

E-readers mishandle some book formats

September 24 2010, By Steve Alexander

Some new e-readers for electronic books create an interesting problem: It's now possible to own a book you can't read.

The problem occurs with free electronic books that have been digitized in the widely used PDF file format for PCs equipped with the free Adobe Reader program. These PDF files sometimes don't display properly on tiny e-reader screens, even though they're compatible.

I decided to see how the Amazon [Kindle](#) e-reader would display some PDF files of classic books, including the novel "All Quiet on the Western Front" and two collections of Sherlock Holmes short stories. The books are free to download to a PC because their copyrights have expired.

But, in a problem daunting enough for Holmes, the words in these PDF files shrank to nearly microscopic size when I transferred them to the smaller Kindle screen. The Kindle could make the type larger, but it failed to compensate by reducing the number of words per line. As a result, every page ran off the edge of the screen, making it necessary to scroll back and forth to read each line. This occurred only with free PDF files; the for-pay books in Kindle format resized automatically to fit the screen.

Seeking a solution, I used my PC to adjust the type in the PDF files before transferring them to the Kindle. The Adobe Reader software did enlarge the type size and rearrange the lines so they didn't run off the edge of the page, but it refused to save the changes. For that I needed the

\$299 Adobe Acrobat program.

Rather than pay that much, I downloaded the literary works again, this time in HTML Web page format -- which, unfortunately, the Kindle can't read. I copied and pasted the words from these files into [Microsoft Word](#), and used Word to nearly double the type size (to 20 or 22 points.) Word automatically rearranged the lines so none ran off the side the screen. Then I used Word's "save as" feature to store the books as new PDF files.

When transferred to the Kindle's small screen, the giant PDF type shrank dramatically but remained easily readable. No doubt Holmes would have solved the problem much sooner.

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