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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted March 30, 2009 | 03:39 PM (EST)

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Kindle 2.0: The Final Review



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Most of the reviews of the Kindle 2.0 had to be thrown together by people who spent a few hours playing with them on deadline. I decided to spend some two weeks with my very first electronic book device to really get a feel for it and see what it was like.

Clearly, electronic books are going to be around in one form or another and the news has been coming fast and furious since Kindle 2.0 came

out. There's an app for the iPhone, publisher **Thomas Nelson is offering a free ebook and audio book for everyone who buys a hardcover** from them on select new titles (this is the wave of the future in my mind), **Google is offering 500,000 public domain titles in easy to use formats for the Sony E-Reader**, Fujitsu is selling a color electronic book in Japan for \$1000 and on and on and on.

So here's my take on the **Kindle 2.0**. I'm an aggressive book reader and collector and will surely die surrounded by hardcovers and paperbacks. I read probably 100+ books a year, as well as newspapers and magazines and blogs and the such. I can't imagine not holding a "real" book in my hand. However, I travel a lot and sometimes find my luggage weighed down with books I might want to read (and books I buy overseas). I also commute a lot on trains and buses. Recently I was lugging around *Dreadnought* by Robert K. Massie, a 900 page monster about the naval arms race before World War I and it did occur to me that having it in eBook form while reading it around town might not be the worst thing in the world. (However, that particular book isn't available on Kindle or **Sony's E-Reader**. The sequel, however, is.) So I'm both intrigued and wary of electronic books. Personally, I won't be happy until every new book I buy comes with a free eBook. But I can see the appeal and wanted to find out for myself.

IS IT LIKE READING A BOOK? -- Yep, it is. I found the Kindle 2.0 very easy to read, with no discernible difference in eye strain or the like whether reading a Kindle or a print edition. Personally, I found the leather cover essential for reading. (And \$30 for something that really should come for free with the \$360.00 Kindle 2.0 is annoying.) Even when I "folded" the cover back (something I would never do on a print edition), I needed that cover to hold and feel comfortable while reading. The heft of the Kindle was nice, solid but not too heavy. This is not a

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side by side comparison, but the brief time I spent playing with the Sony E-Reader (which has a backlight and a touch screen) was no comparison, even though they use the same technology. The thick screen necessary for touch technology made the E-Reader far less reader friendly. And the iPhone? Please. Reading a book on the iPhone is highly impractical. I use it to read the occasional Shakespearean sonnet or some other poetry, but that's as far as it can go.

IS THE KINDLE 2.0 A BIG JUMP ON THE 1.0? -- Oh yes. Strangely, a lot of the reviews described the 2.0 as just tweaking the design of the 1.0. I disagree strongly. The Kindle 1.0, to me, was always very junky and cheap feeling. The buttons for advancing pages were poorly designed, with the biggest complaint being that anyone just trying to hold the device invariably flipped the pages by accident. That problem is completely removed with the 2.0 which is much sleeker and nicer than the original. The page buttons are press-able on the inside only, almost to a fault. It's actually a tad difficult to change pages, which is definitely an improvement on too easy. Perhaps a small raised button on the inside would make it more tactile and user-friendly? The keyboard looks much nicer and the look overall is much, much better. This feels like a real device, not a toy. I'd be happy to keep it around and show it off. However, I can't keep a comment by David Pogue of the New York Times out of my head: he said it looked like **it was designed by the people who did the Commodore 64**. Ouch. Not quite fair for the new Kindle but really: would it kill them to make it available in black and other colors? White is about the least friendly color for a device you're going to be handling all the time.

IS WIRELESS CONNECTIVITY A BIG DEAL? -- Before I used it, the Whispernet function of the Kindle 2.0 seemed a little silly. What's the big deal about plugging in a Kindle to your computer when you want a new book? I do it with my iPod, right? But I had to admit, this feature was surprisingly nice. There's something almost sinfully easy about lying in bed late at night with your Kindle, thinking about a book you want to read and a few seconds later you've found it, purchased it, and begun reading. The free first chapter offer (available for seemingly any book at the Kindle store) is also tempting. To me, it's still not a big negative in other devices to have to hook up to a computer to purchase and download a book. But the breeze of constant connectivity is a bigger positive than I imagined.

