THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

BRAILLECAST PODCAST EXTRA 34

Leisure Reading with Refreshable Braille, Part 2

23rd November 2021

Matthew Horspool: Welcome back to Braillecast Extra. Coming up this time, it's the second part of our series on reading with refreshable braille displays. It was recorded on Tuesday, 23rd November 2021 and introduced by Dave Williams.

Dave Williams: Good evening and a very warm welcome back to the Braillists Foundation Masterclasses. I'm Dave Williams, chair of the Braillists Foundation, and it gives me great pleasure this evening to introduce our guest and speaker for the evening, Mr. Sean Randall.

Good evening, Sean.

Sean Randall: Good evening, Dave.

Two weeks ago we had the specialist stuff and it was a slightly dryer session than I'd planned. It was a bit wordy and not very read-y, if that's a thing, but I think it was important to cover the market.

Tonight, we are going to be talking about mainstream. So, specialist versus mainstream, of course, being that the libraries we discussed last time are only for us as blind, visually impaired, partially sighted people, or I suppose more broadly speaking, many of them are open to people with reading difficulties, so some of them are open to those of us with, for example, dyslexia.

As a rule, the mainstream providers tend to be more expensive. Ebooks are a thriving business. They sell very well. They've seen a rise in lockdown. People have been reading more, because they've been at home more, I suppose. Interestingly they haven't necessarily been buying more physical books. They've been buying as many electronic books as anything else.

Ebooks do not account for a vast majority of reading in the sighted world, for all that Kindles have a great claim to fame of being a paper-like experience, they aren't yet there, whether it's the smell of a book or the feel of it in your hand or just that you can put them on a shelf and show people, I don't know, there must be an appeal to the print book.

We're a bit cast adrift from that with the braille volume. I don't think a series of print books with neat jackets and covers on the shelf is anyway similar to a lorry full of braille volumes with very plain covers. They're very different things, aren't they? So, I think something is lost in translation from print to braille covers. Yet, the sighted world still values their print books immensely.

Audio books have also made a brilliant leap. When I started with ebooks, I would find that perhaps only maybe a fifth of the books that I was reading were available in audio and now almost whenever I buy a Kindle book, I am offered the ability to add the audio to my purchase and listen to it, as well as reading it. I know that the specialist libraries do a really good job of keeping up with those as well but I think for me the ability to switch between listening and reading is marvellous.

I mentioned last time about how I used to scan books into my computer. That barrier that was put in place because books were only available on paper has literally just gone. It vanished overnight like a popped soap bubble. And I relish every new release that lands on my Kindle, with great delight, and I find myself taking great pleasure in the fact that I can have access to that book, in the same way as a sighted person.

Before I go into the specifics of different shops, I want to make a brief point, which is something I share with people quite often, so you might have heard it before. I like very much how, when we read ebooks from a mainstream source, we are sharing that source with the mainstream. So, yes, I'm reading the book by the virtue of pins beneath my fingers or synthetic speech pumped into my ears, whereas someone sighted might be reading the book with their eyes. But the thing that is being turned into that form of reading, be it sight or sound or touch, is the same thing. We are using a common source. We are sharing the same book. We haven't had to have a version processed for us. It's not a version made especially for the visually impaired. I don't want to denigrate libraries for the VI which do a fantastic job, but I just can't help but think that wouldn't it be good if the whole world was like that, if we always access the same thing where possible. We have the technology to turn an ebook into braille or synthesised audio or print and it's the same book, just brought through a different channel, and I think that's pretty precious.

So, the format of tonight's session, it's pretty much going to be split into two parts and the first part is the elephant in the room, because it's the biggest, it's Kindle, Amazon's Kindle, and we'll talk about that briefly. I'm going to play you a little brief demo of one of the Kindle apps and talk a bit more about it. We'll pause for questions about that because it's the biggest and then we'll move onto everything else, because Kindle is really dominant in the market.

Kindle has, for anybody who asks, between 6 and 8 million books available. Obviously Amazon is an American company first and foremost, but their UK Kindle offering is not by any means cheap or tawdry. There are lots of books on Kindle. Kindle apps exist across multiple varied platforms, including Windows, iOS, Android as well, though they've got their own version of Android, the Amazon Fire tablet, so based on Android, and the Kindle devices themselves, called E-Ink Kindles and they're called that to differentiate them from the LCD screens that the tablets have, are all proprietary. But it doesn't matter what you're using. You can get Kindle working on lots of different devices.

