

iRex iLiad electronic ink tablet

Can a Linux eBook be a real page-turner? **Leo Maxwell** investigates...

In brief...

» Handheld eBook reader, running a Linux kernel. See also: Bookeen Cybook, Amazon Kindle, Sony eReader.

SPECIFICATION

CPU: Intel 400MHz XScale

Memory: 64MB RAM

Display: 8.1-inch Electronic Paper. 768 x 1,024 pixels, 160dpi

Roughly A5 in size, the iRex iLiad sits comfortably in the left hand, leaving the thumb to operate the main controls and the right hand free to use the stylus. It feels like a small hardback book or notepad. Grouped at the left of the screen are a long, narrow flip bar, which is used for turning the pages, plus Up, Down, and Select buttons for navigation.

The monochrome electrophoretic screen is easily readable, even in sunlight, and after unpacking and plugging it in to charge I soon found myself nostalgically engrossed in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a supplied Gutenberg Project text.

The screen has a tough semi-matt surface, which at first is a little odd to write or draw on, and the soft keyboard is sluggish, but this device is primarily a reader. The stylus can be used for drawing, writing and other functions, such as zoom and panning. It's not a touchscreen, though: it uses an induction system. The stylus also contains a coil that doubles as a Wi-Fi antenna. It displays diagrams and schematics clearly; even photos are adequately rendered in 16-level greyscale, and the zoom is simple and effective.

Battery life

The iLiad uses power only when changing the page, and up to 15 hours of battery life are promised from the built-in Lithium Ion battery. Of course, this is usage dependant (pen, Wi-Fi etc), but I found ten hours plus easily possible just reading.

Filetypes supported include PDF, HTML, TXT and PRC (Mobipocket, a closed DRM format). JPEG, BMP and PNG images can also be viewed. Created text is saved as .PNG. Files, including PDFs, can be annotated without needing to edit the original. To do this, it creates an overlay, saved as a .PNG file, except for PDF, which

» There are plenty of eBooks to download from the internet, many of them free.

unfortunately uses a proprietary format that can't be viewed on Linux.

A growing number of eBooks are available for download on the internet, many of them free. A stereo headphone socket lurks at the bottom, but there's no audio file provision yet. MMC cards (up to 1GB), CF cards (up to 4GB) and USB Flash drives are all supported. The multi-pin connector for the 'travel hub', which has USB, Ethernet and charging ports, seems a bit flimsy but otherwise build quality is robust.

Wireless connection (WEP or WPA) is available, and is simple to set up. The device software can be automatically updated online, and it's possible to connect to a shared SMB folder on a PC. The connection is for file transfer only, however, automatically downloading anything present in the folder, then disconnecting. Interactive uses such as a web browser are beyond its remit.

Although the companion software is as yet Windows-only, the iLiad was automatically detected and mounted by OpenSUSE 10.3 and Ubuntu 7.10 as a USB disk, so transferring files was a matter of drag and drop. The device lacks a file manager and the PDF reader is unable to read bookmarks, but on the whole it's easy to use and works well for its purpose.

There's growing community support in terms of software, and the developers

promise improvements in the future. It has adequate on-board manuals, copies of which can be printed if necessary.

The bottom line

The cost makes this an expensive book replacement, and the restraints imposed by power limitations show, but with the low cost of storage media, being able to carry an entire library in hand luggage is not to be sniffed at. The obvious alternative at this price is a cheap laptop or a PDA, but for everyday use as a reader, the clear screen, low weight (389g) and battery life put the iLiad in the lead. Although there are other devices appearing, none seems to have the feature set of the iLiad. **LXF**

LINUX FORMAT Verdict

iRex iLiad

Developer: iRex Technologies
Web: www.irextechnologies.com
Price: £387 plus VAT

Features	7/10
Performance	8/10
Ease of use	9/10
Value for money	6/10

» An excellent replacement for a lot of heavy books. Just don't expect much else.

Rating 7/10