HOW ABOUT GETTING YOUR OWN DOCUMENTS ONTO THE KINDLE? -- Sight unseen, I was very adamantly opposed to the way the Kindle works this. If you have a Word or PDF document you want to carry around on your Kindle, you have to email it to the Kindle people who then download it onto your personal device. Privacy be damned, of course. This annoyed the heck out of me in theory. In practice? Not so much. It worked easily and almost as quickly as buying a new book on the Kindle. Several articles and blogs I'd written came to the Kindle in Word formats and were easily read.

CAN YOU BUY ALL THE BESTSELLERS? -- Yes, you can. This is true of Kindle 2.0 and the Sony E-Reader. Today, I went through the Top 15 New York Times bestsellers in fiction and nonfiction. Both devices had every title available, with one exception: the Sony E-Reader did not have the nonfiction title *Inside The Revolution* available, while Kindle did. And neither device had the new John Grisham, who must be a technophobe. What you can't do with the Kindle (or the Sony E-Reader) is just name books you want to read and find them. Current releases are available and the obvious classic titles (*The Three Musketeers*, *Wuthering Heights* and the like). But many, many catalog titles are not. Kindle may have 250,000 titles available but publishers put out that many books every two years, so there are a LOT of gaps to fill. I looked for the massive two volume Winston Churchill biography *The Last Lion* but it wasn't available. However, Churchill's own acclaimed history of World War II is. I looked for *Dreadnought*, that doorstop of a book and it's not available (and neither is most anything else by this best-selling historian EXCEPT the sequel to *Dreadnought*, which is available.)

HOW EXPENSIVE ARE THE EBOOKS? -- Kindle has got most everything at \$10 or less, with exceptions of course. (They're all detailed at Amazon, as well as the Kindle online store, which does NOT include the readers comments from Amazon.) Sony E-Reader's store has titles more commonly at \$11, which is \$2 more than Kindle. There's a lot of variability in pricing, though, with Kindle generally cheaper. You can buy Joe Torre and Tom Verducci's *The Yankee Years* for \$17.61 on sale in hardcover at Amazon or you can get it at the Sony eBook store for \$18.87 (bizarrely, it's MORE expensive than the hardcover) or you can get it on Kindle for \$10. Prices are set by

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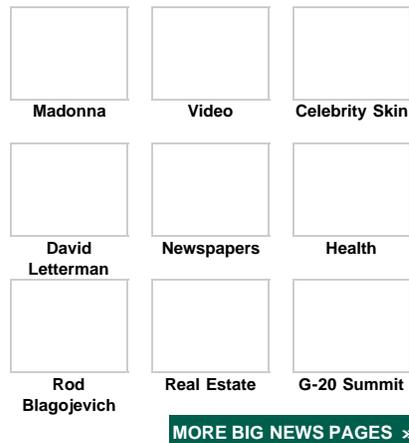
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WHAT ABOUT CLASSIC TITLES? ARE THEY FREE OR CHEAP? -- I was a little surprised to find free editions of some classic titles (Sherlock Holmes, etc.) on the Kindle store. And of course Google has raised the bar with its deal with Sony. I can't think of any reason why they wouldn't work out the same details and make the same titles available to Kindle down the road, though no one is talking. But there are also many publishers making public domain titles available in extremely cheap sets. I bought the complete Charles Dickens for \$5; Mark Twain for \$4, Balzac for \$5, a handful of Trollope for \$4 and so on. With \$30 to play with, I filled my Kindle with literally hundreds of classic and new titles. Shakespeare is a different beast: I've yet to find a free or cheap edition that presented the plays nicely. (Getting the line-breaks right ain't easy, apparently.) You can also find lots of websites with free downloads of public domain titles in Kindle or E-Reader friendly versions. But I'm a clumsy tech guy and tried a couple of them and couldn't find any that came up properly on the Kindle. I'm certain this will get easier and -- again -- Google (with their call for free content on any platform and any device) will surely make their 500,000 and counting public domain titles available in Kindle friendly versions as well that will work.