The thing about Kindle really that sells it for me is that they have almost everything, not everything by a long shot, but certainly in terms of popular fiction, they're right up there. Things tend to go there first. You can pre-order a book months, in some case, in advance and have that certainty that it's going to land in your inbox or on your Kindle on the day it's supposed. I have had occasional refunds and they've said, "Sorry, we've pushed it back a week," and yet conversely I've had it where it's come a couple of days early and I've had a little bonus. So, there is that.

It's very easy to press Buy on something digital, isn't it? We've all seen it, with music and movies, I'm sure. Books are no exception. It's very easy just to buy books and to just lose yourself in that. We are very lucky, I suppose, now, in that the apps are all very accessible. I say "all". I'm a bit limited in what hardware I've got access to, but I can attest that Kindle on its own set of tablets is perfectly accessible with speech and braille. Kindle on iOS is perfectly accessible with speech and braille. Kindle on Windows is perfectly accessible with a screen reader. Of course that then means if you're using speech or braille, you've got those options as well.

This is unusual, I suppose. There was a time when everything in Kindle, for example, all the menus, were fine, but the reading area was hopelessly useless for blind people and you can only imagine the frustration, I'm sure, of that, when you can open up a book and you can browse the library and click what you want to read, but you can't actually read it. That was disappointing in the extreme. But we are now at a stage where any of those apps works for us. There are limitations and we'll talk about those briefly in a moment. I'm just going to play you a brief clip of me using Kindle on the iPhone and I discovered something quite interesting which used to bother me but has been fixed. You'll be able to hear how that sounds in a minute.

Recording:

Sean Randall: In this recording I want to show you the Kindle app on the iPhone. It works very similarly on the iPad, of course, because the operating systems are quite similar. I'm using a braille display as well. I've got my BrailleNote, connected as a braille display, which gives me 32 cells. So, let's just turn the speech back on with VoiceOver here.

VoiceOver: Speech on.

Sean Randall: And we'll tell Siri to open the Kindle app.

VoiceOver: Kindle, notification. He read it three times, slower with each repetition, he didn't start for a second, she was probably doing fine.

Sean Randall: So, it's opened me up a book, which is what I was last reading. Even though I'd closed the app completely, it kept my place in that book and I am able to see in braille the start of the page which says, "He read it three times," which is what the VoiceOver started to read.

One of my favourite Kindle features is the synchronisation between the ebook and the audio book. This current book happens to be narrated by a superbly talented reader and if you buy the audio companion version of the book, you can get it to play and follow. So, if we just do a double tap here to bring up the menu:

VoiceOver: Actions, menu, close book.

Sean Randall: And if we go toward the bottom:

VoiceOver: Play button.

Sean Randall: There's a play button here which is the audio book.

VoiceOver: [INAUDIBLE] Pause button.

Audio book: Having all those other cadets to measure herself against was all the motivation she needed.

Sean Randall: So, again I can do a two-finger double tap, the magic tap, to play and pause that.

VoiceOver: Actions menu.

Sean Randall: But if I close this.

VoiceOver: Actions menu, exit button.

Sean Randall: Exit that now.

VoiceOver: Actions menu, exit. He read it three times.

Sean Randall: Let's go to a new page.

VoiceOver: It's probably not a shock that I don't have much time to write. If I'm not in a class, I'm outside marching.

Sean Randall: So, that's the start of that page and if I resume the playback here.

Audio book: It's probably not a shock that I don't have much time to write. If I'm not in a class, I'm outside marching, doing PT--

Sean Randall: And if I turn the page.

VoiceOver: He read it three times.

Audio book: Three times, slower with each repetition, he didn't--

Sean Randall: Again.

VoiceOver: Sent the one message.

Audio book: One message. His father had sent dozens.

Sean Randall: So, the audio follows the book on screen. Visually there is a highlight as the voice speaks, I believe, each sentence. The braille display doesn't follow the sentences but it will turn with the pages, so you can listen with VoiceOver, you can listen with the audio book, you can read with braille, and it is so magical to have the braille here as well, I must say.

The longstanding bug, which really annoyed me, has been fixed, so, I'm at the top of a page. This page starts with the words, "The one message." Well, if I now scroll back here:

VoiceOver: He read it three times, slower with each repetition.

Sean Randall: I'm now on the previous page and what I'm expecting to see, of course, on my braille display is not that top of that page that you've just heard there. I'm expecting to see the bottom of the page. I've scrolled back from the top of the page we just came from and I should be seeing the bottom of this page. VoiceOver starts reading from the top and the audio book would start reading from the top as well. It's a new control, but my braille display says, "She'd only sent," and if I now go forward a page:

VoiceOver: The one message. His father had sent. His father.

