

App-Enabled Accessories Abound at the Apple Store

Andrew Berg

There's a special section over at Apple's online store devoted entirely to “app-enabled accessories.” These items include extravagances like a Wi-Fi enabled scale that shoots its data straight to the iPhone, or a flying drone that can be controlled right from your very own iOS device. You can't necessarily call them necessities, but you just might call them really neat.

One thing's for sure. There is a huge market out for products that enable users to control more things in the real world through the always-on, always-handly smartphone. Here's a look at some of the more innovative, if utilitarian (and fun) items we found for the iOS devices.



Smart Blood Pressure Monitor from Withings - \$129.95

For those iOS users who suffer high blood pressure, the Withings Smart Blood Pressure Monitor might be just the thing. Not only will this cuff take your blood pressure, the app associated with it will track and display your measurements. It plugs directly into almost any iPad, iPhone or iPod touch. The app will then calculate averages and generate graphs, making the detection of trends easier. The company also boasts a secured sharing option that “allows you to automatically share measurements.” Why you want to share that you’re 10 pounds off your ideal weight is beyond me. Withings is hot on the consumer mHealth trend and also makes an app-enabled scale for those who want to track the effects of their Cherry Garcia intake.

Nest Learning Thermostat from Nest (2nd Generation) - \$249.95

The Nest Learning Thermostat will someday be remembered as the humble beginnings of the smart home promise. While pricier than your conventional wall-mounted thermostat, the Nest does a whole lot more. It actually remembers your preferred temperatures, reduces them when you're not at home, and perhaps the best part is that it can be controlled by almost any WiFi connected iOS device. The app to which it is connected can tell you when you're saving energy, and the monthly Energy Report shows you trends in your energy use, as well as how to reduce energy bills. While being able to change the temperature of your thermostat from anywhere might not be the sexiest iPhone accessory out there, it could have its advantages. Imagine returning home on an exceptionally cold night and being able to crank the heat while sitting in traffic. Or maybe you have to be a from a cold climate to really appreciate that one.

iGrill Grilling/Cooking Thermometer - \$79.95

This is one of those items that weigh heavily on the "extravagance" side of the scale. While an iPhone connected thermometer might be useful, it's probably not exactly necessary if you already have a regular meat thermometer. However, the iGrill Bluetooth-enabled meat thermometer allows you to monitor your food from up to 200 feet away, which might come in handy for those times when you're the host of the party, as well as the grill master. Just be sure not get barbecue sauce on that brand new iPhone.



Oakley Airwave Goggles - \$599.95

We didn't get a chance to actually try out the Oakley Airwave Goggles, but they sound almost too James Bond to be real. Oakley says the Airwave Goggles "combine the company's best goggle technologies with a heads-up display that integrates GPS, Bluetooth, and more with a host of onboard sensors to bring new possibilities to your alpine experience." The idea is that while you're skiing, or doing "other alpine sports" you can access music, text messages and caller ID, while also recording and viewing speed, jump analytics and other stats. Being from Wisconsin, where skiing takes place on hills and not mountains, I'd be hard pressed to justify the \$600 price tag on these.

