

# Apple tablet could write a new chapter for e-books

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In this Sept. 9, 2009 file photo, Apple CEO Steve Jobs is seen during an Apple event in San Francisco. Apple's new touch-screen "tablet" computer, expected to be unveiled Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2010, could give publishers the alternative to Amazon.com they have been craving and give consumers a new way to think about reading books without paper. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, File)

(AP) -- The company whose CEO proclaimed in 2008 that people don't read anymore may now be poised to sweep in and school the electronic book reader market.

That company is Apple Inc., and its CEO, [Steve Jobs](#), was predicting Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle would never take off. But if Apple's talks with publishers are any indication, its "latest creation," set to be unveiled Wednesday, could upend the fledgling e-reader industry in much the same way its iPod redefined [digital music](#).

E-readers had been around since the beginning of the last decade, but in 2007 the Kindle advanced the concept by enabling books to be downloaded wirelessly rather than having to be plugged into a computer. Amazon has tried to push the device further into the mainstream by selling it for \$259, down from the debut price of \$399.

Analysts say the Kindle is the top-selling e-book reader, though Amazon won't say how many it has sold.

Electronic books make up an estimated 3 percent to 5 percent of all book sales, but publishers and authors worry about Amazon's growing clout. The company has been selling electronic versions of top hardcover titles for \$9.99, and publishers fear that consumers who get used to such low prices will demand to pay less for paper books, too.

Enter Apple. The company won't comment on what it plans to unveil Wednesday in San Francisco, but it appears likely to be a tablet - a one-piece computer with a big [touch screen](#), probably larger than an iPhone but smaller than a laptop. While most attention has been paid to the device's possibilities as a Web-surfing and video-watching machine, a multipurpose tablet from Apple also could be the publishing industry's welcome challenger to the Kindle.

Amazon currently sells e-books for people to read on the iPhone and [iPod Touch](#), which is essentially an iPhone without the phone. People with Kindles can download a free program to the iPhone that enables them to read an e-book, put it down and resume it at the same page on

either device.

But given the success of the iPod/iTunes model, in which Apple sells songs and videos for people to stash on their Apple-made devices, if Apple sees its new device as part e-book reader, it will almost certainly want to sell e-books itself. And an Apple bookstore may be in the works. Several publishers tell The Associated Press that they have met with Apple, though they declined to be named or detail the talks.

As a counterweight to Amazon's Kindle store, publishers have rallied around a publishing system from Adobe Systems Inc. that allows them to sell books themselves for several compatible devices, such as Sony Corp.'s e-readers. If Apple creates its own online bookstore, that would be a third major contender in e-book publishing, possibly frustrating consumers who want to move books between devices.

In what seems like a defensive move, Amazon recently said it will let outside companies develop programs for the Kindle, much like Apple has done on the iPhone. Amazon declined to comment on the prospects for Apple's tablet.

If Apple does for e-books what it did for digital music and smart phones, dedicated e-reader makers could be in trouble. Apple didn't invent the MP3 player, but it redefined it when the iPod launched in 2001, and now Apple claims to have three-fourths of the market. With the [iPhone](#), [Apple](#) turned e-mail phones from corporate devices into lust-worthy consumer gadgets to be used for navigation, social networking and just about every other online task.

Forrester Research analyst James McQuivey believes most of the profits in electronic books could come from "converged devices" such as tablets that do many things - such as show video - rather from Kindles and other single-purpose readers.

"Those devices are going to provide an experience that is hard for a standalone reader to ever match," he said.

But much will depend on the price. Analysts estimate a tablet could cost \$500 to more than \$1,000, and that may or may not include having to pay for monthly data access. And many bookworms may still want a device that doesn't try to do too much. They might prefer "e-ink" screens, despite their lack of color, no backlighting and the "flash" of the screen every time a page is turned.

Brent Newhall, who trains people to use new software and other technology in Northern Virginia, has owned the original Kindle, the Kindle 2 and the larger Kindle DX. He said he likes an e-ink screen because it's easier on the eyes.

"I don't need a one-size-fits-all device," he said. "It's very nice having that one device to optimize for that one reading experience."

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