (There may be permanent calling cards available from other companies, but I don't know about them. Who cares, anyway, since this one works fine...)

**Yes, this actually happened. Manhattan blacked out on August 14, 2003 and there was very little cell-phone access. My AT&T cell phone didn't work. But I found a pay phone and I had no trouble making long-distance calls with my calling card... and without having to scramble for coins to put into the phone.*



HOW TO LEAVE A TELEPHONE MESSAGE

SUMMARY: Give the message quickly, but slow down when you give your phone number.

DESCRIPTION: When you're leaving a telephone message - on a cell phone's "voice mail," on an answering machine, etc. - think about the experience of the person listening to the message. The single most important piece of information in that message is your phone number. Even if everything else in the message is garbled, if they can understand your phone number, they can at least call you back.

Futhermore, most people you call won't want to hear a long, drawn-out, repetitive, boring, endless, boring, repetitive message.

Why is it, then, that most people reverse this system when they leave a message?

"Hey there, so um, this is, um, Gary, and we're going to send you that report, ahhhhh, as soon as we have it, and anyway, you'll be getting that report soon. And when you do, uhh, could you call me, at, twoeightsifivesixfourfourthreetoeighnine." Click.

Long, boring, repetitive message, and then he turns into a speed demon when he leaves his phone number. WHY? And then to make it worse, to get the phone number, you have to listen to the whole message again, waiting for that last two seconds of nonsense. Sheesh.

Remember this: leave a brief message, then sllloooooowwww doooowwnnnn when you leave your phone number.



KEEP IN TOUCH

To keep in touch with Uncle Mark, here are two options:

1. Subscribe, for free, to my Good Experience e-mail newsletter. Just send an e-mail to update@goodexperience.com, then reply to the confirmation e-mail, and you're on.
2. Take a look at my other free resources: thisisbroken.com, addyourown.com, and goodexperience.com.
3. Come to my Good Experience Live conference on Friday, April 30, 2004 in New York City. This *isn't* free - one of my few activities that isn't free for you - but it's worth the cost (tickets are \$500 and up). A full day of speakers talking about interesting, creative, good experiences. Plus, you get free local beer at the end of the day. Beer is good.

(Uncle) Mark Hurst
November 2003