Sphero by Orbotix - \$129.95

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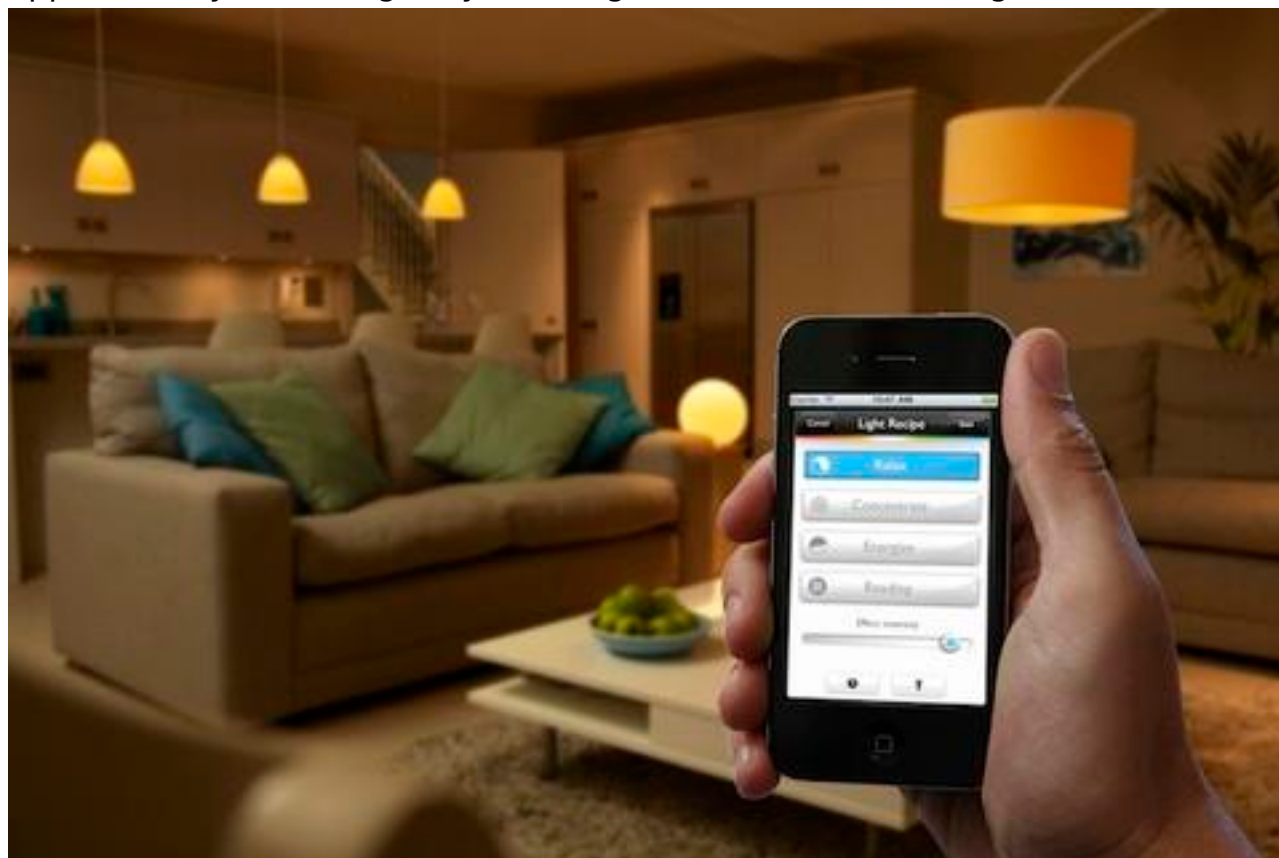
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While I didn't personally review the Sphero, we've had one of these little guys running around the office recently and it has captivated everyone whose path it has crossed. Controlled from an iOS app, the Sphero is a little remote-controlled bluetooth-connected ball that just kind of rolls where you tell it to roll. Billed by Orbotix as "mixed-reality gameplay using fun and challenging built-for-Sphero apps", the Sphero is unique and most definitely NOT a necessity. Still, given the fun I've seen people around the office having with this thing, I'm guessing quite a few people have deemed it worth the \$129.95 retail price point.

Hue Wireless Lighting - \$199.95

The Philips' Hue Personal Wireless Lighting looked just interesting enough that we thought we'd reach out to the company for a review unit. While I was skeptical that I would need or want the smartphone-controlled lighting, I have to say I was pleasantly surprised.

The starter kit consists of 3 WiFi enabled light bulbs and a hub that connects to your wireless router. Set up was about as simple as it gets. You simply screw the light bulbs into any socket, connect the hub to your wireless router, and download the app. Even my technologically challenged father could have figured out this one.



The app comes with a control board for each light bulb. You can adjust the color,

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hue and intensity of each bulb separately with easy sliding touch controls included in the app. (Philips offers free apps for iOS and Android). You can even save customized settings and set timers, with subtle fade ins and outs for when you would like a particular pallet to take over a room. The infinite number of color combinations were a hit with my kids, while I was most impressed by the whites for regular lighting, which seemed superior to what we put up with from standard compact fluorescent bulbs.

Given all that, you might still be thinking this is an impractical extravagance. Not so fast. These colorful smartphone-controlled light bulbs actually proved incredibly practical. How many times have you gotten up in the middle of the night and wandered through a dark house to the kitchen for a glass of water only to stub your toe on the coffee table. Not anymore. With Hue, I simply flipped on the living room lights before even getting out of bed.

Philips also offers a cloud-based service that allows you to turn on the lights from just about anywhere by signing up for an account. This might be particularly handy if you'd like to turn on the lights from the car before going inside.



Philips says each light bulb has a lifespan of 15,000 hours. The average life of a regular compact fluorescent light bulb is about 10,000 hours.

It's not incredibly cheap to control the lighting in your house from your smartphone. The three-bulb starter pack runs a pricey \$199.95 at the Apple Store, with additional bulbs coming in at \$59.95. I have to say, however, that I could justify the

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price.

Philips released the SDK for Hue last month to entice developers to the platform, which means we'll likely be seeing more light-altering apps in the future. The bulbs themselves employ ZigBee Light Link, a standard for interoperable standard for consumer lighting and control products.

After trying Hue for a couple weeks, I realized a few things that I probably wouldn't have otherwise. One: I have my smartphone in my hand a lot. Two: It's incredibly convenient to have control over the lights in my house. Three: Given how much I have my smartphone in my hand, it really should control more of the electronics in my life. Five: It probably will.

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