Review of the Amazon Kindle

I love books, I read lots of them and tend to buy even more of them (a disparity that is resulting in an ever increasing backlog of unread books!). There are physical aspects to books that I love. They are pleasing to hold, and they feel natural to hold and flick through. I'm also fussy about their physical aspects: I like certain sizes of books but not others. For instance, I don't like hardback novels, but hardback non-fiction is okay. I've no idea why!

Therefore you might think that I'd be the last person to convert to e-books. Yet there are several reasons I (kind of) have. Firstly I've long been a devote of hand-held electronics, in all their wonderful forms . Secondly I have limited storage space, and travel a lot. When I travel I like to have access to lots of books (ideally all of them !) 'just in case'.

I've bought both the first generation iPad, and the third generation Kindle. I have to say that I never found the iPad to be a good e-reader device. It's slightly too large, too heavy, and the screen (whilst colour) not comfortable for reading on for any length of time, and basically impossible to read outside in bright sunlight. The kindle is an almost perfect e-reader device given current technology. It's about just the right size, and pretty light. The page turning mechanism (a button at the side) feels even more natural and comfortable than turning the pages in a real paper book (for example, you can hold the kindle and turn the pages easily with just one hand). One slight downside though is that you can only page forward or back a page at a time. With a physical book its easy to jump forward or back multiple pages at a time. This is slightly strange, as digital devices are usually better at jumping aroud (think of DVDs Vs VHS). I think this will improve when future iterations of the Kindle have touch-screens, and then you'll be able to slide your

finger along a progress bar to jump to any part of the book. There is also a certain amount of physical feedback you get from books that is absent from e-readers: you can instantly tell how far into the book you've read, and you can feel the length of a book by its weight. Perhaps future iterations of the kindle may even have some form of artificial sensory feedback that replicates this? I definitely see great potential for the Kindle to evolve over the coming years. It currently uses e-ink technology which makes it perfect for reading for long periods of time, and in bright sunlight, but it lacks the interactivity and attractiveness of a colour touch-screen. There are already technologies in development which combine the two; when that makes its début, then drops to a significantly low price, e-readers will truly take over.

There are also economic problems with e-readers. For instance, most of the kindle books are not that much cheaper than their physical versions, and are sometimes slightly more expensive. This feels wrong to me, especially since 'owning' an ebook isn't quite like owning a physical book: you can't lend it, sell it, and the length of time you'll be able to access it into the far future is far from certain (can you access word processor files you wrote 20 years ago? If not, is it not likely that the current ebook formats could become obsolete and unreadable over time?). Also, some people are worried that the rise of e-readers will mean more physical public libraries are closed, and that the devices are toys for the rich only. The first concern probably has some legitimacy – after all, the rise of Amazon and now e-books has meant lots of bookshops have closed. Nevertheless, I think libraries can not only use ebooks (there are now schemes to let you 'borrow' ebooks from your local library, but can adapt and meet community needs to stay relevant. At least I hope so. As for being elitest, e-readers are quickly dropping in price and will soon become effectively free. This will also allow the poor to access for free loads of public domain books, which have fallen out of copyright. In fact, just as with mp3 files, there will be huge

pressure for ebooks to become free, simply because they will be easily hacked and shared online. Yet if that happens, what happens to authors and good editors, who need to be compensated for their efforts in creating good books? I think there will perhaps be less pressure though, than with mp3s, as most books are not as ‘mass market’ as pop music, and hence less likely to be hacked.

Amazon now claim to be selling more ebooks than paper books. However, I suspect that a big part of the current surge in people buying ebooks is due to them ‘converting’ over their previous favourite books to the new format. The same thing was seen with DVD sales, which peaked for a few years as people rebuilt their film libraries in the new format, then dropped.

In general, I really like the Kindle: it’s easy to use, convenient to find and download books within minutes, great that you never have to think about 3G charges, and useful to be able to carry around so many books whilst travelling. However, it hasn’t killed off my habit of buying real, physical books. It hasn’t even slowed down the number of physical books I buy, at least not much. There may come a time – when e-readers combine touch-screen, colour and e-ink – when I buy almost no physical books, but until then I like both.