

How New Is QUE?

Like many of you, I read voraciously. My nightstand is always overflowing, and I'm running out of bookshelf space. Meanwhile, the cost of print publications continues to grow. I recently canceled the print subscription to my decades-favorite business daily when the renewal was \$400 in addition to my online subscription. Also, I am increasingly aware of my carbon footprint and am not convinced that the contents of my city recycling bin really go anywhere but to the landfill.

So how do you cope? One approach is to use an e-reader, but which one? Electronic document formats abound, and few devices offer any guarantee that what you can view today won't become obsolete tomorrow. As electronic formats change, devices to work with them proliferate. I counted dozens of new and revamped e-readers at the latest Consumer Electronics Show (CES), though most looked like minor variations on existing themes.

An ideal e-reader must combine the best of print and digital features: Let me read inside with artificial light and outside in bright sunlight. It must be affordable, although if the device lasts a long time, price is less important. It must be open to all ebook standards. Finally, my e-reader must be as rugged as a book or a newspaper so that if I fall asleep reading and it falls to the floor, I don't want to have to buy another.

Last year, I described my search as looking for a device that could pass a kind of e-reader Turing test: Using it would be nearly indistinguishable from reading a printed book or newspaper, yet it would leverage features found only in electronic publications, such as text searching. My e-reader must be more than just another web-connected tablet that allows me to listen to music, download apps, and is really just a downsized netbook. Sure, the iPad is exciting, but I'm looking for an e-reader with a singular focus as a durable, long-lasting, frugal device capable of managing a wide array of changing digital formats and storing thousands of documents.

The one e-reader that seemed truly unique and promising at this year's CES came from Plastic Logic. For more than a year, I've followed Plastic Logic and have been watching its new

product, the QUE proReader. I'm still waiting to get one for a test drive; delivery has been delayed until summer. In the meantime, I talked with Steven Glass, senior director of technical marketing for the device. And I learned enough to be willing to wait.

First, QUE can read the widest variety of electronic formats I've seen. As electronic formats inevitably change, you can simply use separately provided software to transform a new format on a separate computer to one that works with the QUE. Although he would not promise that the QUE could survive a drop-test, Glass admitted to dropping his own QUE more than once without breaking it. This would have destroyed most other e-readers or netbooks. Glass also said that having a device with an 8.5" x 11" screen, yet weighing only about a pound, made the QUE comfortable to read, more like a magazine or a book than a brick. Its interface accommodates business reader habits, allowing switching between locally stored electronic publications. As a further enticement to business users, the QUE can store Outlook calendars and email, yet it still leaves plenty of storage for thousands of ebooks. And its battery lasts days, not hours.

However, nothing is perfect, and QUE has its shortcomings. The most obvious is that it cannot display color. I can live with that, but a desire to read in color isn't new; colored manuscripts have existed for hundreds of years. Also, ebooks are usually static, but multimedia is increasingly a part of webpages and what we increasingly expect in online content. Which leads me to this: QUE has no built-in web browser. You can download ebooks from Barnes & Noble, and QUE offers subscriptions to many business journals. Every online subscription is custom-designed for delivery to the QUE. I'm not sure how links in QUE business publications to content outside the publication will be handled without a browser. Given the universe of web publications, it's unlikely that every online subscription I have will be available for some niche publications that I rely on, perhaps ever, so QUE may not be the complete solution I'm looking for.

How do you cope?

Yet even if QUE meets all my e-reader requirements, will it suffer the Betamax fate—a superior product that couldn't win sufficient market share? The QUE is indeed new and appealing, but technology waits for no product. The clock is ticking. **E**

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