Sean Randall: "She only sent the one message." So, they've fixed the bug where scrolling backward jumps you too far. When you go back from the top of a page, what you expect to land on in braille is the bottom of the previous page and this is in fact now what you do land on. That is brilliant.

One of the things I can't work out how to do on the braille display at the moment is to bring up the menu, because you need to do a double tap and for some reason that just doesn't seem to work on my braille display, for my routing keys. If I press anything, it just doesn't work. So, I do have to physically double tap the screen.

VoiceOver: Actions menu, close book, button.

Sean Randall: From here, we've got an Actions menu.

VoiceOver: Navigation drawer, button.

Sean Randall: This navigation drawer option lets us navigate to a different part of the book. Kindle books are well structured. They have a good table of contents. So, if you wanted to go to, say, a particular chapter. One of the chapters is called The Test, for example, I just double tap on that.

VoiceOver: Backward, page, location, sync, popular highlights. Table of Contents. Title Page. Copyright Page. Dedication. Contents.

Sean Randall: I can flick through chapter one, The Test and that's print page 12. Print page 38, so this book has real page numbers, which I can't really imagine how much use that would have been at school actually. Let's go back to the test and again if I do this double tap there [SIRI], so again we're on that page. I can see the title heading in braille. It's got "ONE" in all caps, "The Test" with initial caps and then, "Tanner's desperate," and I can see that and I can do a two finger double tap or a space WH.

Audio book: One, The Test.

Sean Randall: And the audio book picks up.

Audio book: Tanner's desperate line ended outside North Star's district headquarters.

Sean Randall: Brilliantly and exactly in sync. The audio does really bring it to life and I love the fact that I have braille, that I can read the names, I can see how they're spelled. I've got all that, plus I'm getting the performance. The audio companion feature on Kindle is brilliant because the books are a lot cheaper than buying them individually as well. You get great discounts if you buy the companions along with your Kindle books.

So, this is the iPhone version and reading in braille is pretty seamless. There's not much flexibility. You can't really customise the braille you get. It's all based on iOS. My only irritation with this app before, really, was that scrolling back would break and they've now fixed that, so you can go back and it is seamless. Even though you can't buy books on iPhone very easily, you have to go through Amazon's website and it's a bit of a fiddle, if you have Kindle Unlimited, you can borrow books from the library and if you have the desire to, you can import other files into this app as well. So, if you have an AZW file or a Mobi ebook file from somewhere else, you can also import that into the app and it'll sync your place and the braille reading experience is very, very nice.

End of Recording

Sean Randall: So, there we go. That's iOS. As you can probably tell, my favourite feature about that is the audio sync. It's lovely to have both. It really is. It's a dream, really.

Now I'm running out of time to focus on Kindle too much more. If you're going to be using Kindle to study, iOS might not be the best platform. You saw flash cards very briefly in one of the menus. Flash cards lets you highlight passages and make notes for them and things. There's quite a lot in there. It's not just about leisure reading. I think that is probably better done at a computer or with a keyboard.

Kindle on Amazon Fire is a usable, satisfactory experience. I wouldn't say it's comparable to the iPhone in many ways. I think you did a class on the Fire and the Orbit a while ago, Ben, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know about the consensus from that but certainly you're not paying for an iPad quality experience with a Fire tablet and it does feel that way. I think the actual reading experiences is much the same. It's the same content, but I do think the way in which you access the app, the way in which you navigate the operation system is very different. You get what you pay for in that regard.

I wouldn't say not to do it and an Orbit and a Fire is a really economical and good way of getting into things, without a doubt.

Kindle for PC is very good as well, very accessible. The only qualm really for leisure reading for me on all Kindle platforms actually is the slight pause at the end of every page. If the page ends mid-sentence, you get a slight stutter in your screen reader as the page turns, on iOS and Android and Fire. If you're on Windows, NVDA announces a new page number each time and I haven't found a way of turning that off that's reliable and consistent between books unfortunately. It's a small annoyance in the grand scheme of things. When I used to scan print books in, I used to get the author and title on the top and bottom of every page, or the author on one page and the book title on another page and it was very irritating, not to mention all the OCR and scanning errors. So, things are undeniably much better than they were before, but it's not like having professionally transcribed braille. I won't deny that.

What I didn't show in that recording, I did record it but I had to cut it due to time, is the Find feature. You can actually search for a word in the book and it will give you a number of results, depending on how many times the word appears on the Kindle, on iOS, and you can literally scroll through those results, left to right, flick as you would any other item. It will give you page number and it will give you the sentence for context.

