My First E-Reader

As the online editor of Physics Today, I’m expected to be familiar with the latest platforms for delivering digital content. I own an iPhone, iPod, and iPad. But until recently, I had never read a book online.

My reluctance to embrace e-books had several sources. When I decided to buy Marcel Proust’s 4,000-page novel In Search of Lost Time four years ago, I was tempted to choose the e-book rather than the 8.2-liter, 3.9-kilogram paper cuboid. To my surprise, the physical books were cheaper than the e-book.

Another source of reluctance was longevity of access. I first read Ford Madox Ford’s Parade’s End as an undergraduate in the 1980s. When I decided to re-read the tetralogy three decades later, I merely picked up my old Penguin edition. Will an e-book that I buy now be readable after a similar span has elapsed? I doubt it.

My wife Jan remains reluctant to embrace e-books—for three additional reasons. First, we have plenty of unread print books in our library. Second, there’s the problem of what to do when flight attendants order passengers to turn off all electronic devices prior to landing; Jan can keep reading her print book. Third, she likes to read in the bathtub.

So what drew me to e-books? In March, when Jan and I were on vacation in England, we spent two hours in what purports to be the biggest bookshop in Europe: Waterstones’ flagship store in Piccadilly, London. There, in the store’s graphic novel section, I came across volume 1 of Sex by author Joe Casey and artist Piotr Kowalski.

The eight issues collected in the volume tell the story of Simon Cooke, who retires his Batman-like alter ego and assumes the reins of his family’s conglomerate. The series’ title alludes to the contrast between Cooke’s chaste former life as a crime fighter and the carnal temptations he faces in his new role. Intrigued, I bought the book.

I read Sex on the flight back to Washington, DC. When I searched for the next volume, the news was both good and bad. Good, because a further three issues had since been published. Bad, because I didn’t feel like buying one flimsy issue after another. So I signed up with comiXology, an online comic store that sells digital comics.

Now that I’m viewing digital comics on an iPad 4, it’s a mixed experience. Thanks to the tablet’s 2048 x 1536-pixel screen, the artwork is rich and clear, but the lettering of some comics, which was inked with print in mind, is marginally readable. By contrast, Monette Velasco’s redesign of CiSE looks gorgeous on an iPad 4. Even the tiniest mathematical indices are legible.

Having dipped my toe into the e-book waters, I’ve concluded that I don’t have a sentimental attachment to paper books. I favor whatever format offers the best reading experience. For comics (but not for CiSE), paper still has the edge.

Charles Day is the Web editor at Physics Today. This month’s mug shot was painted by John, a talented young artist from Long Beach, California.