

The Kindle Fire Tablet Do you get what you pay for?

By Loyd Van Horn, W4LVH

I remember my first exposure to mobile computing. It was a massive, and I do mean massive, Tandy laptop. I am not sure why they called it a laptop: trying to use this thing while resting it in your lap was a futile effort. Thirty minutes of that would likely lead to sore legs and a loss of circulation to your feet. It was a piece of technology you might see in a museum of technology now, or in one of those articles with photos of large, boxy mobile phones and floppy disks.

Fast-forward 20 years. I am sitting here listening to sports-talk radio in Manchester, England, using a device that has more computing power than my first three computers put together. Yet, it fits in the palm of my hand.

Tablets are all the rage right now, but with a flooded market, it is hard to sort out which tablets combine the best of features, function and affordability.

Enter Amazon's Kindle Fire. With most tablets coming in around \$500, the Kindle retails for a modest \$199. So, do you really get what you pay for?

❖ Out of the Box

If you have any experience using Amazon, you know what to expect in regards to packaging. Well cushioned, securely packaged, the Kindle Fire comes in a single box that efficiently ships the tablet, A/C wall adapter (a small wall-wart, but a wall-wart nonetheless) and a small "getting to know your Kindle" card that instructs you how to charge and power-on the Fire.



That's it! I liked the minimalistic amount of packaging and documentation. You will see later upon powering up the Fire, that your user's guide is actually stored on the Fire. What better way to get acclimated to using the Fire than using it to read how to use it, right?

Button placement is fairly straight-forward – you have a power button at the bottom of the

tablet. That's it! The rest of the controls are all handled by the touch-screen interface. You will also find a headphone jack located near the power button, as well as the plug-in for the A/C adapter. When charging, the power button is lit orange for charging or green for fully charged. At the top of the tablet, are two small speakers.

A bit about the specs as found on Amazon's Web site. It is a 7-inch tablet (a measure of screen size, not actual body size). The display runs at 1024 x 600 at 169 pixels per inch, giving you 16 million colors. Not bad for the price point.

A lot has been made by reviewers at the lack of memory. The Kindle Fire has 8 GB of internal flash memory available. Compared to most tablets that are offering 16 or 32 GB of storage, this seems to be a shortcoming, but it's not really. First, the Fire makes use of Cloud storage, 5 GB in fact, to up the total storage to 13 GB. Admittedly, you must have an Internet connection (the Fire only uses WiFi) to access this Cloud-stored data.

The big thing for me is that, at least with my usage, storage is not a big deal. I have some books stored and a handful of useful apps. That is about it. I already have an iPod and iPhone to store my music. I am more interested in using the Kindle Fire as a streaming source and no storage is needed for that.

Battery life is claimed to be around 8 hours

for continuous reading, or 7.5 hours for video playback with WiFi turned off. I would say this is pretty realistic, as I have been averaging about 5-to-6 hours of use between charges, with WiFi turned on.

❖ On the Downside

There are a couple of downsides, though. Probably my biggest gripe is the lack of volume buttons anywhere on the device. Controlling the volume is done through an icon on the touch-screen interface. It isn't difficult to use, but when you are in the middle of listening to a stream, watching a video or doing some reading, a simple up/down volume button on the top or even side of the device would be more convenient.

One of the huge features missing is a microphone. This obviously has a huge impact for those interested in amateur radio applications of the Kindle Fire, as apps like EchoLink won't be an option on this device. Some have tried to use an external microphone, but since there are no voice-enabled apps in the Kindle app store, you have to hack your Fire to make any use of it. I try to stay away from hacking my devices as much as I possibly can.

I can't believe there is no Bluetooth functionality. I understand Amazon was trying to keep the price down, but I can't imagine this would increase it that much. Once you get used to using Bluetooth on a regular basis, you will see just how handy it is. For example, I am right now typing this review on a Bluetooth keyboard for my iMac. Every once in a while, I will connect this keyboard to my iPhone so I can type emails quickly without having to fight the auto-correct nightmare.

A Bluetooth keyboard would be an absolute perfect addition to the Kindle Fire.

Some will tout the lack of a cellular network connection to be a shortcoming. Depending on how you want to use the Fire, it may be. But for those who have WiFi at home or work and just want something to carry around with them for streaming, the lack of a cellular connection is not a problem.

Those omissions aside, there is still enough here to have some fun with. So, let's get our hands dirty.

❖ Performance Test

While the Kindle Fire has a pretty impressive feature list – including Web browser and eReader capability – my main focus will be on

RATINGS

Audio Quality – 3.5 out of 5 stars

It is plenty loud – enough to be able to hear what you want to listen to, but the speakers aren't good enough for serious music listening. It isn't hard to plug in speakers or headphones to fix that quickly, though.

Performance – 4 out of 5 stars

"It just works." You turn on the Kindle Fire, you open your streaming app, and in a short amount of time, you have audio coming out of the speakers. The temperamental keyboard can be a bit frustrating.

Features – 2.5 out of 5 stars

No volume buttons? No microphone? No Bluetooth? The price-point was nice, but I would pay an additional \$50-\$75 to get a little more "in the box."

Design/Appearance – 4 out of 5 stars

How fancy can you get with a tablet? A tablet is a tablet, right?



