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An Open Letter by David Biddle

It's Time to "Think Different" About E-books



Dear Mr. Cook:

Ten years ago, I was impressed by Amazon's e-book plans. And yet, even though the name "Kindle" sounded cool, I didn't rush out to purchase that first clunky chunk of plastic. I was waiting for Apple to blow us away with something better.

So, what happened?

I have enjoyed watching movies and baseball games on my iPad for about five years now. But the iBooks app is essentially no different than all the other digital book offerings out there—and frankly, I feel let down by Apple. If the goal of e-books is to mimic the twentieth-century print book experience, that seems very un-Apple-like.

E-book apps in 2016 should be as revolutionary as desktop publishing, spreadsheets, and word processors were back in the 1980s. Remember those days? Software was magical. Computers weren't big calculators anymore; they were exotic new tools with wings that let us soar into a new world. High tech was the realm of creative genius and pioneering innovation. As that classic Apple ad intoned by the late '90s, "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers.... Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do."

Noble words—but these days, e-books haven't changed much at all, and they've never been truly different. I can't think of people who qualify more as misfits than readers who still love books. Yet, I see very few high-tech troublemakers who care enough to get us soaring into new realms of reading.

I have to ask: Does Apple even think there's a profitable market in e-books? Or do you all figure it's impossible to compete with Amazon? According to an October 2015 report from the *AuthorEarnings* site, Apple has about 12 percent of the e-book market to Amazon's 74 percent. More recently, the *New York Times* reports that e-book sales in general have taken a tumble—12 million sold in 2015 compared with 20 million in 2011. Maybe that's why we aren't seeing real competitive innovation in e-books—you've run the numbers and decided to cede the ground to Jeff Bezos.



But again, this doesn't seem very Apple-like. In 1997, when Steve Jobs introduced "Think Different" to an audience of employees, he said: "We're thinking differently about the kind of products we have to build." The iPod and iPhone were the result.

I consider myself a power reader, and I'm not alone. In a 2014 opinion piece in the *New York Times*, James Atlas argues that, "by some estimates," five million Americans belong to book clubs. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that in fall 2016, there are over 15 million students enrolled in US public high schools, 35-plus million in public elementary and middle schools, and another 5 million or so in private schools. That's more than 50 million bona-fide young power readers, most of whom will be buying books for decades.

So, here's my challenge to you, Mr. Cook, and to Apple: Create a must-use e-book system for the twentieth-first century and beyond, something that's the equivalent of the iPhone. I offer a few suggestions below, but at Apple, your engineers should be able to do things readers like me haven't even thought of yet.

Let us print out and consolidate e-book notes: I've never felt comfortable defacing paper books with underlining, and I love that I can annotate e-books with highlights and comments as I read along. I would've killed for that kind of

power when I was a student. And yet, there doesn't seem to be a way to easily print those notes out or to amalgamate them in a file connected to other notes. It's possible to use the Evernote app, a marvelous tool, to hack the e-book note-taking process, but that kind of power should be packed into any digital reading app in 2016. Don't just make note-taking different—make it sexy.

Design my e-book collection so that it looks good: Again, make it sexy. As far as I can tell, no e-book application lets users turn those pretty images of their books around so they can simply look at the virtual spines, as they would on a nice wooden bookshelf purchased at Pottery Barn. There should also be a built-in, one-click command for consolidating samples into a manageable collection. Those free samples can really clog a digital library quickly.

Create innovative reading tools for book clubs: Interest in iBooks would increase dramatically if you allowed club members to track their reading exploits like a mini-Goodreads system. Giving groups access to special club communications and scheduling tools, along with easy access to bestseller lists and online reviews, would jump Apple to the head of the class with serious readers.

Give book clubs more purchasing power: Take this a step farther. Imagine that iBooks users can register their book group with the Apple store. Imagine giving those groups discounted purchasing—say, ten to twenty percent off for club reads. Amazon locks readers in. That's their only secret. You can do that, too, only better.

Please let me share my favorite books: I'm disheartened that it's so hard to share Apple e-books with family members and friends. Right now, when I come to the end of a book, you let me rate it and write a review I can share in social media. But I want to loan that book to others, just as I do with my paperbacks. This last obstacle is truly ridiculous and seems a bit mendacious. If you want to compete, it's not just about chiseling out a few more bucks from the people who already put up with current e-book limitations. You need to create and build a market for a product that everybody loves. Sharing great books encourages people to read more—I'm certain of that. And I imagine adding this option would also get you a lot of free press.

Maybe Apple isn't the answer to the current e-book bust, but I'm pretty sure the other players aren't the answer, either—including Amazon. So what does that leave us? A group of wunderkinds we don't know about yet? Toiling away in a garage somewhere like, say, Mobile? Detroit? New Zealand?

You all know that story. Steve Jobs did. Certainly Jeff Bezos does. When you snooze on your laurels, you become breakfast for some young genius upstart. I'd watch my six, if I were you.

Happy e-reading!

David Biddle



Publishing Information

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- "[The Plot Twist: E-Book Sales Slip, and Print Is Far from Dead](#) [8]" by Alexandra Alter, *New York Times*, September 22, 2016.
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- "[Women's Groups and the Rise of the Book Club](#) [10]" by Pamela Burger, *JSTOR Daily*, August 12, 2015.
- "[Fast Facts: What Are the Back-to-School Statistics for Fall 2016?](#) [11]," National Center for Education Statistics, Institute for Education Sciences.

Art Information

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David Biddle is TW's "Talking Indie" columnist. He's the author of the novel *Beyond the Will of God* and several collections of short stories. As a freelance writer, David has published articles in everything from the *Harvard Business Review*, *Huffington Post*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* to *Kotori Magazine*, *InBusiness*, and *BioCycle*.

David notes that he's been on the Mac evangelism track since 1987, when he first used Microsoft Word on a color Mac II and printed out the resulting document on something called a laser printer. A week later, he began playing with the desktop-publishing software package Aldus PageMaker (now Adobe PageMaker), and it was clear to him that independent publishing was about to hit warp speed.

For information about his other writing, see [David Biddle's website](#) [15].

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