

New Kindle Touch is an impressive e-reader

February 9 2012, By Troy Wolverton



When it comes to reading digital books, tablets are all the rage. But there's a lot to like about simple e-readers, which over the past year have

become both a lot cheaper and a lot less clunky.

Tablets usually have full color screens, include [Web browsers](#) and email programs, and can run a wide range of applications; by contrast, e-readers typically have black-and-white screens and are designed to be used primarily for reading [e-books](#).

Among the more impressive of the new e-readers is the Kindle Touch, from Amazon.com Inc., which has only two buttons: one for "home" and the other for power.

Instead of using buttons to turn pages, search the text or scroll up and down, you interact with the screen the same way that you would a [smartphone](#) or tablet. You can tap or [swipe](#) to turn pages, type search terms on a [virtual keyboard](#) that appears and disappears as needed, or highlight words by simply pressing on them.

When it comes to incorporating touch-screen technology into its e-readers, Amazon was something of a late adopter. [Rivals](#) including Barnes & Noble and Kobo had released touch-screen based e-readers earlier last year.

I've spent the past couple of weeks testing out the Kindle Touch and its rivals from Barnes & Noble and Kobo to see how they compare.

All three e-readers - the Kindle Touch, Barnes & Noble's Nook Simple Touch and the Kobo Touch - have a lot in common. As their names imply, they each are built around a touch screen.

They all have a 6-inch display that uses the latest e-ink technology, which allows the devices to turn pages faster and display text more sharply than previous e-readers.

Also, they all connect to a proprietary store from which users can buy e-books. Each company offers an app for smartphones and desktop computers that allows users to switch between the dedicated e-readers and other devices. And each touch-screen e-reader syncs with its maker's data servers, so users have access to their entire library of e-books and can instantly go to the page they were reading in a book no matter which device they were reading it on.

Each of the devices also incorporates some social networking features. You can share books with friends from your Kindle Touch, recommend books to friends on the Nook Simple Touch and use the Kobo Touch to alert your Facebook friends when you've completed a book or reached a certain chapter.

But one feature that the Kindle Touch offers that you can't get on either the Kobo Touch or the Nook is 3G connectivity. If you only plan to use an e-reader at your house, where you have a Wi-Fi hotspot, this may not matter to you. But if you want to take it to the beach or on the road, a 3G connection is a big advantage. Not only can you download books without having to find a Wi-Fi hotspot first, but the device will always be able to keep track of where you are in your books.

The 3G feature costs about \$50 extra, but that includes free 3G data service for the life of the device; you don't have to pay anything extra to get online to download books.

Besides the 3G, one feature I loved about the Kindle Touch was how it handles library books. While libraries have been loaning out e-books for years, the Kindle until recently wasn't compatible with the e-book format used by most libraries. But Amazon launched a new service last year that gave Kindle users access to library-owned e-books.

To access a library e-book on other e-readers, you have to download the

book to your computer first and then transfer it to your e-reader, usually by plugging the device into your PC with a cable and using a special program from Adobe. But with the Kindle Touch, you can transfer a library book directly to your device over the Internet. It's easy and works great.

Making digital reading easy is something of a mantra with Amazon. One great touch that the company has long done with its Kindles is to configure them so the devices are ready to use as soon as you turn them on.

For both the Wi-Fi only and 3G versions of the Kindle Touch, Amazon offers two flavors: a version with ads and a version without ads that costs \$40 more. The Kindle Touch I tested had the ads, and I found them annoying. They show up at the bottom of your home screen when Kindle Touch is on and take up its entire display whenever you turn it off, making them hard to ignore.

Barnes & Noble, in contrast, offers the ad-free Simple Touch for the same price as the ad-filled version of the Kindle Touch.

I also didn't like the interface on the Kindle Touch as much as I did those of the other devices. Your collection of books is displayed as a list of text links. It would have been nice if you could instead display the book's covers or arrange them on a virtual bookshelf, as you can with the Kobo and Nook devices.

The rival devices also do a better job of giving you a sense of where you are in a book and of allowing you to speed ahead to other areas. Unlike the Kindle Touch, the Nook Simple Touch displays the page you're on and how many pages are in the book. And both the Nook and the Kobo Touch allow you to zoom ahead by swiping left or right on a slider, something you can't do on Amazon's device.

So I like the Kindle Touch, and the touch screen is a great addition. If you're willing to spend extra for the 3G version, it's the best e-reader around. But if a Wi-Fi reader is all you need, the Nook Simple Touch is a better deal.

AMAZON KINDLE TOUCH:

-Likes: Brighter, clearer display; touch-screen capability; optional 3G connectivity; library books sent directly to device; pre-configured for use.

-Dislikes: More expensive than rivals, unless you get version with annoying ads; ugly text-based home screen interface; lacks easy way to zoom through book; doesn't persistently display page numbers

-Price: \$100 with ads, \$140 without; \$150 for 3G version with ads, \$190 for 3G without ads

-Web: amazon.com

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