

Commentary: Kindle Fire HD is attractive, but still no iPad-killer

September 25 2012, by Jeff Gelles



The new Kindle Fire HD may not stir you to pass along your old iPad as a hand-me-down. But if you own an earlier small tablet running on Android or another operating system, or even last year's original Kindle Fire, you'll want to take a close look.

The Fire [HD](#) isn't for everyone. Like its predecessor, it still draws potshots for seeming, as one critic put it, "like a shop window onto the world's biggest content department store." Yet Amazon.com Inc. has refined an already-impressive \$199 device, while foreshadowing what it promises before Thanksgiving: an 8.9-inch Fire HD, including a [4G wireless](#) version, that will compete more directly with Apple's 9.7-inch [iPad](#).

What has Amazon accomplished so far? For starters, the Fire HD addresses some of the first Fire's rough edges - literally as well as figuratively. It has the same 7-inch screen, but in a case that's slightly longer and wider yet thinner and lighter, and with rounder corners and edges.

The Fire HD also comes with a built-in [microphone](#) and a front-facing, high-definition camera - a camera designed with Skyping in mind. The lack of those features in last year's Fire contributed to the idea that Amazon had cut corners to keep the price below \$200.

And, of course, the Fire HD boasts a high-def LCD screen, 1280 by 800 pixels, compared with the original Fire's 1024-by-600-pixel resolution.

I had a chance to examine the sum of those and other improvements, with a Fire HD provided by [Staples](#), which has begun promoting Amazon's small tablets - including an updated non-HD Kindle Fire selling for \$159 - at its office-supply stores.

Physically, the Fire HD seems less boxy, and somehow softer to the touch. Perhaps it's no surprise that it feels much more like a small iPad than last year's Fire did, since Amazon may be laying a marker against the "iPad Mini" - a rumored companion to Apple's pathbreaking tablet that many analysts expect to arrive this fall.

But it's the refinements to the Fire's technology, and to Amazon's version of its Android operating system, that should make the Fire HD glow noticeably brighter than last year's version.

Amazon has improved on the old Fire's list of features, not just with the HD display, camera and microphone but also by adding robust Dolby Audio stereo speakers, dual-band Wi-Fi, and other enhancements. And it has built the Fire HD on Android 4.0, also known as "Ice Cream

Sandwich" - not the very latest version, Android 4.1 "Jelly Bean," used by the well-regarded Google Nexus 7, but two steps past the original Fire's software based on Android 2.3 "Gingerbread."

That highly refined Android "skin" - the layer above the open-source operating system - is what will likely distinguish the experience for most Fire HD owners.

PC Magazine's Sascha Segan, source of the "shop window" criticism, dubs Amazon's [operating system](#) "Amdroid" and says that its focus "is on letting you easily play with the stuff you download from Amazon" - a critique that, ironically, points to a competitive advantage that Amazon and Apple share.

Like Apple with its iTunes and App Stores, Amazon doesn't make money just by selling devices. Though it started as a bookstore-slaying Web bookseller and morphed into a retailer-killing superstore, Amazon also profits from selling media - not just the e-books that it pioneered on the original Kindles, but also music, movies and TV shows. Just like Apple.

One difference is that Apple, as a pioneer of devices more than of sales models, has taken a high-end path on pricing. The third-generation iPad starts at \$499, and ranges to \$829 for a tablet with 64 gigabytes of memory and 4G LTE connectivity.

Amazon, by contrast, clearly follows the "razors and blades" strategy: Sell razors at a discount, and make your money on blades. One sign of what must be its razor-thin margins for its Fire HD is that it delivers home-screen text ads, which purchasers can vanquish forever by paying Amazon an extra \$15.

Another Fire feature sure to frustrate some users is that Amazon still

bars access to the full universe of apps offered by Google Play, the renamed marketplace for [Android](#) apps developed by a burgeoning industry of outside developers. Like Apple's App Store, Google Play boasts of selling more than half a million apps.

That's an astounding number, but in Amazon's view a somewhat meaningless one. Its Appstore claims to offer more than 30,000 apps, all tested to ensure compatibility with [Kindle Fire](#) and "tablet-optimized" - not simply blown-up smartphone apps.

Amazon's theory is that it can offer the most popular apps, games, and media - almost anything you might want, for a lot less money than an iPad and more smoothly than other non-Apple tablets.

It's a powerful argument from a powerhouse of a company. Don't count it out.

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