

Electronic reading devices have the potential to reinvent a fine old technology, but they have some way to go

The book is already a highly evolved piece of technology, many claim. It is portable, shareable, easily navigable and relatively cheap. How could it be improved by making it electronic?

I love books, but I have no difficulty imagining how they could be improved. Indeed, I have been waiting for e-readers to arrive ever since I first read about them over a decade ago. Think of something like a larger, slimmer iPod Touch that could store thousands of books and dictionaries; you could download any book ever published (they would never be out of print), flick through them effortlessly and search them for that passage you can't quite remember.

Unfortunately, in the real world you are stuck with the iRex Iliad. For a start, it's a monster. It weighs in at 425g – that's roughly the same as a 700-page paperback. Writing as someone who does most of his reading on London's Tube, I must admit that fact alone would make it a non-starter. Earlier this year, I bought the Bookeen Cybook almost entirely because of its weight – a slimline 170g.

The legibility of the Iliad is excellent, it must be said. Like all the current generation of readers it uses a brilliant technology called eInk. This is black on white and is not backlit, which means that – like a book but unlike a laptop – you can read it in sunlight, though not in the dark. And it doesn't strain your eyes.

Unfortunately, the user's manual is a classic written-by-geeks document. For example, there is a facility on the Iliad for reading newspapers; great – how do you get them? The manual is silent. You can clearly do a lot more on the Iliad than simply read books, but you'd have to be a technical whiz to work out what.

At the moment the Iliad feels like a prototype that needs a lot more development. Whether it gets it depends on how popular e-readers become in the future – and currently the signs are not hopeful.

Electronic reading devices need to develop further to realize their full potential. The author of the article has known about e-readers for more than 10 years. He says a great advantage is that, theoretically, they can make any text available. He finds that one big problem with the present version of the iRex Iliad is the screen. For this reason alone he would not even consider buying one for himself. A good feature, though, is the use of eInk, which makes the Iliad easy to read. Some of the Iliad's additional facilities are great, but the average user would need more time to be able to make full use of them. All in all, current trends make the author sceptical about the future of e-readers.