As I mentioned in the recording, that bug about scrolling back was a big turn-off for me and in fact I would read on my Fire with a braille display just to avoid that bug, so I could go back if I needed to, but that's been fixed on Kindle now, for iOS, which is brilliant.

Amazon Kindle Unlimited, it's like Netflix but for books. You get access to a library of free titles which rotates, so some of them come and go. You can have, I think, up to ten borrowed at any given time and you can return them at any time and swap for others. So, that's worth knowing about and I think that's about £8 a month, or £7.99. There are almost always deals on, and this is a really good time of year, of course, with it being Black Friday, Cyber Monday, to get yourself a Kindle Unlimited subscription. Wendy in the chat has just said she loves it, which is wonderful. My colleague at work also loves it and he's forever telling me about books that he gets on it for free, which I don't.

So, that's Kindle and I could talk about Kindle a lot more, but I think it's a good time to pause for some questions.

After Kindle, we'll be coming to some of the other players in the ebook scene, as well as libraries.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you, Sean. We're going to come to Carol Adams first and then Jeff Bashton.

Carol Adams: I've been doing Kindle a totally different way but I'm having real problems. I have been using my BrailleSense Polaris actually and what you do is you go to a site, and I can't remember the name of it, and you download kind of an older version and you can use it, but what I'm really wanting to know, is there a way of deleting books, because it says I've got too many, I've got ten books. I'm on Kindle Unlimited as well. How do I basically get rid of those books?

Sean Randall: So, you've borrowed too many and you want to return one to get another one. So, when you press the Borrow button on a book, it will come up with a screen that says, you need to return a book to continue, and underneath that information is a list of your books, with each of them having a return, either a button or a link, and I can't quite remember the specifics. You need to choose one to swap on that page.

So I'm on a full desktop web browser, it might be a bit different on your Polaris.

Carol Adams: Would it be better to do it with my iPhone then?

Sean Randall: Almost certainly. If you open up Safari and do it in the browser, you will find underneath the "Buy this book" and continue option, there will be a "Return this one, " to continue, so there will be a list of all your current borrows and you can return that one to swap that for your newer one.

Carol Adams: So, I just need to find the Return button basically.

Sean Randall: It will be somewhere. There'll be up to ten Return options, I suppose, for each of the books you've already borrowed, so you need to be careful about tapping the one that links up to the book which you want to return. So, a bit of trial and error.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Jeff Bashton next and then Rhonda Mencey.

Jeff Bashton: I have to confess to being very new to using Kindle on the iPhone and the book I borrowed didn't have an audio equivalent, so I could only buy it, I suppose, as a pseudo print book. What I couldn’t do, and it might be my lack of skill, but I couldn't read continuously nor could I use the contents effectively.

Sean Randall: Reading continuously, it's the same gesture you would use in iOS generally, a two-finger flick down will start reading from the top of the page, and when you've done that once, that will keep turning pages until you tell it to stop or the book finishes, unless your phone locks or something like that. It does stop it locking under normal circumstances. I have had students at work tell me, "My phone's stopped reading and I told it to read forever." I say, "Why is that?" and they say, "Because the battery died." So, that does happen.

In terms of navigating the table of contents, double tap with one finger anywhere on a page and that will bring you up a menu. Flick right there and one of the options there will be a navigation drawer, in which if you double tap that is the book's table of contents. What you sometimes see in not just Kindle books but in all ebooks, the book itself, as a chapter within the book, will have a contents list and not all of those hyperlinks on that page are always very accessible. So, you want to get to the contents through the menu on the app, rather than as part of the book's text, if that makes sense. Sometimes in braille, you'd get a contents page.

Jeff Bashton: Yes, I know what you mean. So, it's called something, something, drawer, is it?

Sean Randall: Navigation drawer. Yes, that's what the iPhone calls it.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Rhonda. After Rhonda, we don't have any other hands, so I think we can go to another section, then if anyone has any other Kindle questions, we can come back to them a little bit later.

Rhonda Mencey: Thank you for the presentations. I've learned from them. Have you tried the Amazon Fire tablets with a braille display and the Kindle books?

Sean Randall: Yes, I have. They do work, not quite as smoothly as on the iPhone or the iPad, but they do work. It's a bit clunkier, I suppose, to navigate around the operating system. I think you'll find if you're used to an iPhone and you've been flicking around the screen, you'll notice that the Fire tablets are a bit slower to respond perhaps and not quite so perceptive to your tapping and gestures. But for actually reading a book, having a braille display scroll forward and back through the text, they are pretty reasonable, and for the price, it's a very good investment because they're so reasonable priced.

