

Kindle 2 will no doubt find lots of new fans

April 1 2009, By Etan Horowitz



The Kindle 2, the second version of Amazon's breakthrough electronic book reader, is cheaper (\$359), thinner (0.36 inches), can hold more books (more than 1,500 compared with 200), and has a longer battery life (Amazon says you can read for four to five days with wireless turned on and for longer than two weeks with it turned off) than the original.

Just like the first model, you adjust the text size and wirelessly download books in seconds without the need for a [Wi-Fi](#) hot spot or a monthly service plan. It's easy to get immersed in a book and forget that you're reading it on a gadget.

- The layout

On the original, there was really no natural place to rest your hands, because more than half of each side of the device was taken up by next-

or previous-page buttons. This meant that you would often accidentally hit the button to flip to the next page before you were ready. On the new version, there's more space around the screen so you can comfortably rest your thumbs without accidentally turning the page.

In addition, the keyboard is laid out more naturally, which makes it easier to type in the name of a book or an author. [Amazon](#) has replaced the scroll wheel on the original with a five-way, joystick-like controller, which is an improvement but still has some quirks. For instance, there isn't a ton of room around the joystick, so when I was trying to press it to the right, I often accidentally pressed it in the center, which is akin to a mouse click.

And although the buttons are more intuitive and better laid out (the tiny home icon on the keyboard has been replaced with a larger "Home" button on the side), it's still not that easy to pick up and start using. Several of my colleagues needed assistance when I handed them the [Kindle 2](#) and let them test-drive it. But eventually you get used to it.

- Where's the case?

One thing I don't like is that unlike the first Kindle, a cover/case does not come as an accessory. But the optional leather cover you can buy for \$30 does hold the Kindle 2 in place much better because it has hooks that snap into the side of the device. There also is a slight delay between when you press a button and when the device performs the action, which can be frustrating.

- Talk to me

Perhaps the most talked-about feature is "text to speech," which will read the text on the screen aloud. The Authors Guild has argued that this feature infringes on authors' rights, because by buying a Kindle book,

consumers get a book and an audio book, without any royalties going to the authors for the audio portion. But I had a hard time tolerating the computerized, emotionless voice that read to me.

A small new tweak that makes a big difference is that at the bottom of each page of a book, you see the percentage of the book that you have read, which helps you visualize how much you have left.

- There's an app

Recognizing the popularity of the iPhone, Amazon has released a free Kindle iPhone app, so books you purchase on the Kindle can also be read on your iPhone.

Now that Amazon has addressed most of the gripes with the original Kindle (though I still think it should have a light so you can read in the dark), the question most people will have is, is it worth it? The answer really depends on your reading habits. If you love buying books and are constantly burning through one after another, then the device is a good investment, especially if you travel a lot. Because new releases typically cost \$10 -- vs. \$25 or more for a hardcover book -- you'll save money over the long run.

- Should you buy?

But if you are a less-voracious reader, having a Kindle may cause you to spend more than you normally would on books. Unlike an iPod, which lets you transfer your CDs to it, there isn't a way to transfer books you already own to the Kindle, so you would have to repurchase some of your favorites in Kindle form.

There are thousands of free books available for the Kindle, but it takes some digging to figure out how to get them. For instructions, visit my

blog.

While the Kindle's main draw is reading books, you can read newspapers and magazines on it. Subscriptions are cheaper than the print versions, but if I am going to pay for a magazine or newspaper, I'd rather read the print edition. If I want to read an electronic version, I'd rather read online for free.

With few exceptions, pictures and graphics do not translate well to the Kindle, and navigating articles in newspapers and magazines is a bit clunky. Being able to instantly download out-of-town newspapers or magazines is a great feature, but I wouldn't buy the Kindle if your primary goal is to read lots of periodicals.

To be sure, the Kindle makes a great gift, and the newest version will no doubt find lots of new fans. For mass acceptance, I'd like to see Amazon drop the price even more, perhaps to \$300.

I can't wait to see what Kindle 10 will look like.

Pros

- Improved battery, which lasts for days, or weeks with wireless turned off
- Sleek and attractive design
- Better designed buttons and keyboard
- Holds seven times more books than original

Cons

- Cover is no longer included
- Multidirectional joystick can be frustrating
- You can't transfer books you already own to Kindle

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