

Michael B. Williams, June 2009

## **The Original 2007 Kindle**

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Face 2 Face Project / AAC-RERC



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### **A Brief History of Reading, MBW Style**

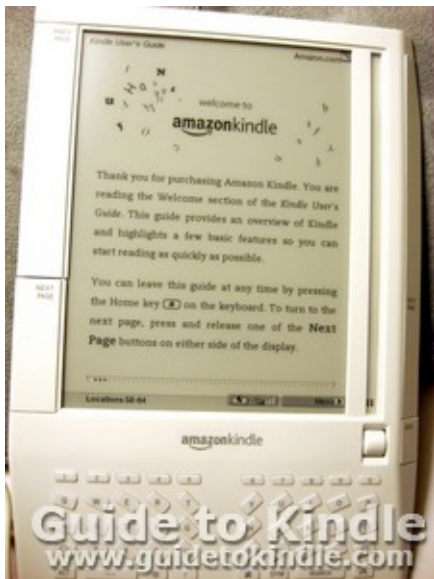
I am an inveterate reader who has practiced this art for 64 years. My home is filled with books which sit on shelves, repose on floors, lay stacked up on tables and reside in a backpack hooked onto my wheelchair. Magazines and newspapers are stashed in various nooks and crannies. In short, I live in a reader's paradise and a cleaning person's hell.

As I have gotten older, I have experienced a subtle loss of ability to perform the physical tasks necessary to reading, holding printed material and turning pages. Books have mysteriously gotten heavier and more awkward over the years. As I struggle to get a book onto my lap from a stack on my desk, several volumes in the pile will act like lemmings and make a dive towards the floor, bouncing off my knees, shins, ankles and toes on their way down. Who knew reading was a contact sport?

I have tried reading on several electronic devices, including a computer and a Palm Organizer. Both these devices delivered inferior reading experiences. Reading on a computer is like, well, reading on a computer—I can do it, but I wouldn't want to make a habit of it. Yes, I can turn pages easily and adjust font sizes with a mouse click, but reading text on a computer monitor that's positioned vertically seems psychologically inhibiting. Also, reading on my computer means reading in my office, even if I'm reading for pleasure. And frankly, staring at a computer monitor for hours on end puts a tremendous strain on my eyes and body.

Reading books on a Palm Organizer became fashionable among the business set when everyone was toting around these electronic gadgets. When I tried reading a book on a Palm Organizer, I found the experience akin to torture. The screen was so small, only a few lines of text were displayed at a time necessitating constant scrolling on my part via the use of a stylus. It didn't feel like reading, it felt like crocheting with words.

### **Enter the Kindle**



After these frustrating experiences, I didn't want anything to do with electronic books. Then I got my hands on a Kindle, the e-reader developed by Amazon.com. The Kindle changed my thinking about electronic reading.

Amazon first introduced the Kindle in November 2007 and introduced a newer version of the Kindle in March 2009. I have experience with both versions. This review will cover the original Kindle.

I ordered a Kindle in November 2008. It arrived at my house in about a week, and I opened it with great excitement and anticipation. Once I stripped off the plain cardboard used to ship the device, the Kindle's custom designed box was revealed to me. I was wonderstruck: all those letters floating every which way in cream-colored space! I felt like reading royalty. I opened the box, took out the Kindle along with the charging unit