Amazon have got a lovely help page with all the braille chords for Fire OS that they support. They're a bit different to some others. For example, I was using an Orbit Reader and on my iPhone, I can use the arrow pad on the middle of my Orbit to move around. You can't do that on Fire OS, you've got to use space and dot 1, and space and dot 4, but once you learn those little quirks, it is a usable system.

Rhonda Mencey: I have an Orbit Reader 20 Plus and for some reason, it loses the Bluetooth connection with the Fire tablet, so I can be reading along and then instead of staying in the remote mode, it'll go back to the book mode and the connection is lost. I don't know if you had experience with that.

Ben Mustill-Rose: These Bluetooth issues once again, Sean.

Sean Randall: They come up an awful lot, don't they? It's a very common thing. What I would advise is, make sure they're exclusive, so if you've got other Bluetooth devices, either not connected but paired to either device, trim that up. Whether that's headphones for your tablet or another device for your Orbit, keep them exclusive. Monogamy might be the best thing for Bluetooth.

We see this a lot at school. I work at a school with visually impaired children and you get a lot of overlap and very occasionally you'll see someone else's Orbit controlling someone else's iPad and it all ends in tears.

Dave Williams: Can I add to that as well? As well as your Bluetooth monogamy tip, which is a great one, I would also look at power saving. I've seen reports that when the screen dims on the Fire tablet, that sometimes it can let go of the braille display. Now, I've not been able to verify that myself, but I have heard of it. So, if you have power saving settings or if you're able to plug in the tablet or extend the time at which the screen automatically dims, that might help.

Sean Randall: And there's one more point to throw in there. If you have it set up so when you say "her" name, Lady A, that can trigger Bluetooth as well, depending on what she thinks she hears, she could be looking for a Bluetooth device or trying to play music or something. So, it's just trying to minimise everything, apart from the reading, I suppose.

Dave Williams: That's right, yes. There's also a setting within the Orbit menu where I think you can set the Bluetooth to be on, auto or off, and there is a difference between auto and on, and if auto is set, then what tends to happen is that, if you've got other Bluetooth devices in the mix, then it's open to that, jumping between local mode and remote mode, whereas if you just set the Bluetooth to on, then the Orbit should stay on Bluetooth and respect that. Even if the Bluetooth device goes away, the Orbit should stay in Bluetooth mode, so if it loses connection briefly and then that connection is regained, you won't get that jumping back into local mode.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you, everyone. Some great tips there. We're going to move onto the next segment now.

Sean Randall: So, I had a great plan for this next section. I wanted to show you how I could borrow a book in a minute but I haven't quite managed to do that. The reason we're moving onto libraries first is to get the next recording played out to you. This recording will show you how I use my local library, which is Worcestershire, to borrow a book. I'm using their online library service. When I've shown you that, you'll understand why, because that takes us onto the other book shops as well.

There is Kindle and then there is everything else and Kindle uses its own format for books, like I said before, AZW files or Mobi files, as they've called. Everybody else uses EPUB, short for Electronic Publication. An EPUB file, if you can picture, is a zip file, a collection of files, or web pages, essentially. So, an EPUB book is a collection of chapters, usually, which are a type of HTML file, which is what web pages are written in, which allows for very rich media, but I'll explain more about that in a minute. I'm just going to put you out to the VT, as they say on X-Factor, and play you me borrowing a book.

So, this is me, knowing exactly what I want and where to go, borrowing a book from start to finish. I've opened up my web browser. I've typed in "BOR" into the search box of my web browser and pressed Enter. It's logged me into the library automatically, because it remembers my log-in. I don't consider that really a high risk thing. It's not like it's using a credit card or anything, so that's fine. The recording is literally less than two minutes long and it takes us from the home page of the library right through to searching for and borrowing a book.

Recording:

Sean Randall: So, we start off on a Windows web browser at my local council's online library through BorrowBox.

VoiceOver: Worcestershire County Council, BorrowBox.

Sean Randall: You then tab to and press the Search button.

VoiceOver: Ebooks. Audiobooks. Search. Search by title, author, narrator, genre, series, ISBN, edit as auto complete length, Focus mode.

Sean Randall: Focus mode means we can stop typing the name of the book, of course.

VoiceOver: A Most Clever Girl, search results Worcestershire County Council. Browse mode.

Sean Randall: BorrowBox uses graphics to separate out the books. I guess we have the covers, so we can straightaway see:

VoiceOver: A Most Clever Girl, graphics, add to reading list, borrow, graphic ebook, A Most Clever Girl, Stephanie Marie Thornton.