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WHO SHOULD BUY THE KINDLE? -- If you travel a lot and like the classics or have lots of disposable income and don't mind buying the cheap ebook versions of new titles you may already own or want in a print edition, the Kindle is very tempting. It reads terrifically well, it's lightweight and portable and easy to use and you can fill it up with classics very, very cheaply. If you're like me and worry about running out of reading material, the Kindle is ideal. You can bring two books and the Kindle and be set for the weekend or a month, frankly, without any anxiety. If you're old and have poor eyesight, the ability to have de facto large print editions of classics and new bestsellers is great. However, if you have eclectic tastes and expect to find any title you're looking for available on the Kindle, you'll get frustrated. Browsing the Kindle store to find titles to read is fun. But looking for a particular book that came out 10 or 20 years ago is frustrating since half the time it's not available. I found it telling when I was looking for some acclaimed authors who have won awards and hit the bestseller lists but are still "midlist" as opposed to perennial bestsellers like John Updike. Padgett Powell? None. Peter Taylor? None. Mark Helprin? One. Edmund White? Four, but mostly minor works and none of his acknowledged classics. Steven Millhauser? His three most recent only. By the way, John Updike is no better, really. I found only eight books, a mishmash of mostly recent releases and none of the Rabbit books. And so it goes. This situation will improve with time (and with the number of people who actually buy these electronic books).

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To sum up, I loved playing with the Kindle and would love one for free and would love to get free ebooks and audio books every time I buy a print edition (or get the option of just the ebook or audio book at a severe discount). It reads very easily without any eyestrain whatsoever; I felt like I was reading a book whereas reading on an iPhone or a computer is just a gimmick. The Kindle is indeed a genuine alternative to a print edition and not just a toy. But for the moment, I won't buy it. Here are some suggested changes.

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3. They need more colors available for the exterior of the model; a color screen is far less important to me.
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5. Navigation is a little clumsy at times. When you're in the store, the Kindle takes you to the top of the page and you have to scroll down through new releases and bestsellers and recommendations and so on to get to the section where you can type in an author. Trying to toggle up to jump from the top to the bottom doesn't work. Other minor roadblocks like that popped up.
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7. Kindle needs to woo Google and get a deal done quickly; those 500,000 public domain titles are awfully tempting.
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10. And do this FAST. I'm not ready to buy an electronic book but I will be very surprised if I don't have one in the next five years.

If you have any questions about the Kindle, ask away and I'll try to answer them. Do you own an eBook of any sort? Have you played with one? Let me know what you think.

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As a Kindle 2.0 lover, I really enjoyed this article. The only disagreement I found is that free web surfing is already available on the Kindle 2.0. It's not a very advanced internet system, but you can do all of the basics! I heart my Kindle!

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But now that the iPhone has a Kindle app, isn't the Kindle already obsolete?

And for the love of Yaweh, can they cut about \$150 off the price?

Seriously, they have been selling similar devices for children's learning purposes for years that have a little less capacity but are under \$80 or so.

For \$360, just keep saving, get a laptop, and 'read' off of that.

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Did you even read the article before posting this? Giltz addressed the shortcomings of the iPhone and the high price, among other concerns. And reading off a laptop? Yeah, that'll fit nicely into your jacket pocket.

BTW, it's "Yahwey," not "Yawey." You could look it up.

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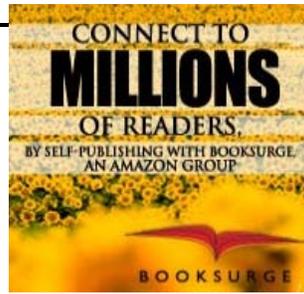
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