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CES: Ray Kurzweil tries to build a better e-reader

by Ina Fried

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LAS VEGAS--Ray Kurzweil knows a little something about e-readers.

The **computing pioneer**, who among other things helped develop modern text recognition software, has been working to use digital technology to improve reading for the past 30 years. After years of work on how computers can help those with learning disabilities, Kurzweil is now taking aim at the masses.

His latest project, **Blio**, is an effort to improve the emerging electronic book field with software that turns e-books into more than just a digital copy of the print edition. Blio, which is due out next month, is software that combines a full-color digital book with the ability to add Web content, video, and professionally narrated audiobooks.



Kurzweil said that kind of reading experience just isn't possible on current e-readers like the Kindle. Plus, he said, most people don't want to carry a separate device just for reading.

"People want to do everything--they want to watch their movies, they want to do all their computing, their e-mail on one platform," he said in an interview. "They don't want to take another device."

Initially, the software will run on Windows PCs, Apple's **iPhone**, and its **iPod Touch**, though Kurzweil wants to make it available on other devices as well. Blio made a brief cameo Wednesday as part of the **keynote speech** by Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer.

The Blio software allows for a number of interesting enhancements over standard e-books. In one example, Kurzweil shows a children's picture book of the "Three Little Pigs" with the book synchronized to the human-narrated audiobook. As the audio goes on, the word being read can be highlighted. That, Kurzweil says, allows children to improve their reading more quickly.

Another type of enhanced book could benefit older students. Kurzweil showed an anatomy textbook with Web content, such as quizzes, built right into the book.

Kurzweil said he doesn't see a big market for dedicated e-readers with limited capabilities.

All of these enhanced books require work from the publishers, though Blio can handle the task of syncing an audiobook by scanning the text and audio. In that case, it's more a matter of acquiring the rights to both text and audio, though Kurzweil notes that it opens up an opportunity for publishers to sell a premium version of their books.

Under the hood, Blio uses a number of Microsoft technologies, including Windows Presentation Foundation and the **XML Paper Specification (XPS)**. Kurzweil said his company is also working on a Silverlight version of its software that will provide for **Mac** support.

Users will be able to register up to five different devices on which they can read their content, although some textbooks will be limited to just three devices to limit piracy. "They are a little worried about some of your generation," Kurzweil said.

For more on Blio, check out my video interview with Kurzweil, embedded above.



During her years at CNET News, Ina Fried has changed beats several times, changed genders once, and covered both of the Pirates of Silicon Valley. These days, most of her attention is focused on Microsoft. [E-mail Ina.](#)