Sean Randall: We'll just click on the book and read the description, see if you like the sound of it.

VoiceOver: A Most Clever Girl: A Novel of an American Spy. Stephanie Marie Thornton. 1963. Reeling from the death of her mother and President Kennedy's assassination, Catherine Gray shows up on Elizabeth Bentley's doorstep demanding answers to the shocking mystery she just uncovered about her family. What she doesn't expect is for Bentley to ensnare her in her own story of becoming a controversial World War II spy and Cold War informer.

Sean Randall: I do love a bit of World War II spy fiction. So, yeah, we can borrow it, it's available. Let's go for it.

VoiceOver: Borrow ebook button, load confirmation dialogue A Most Clever Girl, A Most Clever Girl, Stephanie Marie Thornton. After confirming this loan, you will have two loans left. Loan period: 21 days. Button, cancel. Confirm load button. A Most Clever Girl: A Novel of an American Spy. A Most Clever Girl: A Novel of an American Spy. Loan successful. Dialogue, download now or keep browsing and download later from My Loans page. Download now button. A Most Clever Girl: A Novel of an American Spy, button borrow. Download A Most Clever Girl. Download for ereader, EPUB.

Sean Randall: Now I'm using Firefox so it's going to give me a little file to open and ask me if I want to open it in my digital editions app, which I do, and I'll explain more about that in a minute.

VoiceOver: Open a new URL link, item dialogue, you have chosen to open new URL link. Open with radio button, Focus, check one of two, combo button, Adobe Digital Editions 4.5.11. Default collapsed. Okay button.

Sean Randall: That was my download noise from my web browser, so I know when the download's finished and now what we're going to hear is:

VoiceOver: In A Most Clever Girl window. A Most Clever Girl. Praise for the novels of Stephanie Marie Thornton. And They Called It Camelot is the Bookclub Pick of the Year. Praise for the novels of Stephanie Marie Thornton.

End of Recording

Sean Randall: There we go. That is how quickly you can borrow a book from the local library. That just blows my mind. It's incredible. It really is, because even as a child, if I wanted books on tape, I'm showing my age now, on CD later on, I had to wait for them. They had to be ordered in, sometimes from a different library. Very occasionally I would go to a different library and I'd say, "No, I'm here for this one. It's checked out to me under a different place but I'll pick it up now, thanks."

So, that was amazing. I'm sure you'll agree that's fairly speedy. You might have noticed that my screen reader didn't say things like "link" or "heading at level 1" or anything like that. I've turned all that off for my home browsing, because I find it quite superfluous in most cases. But that was very smooth and it was really nice.

That takes us on very nicely to Adobe Digital Editions. Adobe Digital Editions is made by the same people who make Adobe Reader, the well known and oft maligned app for reading PDF files. Not many people like PDF files, but they have done a fairly good job with Adobe Digital Editions or ADE as we tend to call it. ADE will open EPUB books and most places that aren't Amazon use EPUB.

So, if you borrow books from your local library using BorrowBox or OverDrive, they will or can use this ADE to read. If you buy books from other vendors, ebooks.com, Smashwords, what used to be called Fictionwise, now part of Barnes & Noble unfortunately, they got bought out, they all use EPUB as well and EPUB are openable with Digital Editions.

The only slight caveat is that there are two forms of EPUB, the DRM encrypted and protected type which is what you get on libraries, and then websites like Smashwords which have free and unencrypted and unprotected books.

We'll just do a brief 30 second DRM bit of recap. DRM is technology which allows publishers to tell booksellers that the book should only be readable on their software. So 90%, 99% maybe even, of Kindle books have DRM. You're not allowed to take the file and read it somewhere else. It's not like a BRF file where you can take the SD card out of your Orbit, say, plonk it into a Brailliant or something, or a Focus, and read it on the different device. With DRM, you're linked to the device you're using. You have an email address and perhaps a password or an account number of some sort and it's tied to that device. This is what Adobe Digital Editions lets you do. It lets you log into your library account or your other bookshops that aren't Amazon and it lets you read books from them.

Now, unfortunately, Digital Editions isn't very accessible on any platform other than Windows. So, if you have an iPhone or an Android tablet or a Mac, I think you're slightly out of luck with this at the moment. Windows is the only game in town for what I consider to be the best access to this content. That is quite sad. However, there are lots of apps, such as Dolphin EasyReader for iOS and Android which will read the unprotected books and there are tools for removing DRM and whether or not it's against the terms of service of the publisher to remove the DRM, I think there is a case to be made, under fair use and copyright provision for the visually impaired, that if the software isn't accessible on your platform, you should be allowed to make changes to that file for your own personal use. So, I don't have exact specifics at the moment, step by step instructions. Obviously it's a practice that's frowned upon, because publishers don't want you stripping away the DRM, but there are tools out there and I don't know of anybody who's got into hot water for doing it, as a blind person wanting equal access to content.