Overall Rating – 3.5 out of 5 stars

how this performs as a streaming device for radio enthusiasts.

Powering on the Kindle the first time, there is the required set-up. You have to connect to your WiFi signal, tell it what your name is and what time zone you are in, things like that. It is pretty easy, and a fairly quick set-up.

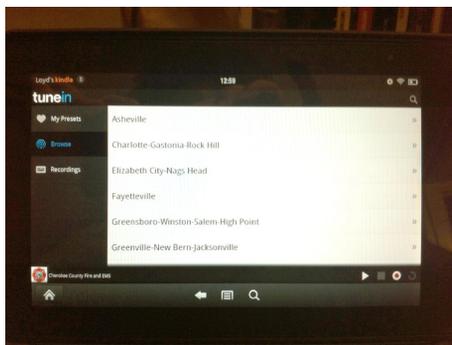
For those folks with little or no touch-screen experience, you might struggle a bit at first at typing without keys. Even as a daily iPhone user, I still find it takes a bit of getting used to the specific keyboard placement of the Kindle Fire's screen (since I am used to much smaller keys on my iPhone). But, overall, the larger screen size makes typing much easier once you are used to it. You won't be writing a thesis on it anytime soon, but basic emails and Web browsing aren't that bad.

You are automatically given some basic apps to work with, although you still need to download them. Things like The Weather Channel, ESPN and – imagine this – Pandora. Right out of the box, Amazon recognizes that streaming music, as opposed to storing it on your device, might be something that people are interested in doing.

Downloading apps is amazingly easy. No more syncing up from a computer, everything is natively done in the device itself. A quick browse of the in-device app store will give you quite a few options for streaming content, both audio and video. When an update is released for an app, you receive a notification and everything is once again completed on the device itself.

There are a number of apps available for listening to streaming radio content: iHeartRadio, TuneIn, Scanner Radio, Slacker, Stitcher and more. Many of these I have highlighted in my GlobalNet column, as they are used on other devices such as Droids, Blackberries, iPhones and more.

My go-to for listening to streaming radio stations is TuneIn. For streaming scanner listening, I am currently using Scanner Radio, although I would like to see some of the scanner apps from the iOS app store (such as 5-0 Radio) make their way to the Fire.



Some of the other audio apps that are popular on other platforms are curiously missing here. Apps like Wunderradio, Reciva Radio and LiveATC are not yet available for the Kindle Fire.

Also missing are some of the popular remote apps such as RecivaRemote, Logitech Squeezebox and the GraceRemote. Just recently added is a remote app for Roku devices that is a dream to use on such a large screen, so hopefully

these other apps will find their way to the Fire soon as well.

Streaming video also is represented on the Fire. TVu and Netflix are the big ones so far. As with audio, there are a few popular video apps missing too, such as Crackle, or any of the network specific apps such as HBO, Cinemax, Showtime or TBS. The Amazon Instant Video option (for those signed up for Amazon Prime) has a wide selection if you are willing to spend the money on a subscription (\$79 a year, compared to \$96 a year on Netflix).



So, what can you expect when you listen to audio on the Kindle Fire? The top-fire speakers are basic and get the job done, but people who are interested in better quality audio may want to use external speakers or a set of headphones.

The line out tends to run a bit loud, though, so familiarize yourself with where the volume icon is and be ready to use it. I always test audio by listening to BBC Radio 1 as it is running at a high-bitrate and the music has a lot of low-end to really push the speakers. I found best audio quality, with little distortion, came from running around 60-70 percent volume.



Video quality is pretty good, especially for the price point. This would make a nice portable video player, as long as you have WiFi access available.

❖ The Final Word

So, what place does the Kindle Fire have

in your gadget arsenal?

My iPhone and Kindle Fire rarely travel without each other. They supplement each other very well. The thing that wasn't expected was just how much the Kindle Fire has replaced my home computer for just about everything else. Even my WiFi radios seem to be getting less usage now that I have been using the Kindle Fire more and more.

Obviously, you are tethered to those areas that provide a WiFi signal. Right now, the WiFi-only option means the Fire is really more of an "at-home" mobile option. Outside of home, if you have a coffee house or WiFi at work, the Fire would be a perfect mobile option there, too. Perhaps in subsequent versions of the Fire, we will see a 3G or 4G option available for a little more money.



Affordability usually means you have to sacrifice something for the lower price. Usually, those sacrifices make the gadget frustrating or even impossible to use. However, in the case of the Kindle Fire, the missing features are more of a luxury.

The bottom line: It's not perfect, but if you are looking at the Kindle Fire, that's not what you are probably looking for anyway. If you want a glamorous tablet and have the money to afford one, get yourself an iPad. If you just want a functioning tablet device, especially one that comes at an affordable price, you can't miss with the Kindle Fire.

The Amazon Kindle Fire retails for \$199 from Amazon.com and other retailers. You can find a link to the Kindle Fire's Amazon page at the end of this review.

My guess is that the second incarnation of the Kindle Fire may solve some of the design, feature and performance shortcomings that have been widely circulated. When most other tablets on the market are hitting around \$500, \$199 is hard to complain about. This is a fantastic entry-level tablet

Web Sites:

Amazon Kindle Fire Tablet:
<http://tinyurl.com/cf49d6v>