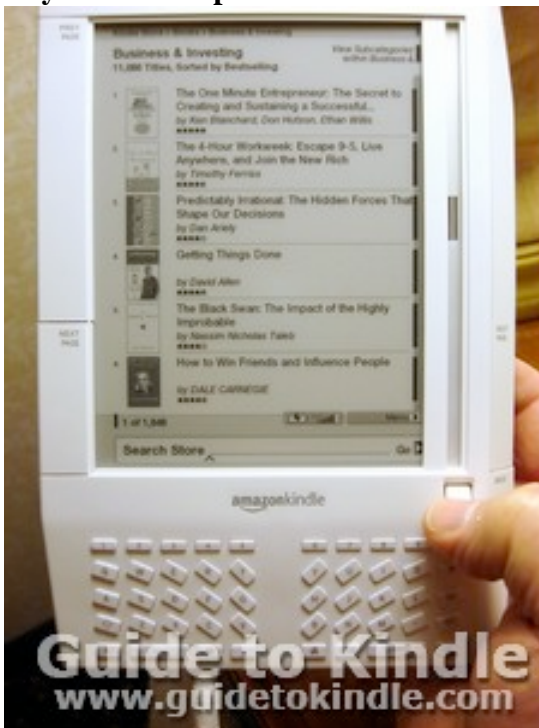
and started charging the device. I looked over the Quick Start Guide, and finally turned the Kindle on. It opened to my "home screen," the place where all my Kindle content is.

Two items were in my Kindle: The Kindle User's Guide, and a welcome letter from Amazon's CEO, Jeff Bezos. The letter read in part:

Our top design objective was for Kindle to disappear in your hands—to get out of the way—so you can enjoy your reading. We hope you quickly forget you're reading on an advanced wireless device and instead be transported into that mental state readers love, where the outside world dissolves, leaving only the author's stories, words, and ideas. Thank you and happy reading.

Is this statement based on any semblance of reality, or is it rooted in the philosophical musings of a master salesperson? The short answer is, a little of both. I'll explore this in depth later, but now here's a description of the Kindle.

### Physical Description



The physical dimensions of the Kindle are 7.5 x 5.3 x 0.7 inches. It weighs about ten ounces and is about the size of a trade paperback book. The power on/off switch, as well as the on/off switch for the Kindle's wireless feature, is located on the back of the device. Hidden under the back cover is a user-replaceable battery and an SD card slot for expanding the unit's memory. Running along the bottom edge of the device are a headphone jack, a USB port, a jack for the Kindle's charging unit and volume up and down buttons. On the front of the device is a small keyboard and a 6-inch E-ink "electronic paper" display, featuring 4-color grayscale print and 600 x 800 pixel resolution. The display has no backlighting.

To the left and right of the display are four large rectangular buttons: A "Next Page" button is on either side of the display. The "Previous Page" button to the left of the screen allows the reader to flip back, page by page. A smaller button on the right, labeled "Back," acts like the "back" button on a web browser. Also, to the display's right is what the Kindle User's Guide calls a "cursor bar." It looks like a thermometer with a silver

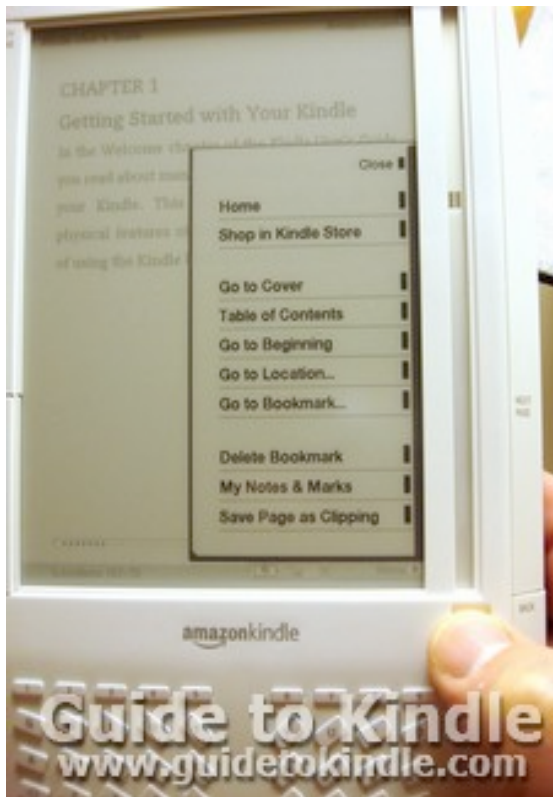
rectangle at the bottom. The silver rectangle is the Kindle's cursor, which can be moved up or down via the scrolling "select wheel" located at the bottom of the cursor bar.