Luckily we have a really good supply of material from RNIB and their kin, so much of the content the publishers put out to the big stores, also gets picked up by people like RNIB and that's where, I think, we have to be very grateful for them in this instance. They do a really good job of advocacy on our behalf.

So, I wanted to show you the BorrowBox thing because ADE, next to Kindle, gives you access to the huge number of other shops and stores. Of these, I think Smashwords is really big, as is ebooks.com. Those are the second two biggest that I use most often. Oh, and Google Play Books, of course, is also an ADE compatible book seller, so you can buy a book on Google Books and export it from their web view into ADE, if you prefer to read using ADE and read it on there as well, which is really good, because ADE is nice.

Interestingly the ADE and Kindle apps on Windows look and behave in a very similar fashion. The bulk of the screen is taken up by a page of text from the book. There is a navigation tree or list, depending on how the book's been laid out. Some table of contents have parts and subdivide those into chapters, and so forth. There are features to set bookmarks and to annotate and highlight with different colours and make notes. They both work very well in terms of braille display support.

The downside to using encrypted Adobe books is that they are tied to the machine you're on, so, if you're thinking about looking at using this and you haven't done so, be careful when you set things up. There is an option in ADE to set up without an account and just to authorise to your machine and if you do that, that's fine, maybe if you're only using a library, because library books have to be returned. But if you've bought 30 or 40 books and they're tied to your individual machine, not an account, the next time that machine has to be changed, you might lose access to those books, so that's a note of caution there.

ADE is a completely free program and it's used to open any EPUB, not just the commercial EPUBs. The Open University are brilliant at providing text books in the EPUB format and of course all the content of those is accessible to you as well. You can download EPUB not just from mainstream providers but from RNIB Bookshare, I think, as well. EPUB is a lovely format. I like it because it's got a lot of metadata. There is a file inside each EPUB with information about the book and the author. They have covers, so when I talked earlier on about not being able to put books on the bookshelf, if I were to have a virtual bookshelf, I could show off all my shiny EPUBs, which are accessible, as I say, from vendors that aren't Amazon.

People do have a bit of an Amazon beef, I'm afraid. People, and maybe rightly so, have issues with Amazon's tax strategies and worker conditions and so as a sort of competitor to Amazon, ADE is pretty good, if you have access to Windows. I would also like to point out that ADE works very nicely on the ElBraille, which runs Windows as well, and even if you only have a cheap Windows machine. I have a friend who runs Mac for everything, but has bought himself literally a less than £100 Windows tablet with very, very limited memory and RAM and resources, and literally uses it an ereader. Whereas most sighted people might buy a cheap Android ereader to keep the price down, he realised the benefits of ADE and bought a cheap tablet for reading with NVDA and his braille display on Windows.

So, when I say, it's a game of two halves, it really is. Amazon make up the bulk of the market, the lion's share, and almost every other supplier uses ADE, with the minor exception of Kobo. They have their own platform which isn't in any way accessible and you can't export from Kobo into EPUB, as far as I know. That was certainly true this time three months ago, when I researched. So, try to avoid Kobo.

Other websites I have mentioned, we've talked about Kindle obviously; ebooks.com, they're very good; Smashwords are another provider and Google Play Books. BookBub is not an ebook seller but they do provide wonderful emails of curated deals, so if you're looking to start with ebooks but you don't know where to go maybe, that's a place to think about.

Of course, before I stop for questions for the last five minutes, I need to mention Apple Books. We haven't talked about them yet. I tried to do a recording with Apple Books and I wondered how Apple would behave with the same issue as Kindle. What happens to the Apple Books app if you try moving your braille display backward from the top of a page? I opened up my Apple Books. I got a book and I opened it. I went forward a bit. I then tried to go back and the app crashed. This happened repeatedly. Given that Apple Books is only accessible on iOS devices, I don't think it's even on Mac or it certainly wasn't when I last looked, I've discounted Apple Books from my shortlist as well.

That, I think, is my coverage pretty much complete, so we've got five minutes, I think, Ben.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Yes, round about five minutes for questions. Thank you once again, Sean. I'm going to come to Claire Morgan now and then Gary O'Donoghue.

Claire Morgan: When you were playing the recording of you accessing the library, I couldn't understand a word that the screen reader was saying. Was it a screen reader? It was just total rubbish to me.

