

E-ink

Mobile Devices and How We Read

by Thomas Brenndorfer

Mobile devices are increasingly affecting what and how we read. In fact, my choice of a new cell phone was influenced by the availability of NetLibrary's e-audiobook collection through Guelph Public Library's catalogue. I chose a phone that runs Windows Mobile because it includes a version of Windows Media Player that can play my library's e-audiobooks. Windows Media Player interacts with Microsoft's digital rights management (DRM), which limits how often downloadable audiobooks can be copied and how long they can be played once the DRM license expires.

However, before I could play an e-audiobook, I discovered that I had to apply a software patch to Microsoft Vista's Media Player because of a bug that affected the sync feature. Next I installed an inexpensive audio file player that could remember each place I stopped in the e-audiobook – an improved solution to Windows Mobile Media Player which always returned me to the beginning of the book. Finally, I was ready to listen to e-audiobooks on my new cell phone.

E-BOOK FUNCTIONALITY

While I was new to e-audiobooks, I had been following the development of text e-books for many years. Competing standards and vendor lock-in have always been a problem with e-books. For my computer and my mobile devices I had found Mobipocket to offer the best e-book reader. Fictionwise.com is a great site where I could pur-

chase titles and have the site store them so that they can be transferred to a new computer or other devices. But library e-book services use Adobe Acrobat (PDF) files. NetLibrary's e-books are not downloadable and can be viewed only within a web browser. OverDrive is another company offering PDF e-books for libraries and these files are DRM-based.

Sony's announcement in the summer of 2008 that its e-book reader could be upgraded to support DRM-based PDF files caught my attention. The Sony Reader is one of the few e-book readers with "e-ink" displays. E-ink displays do not use battery power when displaying text. Paging forward uses a small amount of battery power. An e-ink device, with its high-contrast, lower-power display, comes close to mimicking the feel of reading a paperback.

Support for DRM-based PDF files also means one advantage over the Amazon Kindle, an e-ink device that locks in users to the Amazon store for e-book purchases. By contrast, the Sony Reader works with many e-book stores and the OverDrive service used by libraries. In addition, the Sony Reader was the first e-ink device to provide support for the new EPUB format, a standard promoted by the International Digital Publishing Forum (idpf.org). The EPUB format is an open XML-based standard, has DRM options, and allows publishers to distribute a single electronic product that can display on a multitude of devices.

E-INK DEVICES

As far as e-ink devices go, the Amazon Kindle has had the most press recently. The Kindle, which features a built-in keyboard, sets the bar in e-book functionality despite its lack of support for DRM-based PDF and EPUB files.

Amazon provides free access to Sprint's wireless EVDO network, although not in Canada. Amazon has designed the Kindle to stimulate impulse buying from its online bookstore.

In October 2008, Sony offered a new Sony Reader that included a touch screen with annotation capabilities, but no wireless access. Sony also launched a promotion to coincide with the American National Book Month. David Farrow, a speed reader and world record holder for memory feats, sat in a Manhattan store window for a month and read books on the Sony Reader. Responding to studies indicating that reading for pleasure is declining, Sony launched its promotion to spark the imagination of young people and engage the public in digital reading.

Does reading in e-ink live up to the hype? I think these devices have a place for some readers and for libraries. The number of titles in PDF and EPUB formats is growing steadily. With more conveniences, such as wireless access and built-in dictionaries and annotation capability, these e-ink devices can build on their main features of low power consumption and highly readable screens. While I was reading a downloaded book, I noticed I became absorbed by the text because I was free of the distractions that come from reading on a computer. I think that's the secret of all good reading – if we are fully engaged, then it does not matter what technology we use to read the text.

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