

Review: Nookcolor is best dedicated e-reader

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When Barnes & Noble Inc. began to sell its first electronic reading device, the Nook, a year ago, I found it as welcome as a bookcase landing on my toe. It was a terrible design — slow, confusing and buggy.

The successor, the Nookcolor, is a huge improvement and the best dedicated e-reader on the market this holiday season.

The new color touch screen makes navigation and reading much easier. At \$249, it is great for consumers who are not yet willing to spring for a pricier tablet computer such as the iPad.

The original Nook had two screens: one big, Kindle-like gray-scale "electronic ink" display for reading and one small touch-enabled color display for navigation. It was like an unholy marriage between a Kindle and an iPod Touch, worse than either product on its own.

The Nookcolor, which went on sale two weeks ago, dispenses with the e-ink screen. The color screen has swelled to 7 inches diagonally, taking over the whole surface and making the Nookcolor look like the mid-sized product of a happy union between an iPhone and an iPad.

Other color e-book readers have hit the market this year from smaller names, including Sharper Image with its Literati. They've been hampered by poor screens that make the text shimmer uncomfortably. Barnes & Noble's screen uses the same technology as Apple Inc. does for its iPad, and it's wonderfully crisp.

E-ink readers such as the Kindle do have one selling point: They provide a more paper-like reading experience, which sounds attractive to people who find that staring at a computer screen for hours on end is uncomfortable. However, I believe most of this discomfort derives from screens that are set to shine too brightly. I found the Nookcolor quite comfortable to read on, partly because it's easy to adjust the brightness of the backlight for pretty much any reading environment. Blazing sunshine will still wash the screen out, though.

Most importantly, the touch-sensitive color screen makes navigation much easier. The Nook's software isn't exemplary in its clarity and I did experience a few glitches, but it's not hard to get the hang of it.

Here's how the Nook stacks up with the competition:

— Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle has stuck to e-ink technology, which has been the norm for e-readers so far. It has only one virtue: It's easy to read in broad daylight. In all other ways, e-ink is a disastrous technology and makes navigation a chore.

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The Kindle can't show color, scroll or zoom images, and the text is dark grey on a light grey background. It doesn't come with its own light source.

In the Kindle's favor, the reader is cheaper, available for as low as \$139. There's also a \$189 version that comes with free access to AT&T Inc.'s cellular broadband network. (The first Nook was cellular too, but the current version relies solely on Wi-Fi hotspots.) The Kindle is about the same size as the Nookcolor, but weighs half as much.

The Kindle doesn't accept e-books from public libraries. The Nook does, though it treats them as second-class citizens. They can't be pinned to the "home" reading screen, so firing them up takes more time than with other titles.

— Apple Inc.'s iPad does far, far more than the Nook, and it is much better at presenting magazines and newspapers, thanks to a screen that's twice as big. Magazines, in particular, are terribly clumsy to navigate on the Nook. The Nookcolor is more portable and cheaper, and its screen brightness can be turned up higher, so it's a better choice if you plan to mainly use the tablet for reading novels. The iPad is better in every other way, so buy one if you can afford the \$499 starting price.

Apple's iPod Touch is a viable e-book reader as well and starts at \$229, making it slightly cheaper than the Nook. The screen is a third of the size of the Nook's. Like the iPad, the iPod Touch can access not just Barnes & Noble's e-book store, but scores of others, including Amazon's Kindle store. However, the small screen means that it's best bought as a general entertainment device. If you really want something to read books on, the Nook is a better choice.

Both the iPad and the Kindle beat the Nookcolor in terms of battery life, but at eight hours, the Nook is good enough. Expect to charge it every three or four days.

The Nook is based on Google Inc.'s smart-phone operating system, Android, but it doesn't run any of the tens of thousands of third-party Android programs, or apps, that are available for phones. Barnes & Noble plans to launch its own app store early next year. In the meantime, the Nook does come with a Web browser and a couple of apps, including Sudoku and Pandora's Internet music service.

Barnes & Noble is taking advantage of the color touch screen by selling children's books with built-in narration tracks. It's a fine idea, and my 3-year-old daughter soon got the hang of starting up the device, navigating to a book, and following along by swiping the screen to go from page to page. But the books cost \$8 each, while iPhone and iPad apps that are more engaging and animated, such as a version of "Dr. Seuss "Green Eggs and Ham," cost just \$2 each.

I don't think dedicated e-readers are going to get much better than the Nook, at least not when it comes to the hardware. Maybe they'll become a bit slimmer and lighter and have longer-lasting batteries, but there won't be much time for big improvements, because within a few years, general-purpose tablets such as the iPad and Samsung Galaxy Tab will have taken over this niche. Though it may get some more apps next year, the Nook won't be able to match the versatility of a

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general-purpose tablet.

The Nookcolor could use one immediate improvement: a space between "Nook" and "color." As it is, the name sounds too much like a mispronunciation of "nuclear" when you say it too fast, and that's not a word you want to stumble into when you're at an airport security checkpoint.

But other than that, it's a good choice for someone who doesn't want to spring for an iPad. Welcome to adulthood, e-readers.

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