Sean Randall: I am sorry. It was my screen reader. I did slow it down by about 40 words per minute but I apologise, I didn't realise that my fast speed is still very, very fast. I was using NVDA but I was just using a normal web browser. BorrowBox works really well on Chrome, on Firefox, on Edge, Safari, and it even works on GuideConnect.

Claire Morgan: What's BorrowBox?

Sean Randall: BorrowBox is the website which my local council uses as a way of distributing library books.

Claire Morgan: Oh, I see. Ours uses Libby.

Sean Randall: Okay. Libby is similar. You can download ebooks into ADE with Libby as well. If I can just come to a brief point in the chat, Yvonne mentioned that she likes BorrowBox but they haven't got much range. The range of books they have is completely down to the local authority, or local council, as to what books they buy in into the library, so it's different for everybody. Worcestershire seem quite good on the thrillers and non-fiction at the moment.

Claire Morgan: I use Kent library for audio books and I find it's very good, although they don't have all the books you might want, but they do have quite a good selection.

Sean Randall: We're very lucky. RNIB are growing all the time with their Reading Services and to have a local library as well, we get twice the choice really in some ways.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Gary next.

Gary O'Donoghue: Thanks, Sean, for a very informative talk. I have a couple of quick questions. I wondered if you'd found an effective way, either in Kindle or in Apple Books, you mentioned flash cards, of sort of using the tools they have for making notes, copying quotes, things like that and if there's an effective way of getting that material out of the apps into a format you can just read afterwards. Can you take notes for a book or write in the margins like a sighted person would and get hold of those notes?

The other question I had. I don't use Kindle very much, I use Apple Books quite a lot but when I looked at Kindle before, quite a lot of books didn't seem to have proper navigation. In other words you could see a table of contents at the start but you couldn't move around the book in the easy way you can with Apple Books and its contents. You could go to each chapter and move around a book like that.

My final observation is that you mentioned the double tap on Kindle. Have you tried a dot 3 6 chord on a braille display, because sometimes that emulates a double tap?

Sean Randall: Thank you, Gary. I hadn't tried the dot 3 6. I will add that to my list of experiments.

In terms of navigation on Kindle, as I pointed out to Jeff, what a lot of people get displayed is the contents page of a book that's part of the book, that actually appears in the text. So, if you were to print it out, that will come in the print copy, whereas a lot of them now do have the contents as part of the navigation when you bring up the menu. So, rather than reading the navigation within the book, you would go to the book's menu and it would be in there.

I looked at 17 different books that I'd bought from Kindle in the past six months or so and they all had tables of contents that were accessible to me on the app.

Note taking is a brilliant point. It's much better on desktop. You can select and copy passages on iOS quite easily. There are slider controls for taking notes. So if you double tap and hold a word on screen, you'll then see a series of sliders which you can slide up and down to extend or contract your selection and then you have the ability to copy that out as a quote and that comes out with a citation at the bottom. So, when you paste it into something else, it will say, "Copied from so-and-so by so-and-so on Kindle."

As for taking efficient notes on the iPhone, not generally speaking with Kindle, I'm afraid and again, I find it works quite well with ADE on Windows. The other useful thing about ADE as well is if you are working, as I do in a teaching environment, I can make notes in a chapter of a book that my students are reading and I can share my notes file with them. If they have it in their ADE, they can see my notes as well, so the notes are saved in a separate file which you can import into ADE. So, if you want a book to be studied, then that's one of the good ways of doing it, but, I'm sorry, that doesn't answer your question about the iPhone or iOS architecture unfortunately. I've not found a really good way of doing that.

Ben Mustill-Rose: I hope that helped though, Gary. Sean, I guess we might mention these things somewhere in the handout as well.

Sean Randall: Yes, I've got lots in the handout, don't worry.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you, everyone. Thank you, Sean, great session and all that remains for me to do now is to hand over to Dave to wrap things up.

Dave Williams: Sean, thanks so much for your time. Thanks, Ben, for all your help with the moderation this evening. On behalf of myself, Dave Williams, and the rest of the Braillist team, all the best and we'll speak very soon. Bye for now.

Matthew Horspool: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Braillecast Extra. You can find more braille-related content by subscribing to Braillecast in your podcast client of choice, or listening to Braillecast: Connecting The Dots For Braillists Everywhere, on your smart speaker.

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Finally, if you like what you've heard, spread the word. We welcome new listeners and live participants alike. So if you know other people who are interested in braille, please tell them where to find us.

In the meantime, on behalf of everyone at the Braillists, thanks for listening and bye for now.

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