### What's a Kindle Good For?

What can people do with a Kindle? Well, here's what I do with my Kindle:

- Buy a book, magazine or newspaper from Amazon's Kindle store and have the material wirelessly delivered.
- Load public domain texts into my Kindle by hooking my device to my computer with a USB cable.
- Read printed material, turning pages forward and backward as needed at the touch of a button.
- Increase the font size of my reading material.
- Highlight selections in my reading material.
- Place a bookmark my reading material.
- Annotate my reading material.
- Search for specific words and phrases in the text I'm reading.
- Look up definitions of words in the text I'm reading via Kindle's built-in dictionary.
- Carry around Sunday's newspaper, a couple of books and three magazines in a convenient little package.
- Listen to MP3 music files while I read.
- Listen to audiobooks.

### Performing Kindle Tasks



These tasks are accomplished by using the Kindle's select wheel and cursor bar to navigate the Kindle's contextual pop-up menu system and selecting from its many options. By default, the Kindle's cursor always sits on the bottom right side of the screen next to the word "menu." Press down on the scroll wheel to display the Kindle menu and the various menu choices. To the right of each menu item is a short vertical bar called a "selection point." Select a menu item by using the select wheel to align the Kindle's cursor with the selection point next to the desired item, and press the select wheel to choose the item. These contextual menus change depending where I am in my Kindle universe. For example, here are the menu choices when the menu is activated while I'm in the home screen:

- Shop in Kindle Store
- Sync & Check for Items
- Settings
- Content Manager
- Experimental

Here are the menu choices when the menu is activated while reading a book:

- Home
- Shop in Kindle Store
- Go to Cover
- Table of Contents
- Go to Beginning
- Go to Location
- Sync to Furthest Page Read
- Go to Bookmark
- Add Bookmark
- My Notes & Marks
- Save Page as Clipping
- Delete This Item

If I move the Kindle's cursor to a line in the text I am reading and press the select wheel, a pop-up menu appears with these three choices:

- Lookup
- Add Highlight
- Add Note

### **Shopping with the Kindle**

I can buy books wirelessly from almost anywhere for my Kindle because Amazon uses a cellphone network to connect Kindles to their online store. Although Amazon charges nothing for this wireless service, my Kindle is tied into my Amazon account, which in turn is tied to my credit card. When I buy a Kindle e-book from the Amazon store, it is immediately charged to my credit card and downloaded to my Kindle. Within seconds my chosen book is listed on my Kindle home screen, ready for me to read. To add content such as public domain literature that is not for sale online by Amazon I must connect the Kindle to my computer, otherwise not.

To get to the Kindle store, I make sure the Kindle's wireless feature is switched on and the cursor is at the bottom of the cursor bar. After pressing the scroll wheel to display the menu, I position the cursor next to the "Shop in Kindle Store" selection point and press the scroll wheel again. This connects me to the online Amazon Kindle store, where I can look around and buy reading material for my Kindle.

### **MBW's Criticism**

How does the Kindle operate under real world conditions? Did I quickly forget I was reading on an advanced wireless device and was instead transported into that mental state readers love, where the outside world dissolves, leaving only the author's stories, words, and ideas, just like my new buddy Jeff Bezos said I would?

Oh, Jeff, you are such a kidder.

