

Review: A \$499 e-reader that opens like a book

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E-book readers are a fun category of gadgets, because their shape is not yet set in stone. While one laptop is much like the other, manufacturers are still experimenting with e-readers, trying to figure out how best to take the book into the digital age.

So how about an e-book reader that actually opens like a book? That seems like a good idea, given that the book in its current form has about 2,000 years of popularity behind it, after supplanting scrolls. But appearances can be deceiving.

The \$499 Entourage Edge, which comes out this week, looks like a small laptop when folded. Hold it by the spine like a book, and it opens to reveal two screens. On one side is an "electronic ink" screen for reading. On the other is a full-color touch screen that can be used not just to buy books, but to surf the Web, play music and write e-mail.

Unfortunately, this is less of review and more of a word of warning: The Edge doesn't do its job. It has a couple of flaws that are enough to make it a failure. Then it has one huge flaw that is enough to make it a failure with no help from other flaws.

The big flaw is atrocious battery life. The Edge doesn't go into a proper standby mode when closed, so its battery is drained after about 10 hours of inactivity. The only way to make it last longer is to turn it off completely. But when you turn it back on, it takes a minute and a half to boot up. That's way too long, considering that you can flip open a paper book and start reading in a few seconds. Other e-readers, such as Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle, last longer on standby and turn on faster.

Entourage Systems Inc., the startup behind the product, says it's working on getting the Edge to consume less power when closed, and hopes to be able to send a software update out in June.

The other problems with the Edge are that it's heavy, at about 3 pounds. The Kindle weighs two-thirds of a pound. For \$499, you'd expect the Edge to have cellular wireless access for book and newspaper downloads, as the \$259 Kindle and the \$400 Sony Reader Daily Edition do. Instead, it has only Wi-Fi access.

The flaws aside, the Edge is an interesting device. It's the most capable e-reader yet, but it's likely to hold that honor for less than two weeks, until Apple Inc.'s iPad tablet comes out April 3.

The Edge's color touch screen is powered by Android, Google Inc.'s software for cell phones. It can play music and movies in addition to surfing the Web. You can tap out e-mails or notes on the screen. You can plug in USB "thumb drives" and SD

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cards to load files. The Edge comes with its own online book store, but it can also show books from other stores, if they're in the right format (ePub with Adobe DRM). However, to read books from other stores you have to download them to a computer, then transfer them to the Edge through a USB cable or a memory card.

It's tough to design a good user interface that stretches over two screens with very different characteristics. Barnes & Noble Inc.'s Nook is a prime example. Like the Edge, it pairs an e-ink screen with a color touch screen, albeit a much smaller one. That's a confusing setup. It constantly forces users to switch their gaze between the screens to figure out what to do. The Edge does better in this regard, because more functions are manipulated from the large touch screen.

It still feels awkward that you can control the color screen by touching it while you need to pull out a stylus to use the e-ink screen. And some functions send you hunting from screen to screen. For instance, to search for a word in a book, you press an icon on the e-ink side with a stylus, then move over to the color side to tap out the word. If the color screen has turned itself off to conserve power, you won't know that the word-search window is up until you turn on that screen by pressing a button.

This is an attempt to get around a key limitation of e-ink: Although it supposedly is a more natural display for reading, it is very slow to update from image to image, making typing and navigation awkward.

However, I find a high-quality backlit LCD color screen to be more legible than e-ink, not less. And a device with one responsive screen is much easier to use and lighter than one with two. We'll see. Maybe the iPad will show people that reading on LCDs isn't so bad, after all.

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