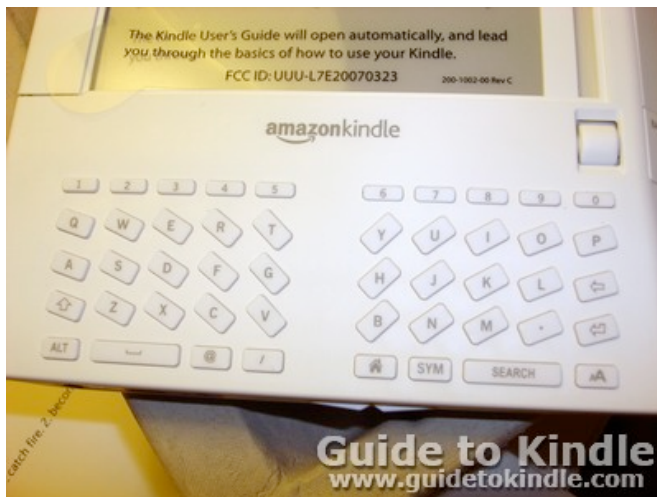
There is no way to easily hold the Kindle without activating one or more of its buttons. Grip the left side of the Kindle and risk unintentionally flipping forward or backward through a text. Gripping the Kindle by its right side may activate the next page button on that side. I found this most annoying. It raised my frustration level to the point of wanting to hurl the Kindle against a wall. Fortunately, before I took action on this impulse, I

found the Kindle comes with a cover which the device slips into, making it look more book-like and easier to handle. However, I once tried to pick up the Kindle by the cover's flap. Big mistake. The device immediately slipped out of the case and fell to the floor with a disturbing thud.

Simply reading on the Kindle is easy. Once I have my reading material on the screen, I press the next page button to go forward in the text I'm reading, or hit the previous page button to go backward in the text.

One of the main features of the Kindle is its E-ink "electronic paper" display. The display is very clear and readable, but it's a different experience from reading a book printed on paper. I found the E-ink display of dark gray letters on a light gray background disconcerting at first, wishing I could turn up the contrast, especially in low lighting conditions. I can still read in low light by bumping up the font size on the Kindle. I take the Kindle outdoors and read in direct sunlight with no difficulty, and I can read for hours on the device without straining my eyes or body.

Yes, reading on the Kindle is easy; however, if I want to perform any of the other tasks the Kindle is capable of, like buying a book from the Kindle store, making a note on something, or looking up a word in the built-in dictionary, I must brave the deathly hallows of the Kindle's poorly designed user interface. Dealing with it is maddeningly frustrating and makes me want to scream, yell, fall on the floor and kick my feet up and down like a three year old. When I first started using the Kindle, I frequently got lost in the wrong menus. This improved as I used the Kindle and familiarized myself with where the various menu choices were and what screen I had to be in to access them. By far the most difficult thing on the Kindle for me to use is the select wheel and its associated cursor. Using the select wheel is problematic, as I usually undershoot or overshoot my intended mark while moving the cursor up and down. To make matters worse, the silver cursor is almost invisible in low lighting conditions. Pressing down on the select wheel for a "click" without moving the cursor up or down is extremely difficult. I have to try two or three times before I can select the item I intend. This has not improved over time and is quite frustrating.



Talk about frustration, take the Kindle keyboard...please! It's a total disaster. The tiny keyboard with Chiclet-shaped, oddly angled keys looks like it was dreamed up by a failed design student. Ordinary mortals will find it frustrating to use, let alone persons who lack good hand control. The keyboard also lacks the basic set of symbols available on a standard keyboard. To access these on the Kindle, I must push the "sym" key on the keyboard, which activates a pop-up menu and then use the scroll wheel to navigate to the desired symbol

and press the wheel to select it. It is overly complex processes such as this that make me wish I could ignore the keyboard altogether. Unfortunately, this is not possible as the keyboard is used for doing necessary things such as buying reading material from the Kindle store and looking up words in Kindle's built-in dictionary.

If anyone thinks I'm being overly critical of the Kindle, let me say this in conclusion: The advantages of the Kindle for me as a reader are so great that I will gladly overlook its many flaws to be able to read in comfort, instantly look up definitions of words I don't know in the text I'm reading, and buy books for my Kindle wherever I happen to be. These features make me forget any frustration I have. My Kindle goes almost everywhere with me, tucked in beside me in my wheelchair. Trips to the dental clinic don't seem so daunting anymore now that I'm armed with my Kindle loaded with interesting reading material.

And to think this is just a small, early step in a long evolution.

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