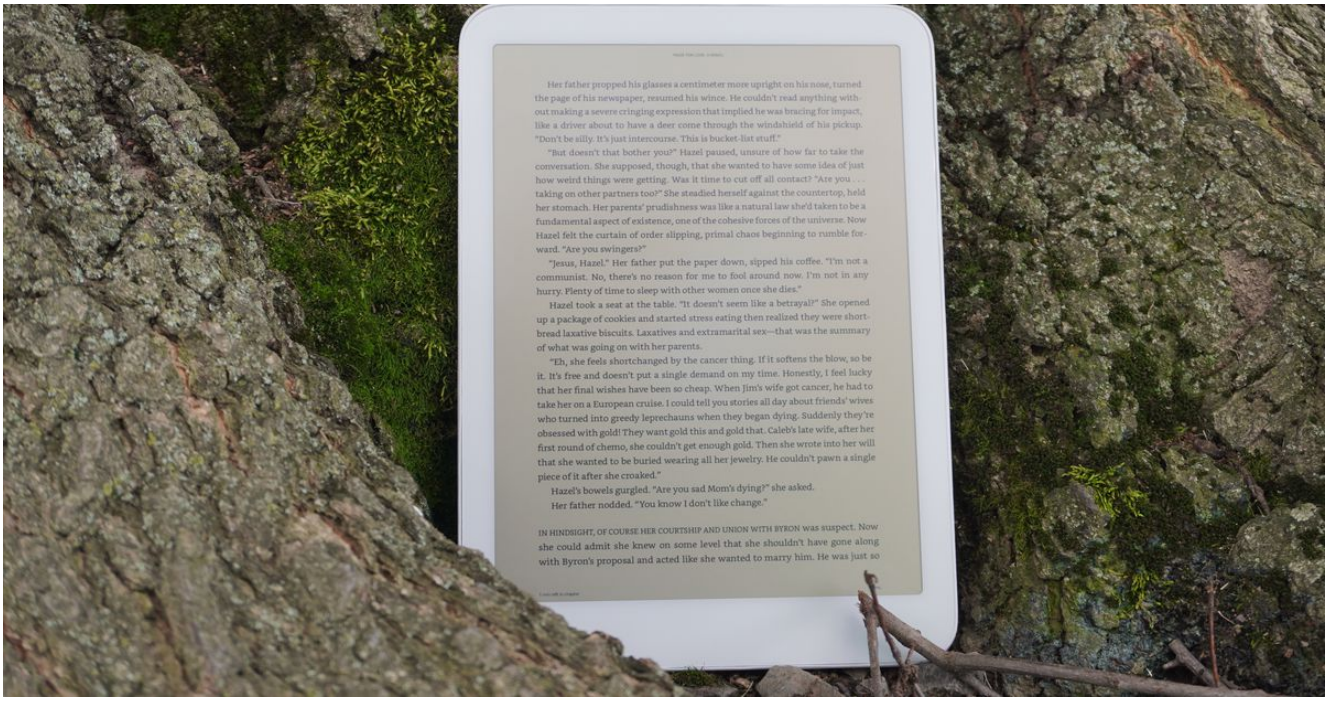
A few weeks with the Daylight DC-1 tablet: rethinking screen time



There’s a big piece of paper in the San Francisco offices of Daylight Computer, with a list written in purple ink of all the kinds of devices the company hopes to one day make. The list is long: Daylight wants to make a phone, a laptop, different kinds of tablets. Basically anything you can think of with a screen, Daylight wants to make it with a better, different screen, one that doesn’t blare brightly into your eyes in a dark room but instead looks like paper and works just fine outdoors.

I should mention another big piece of paper right next to the one with product ideas — an equally long list of reasons Daylight might fail. And as CEO Anjan Katta shows me around the office, the rest of the team is preparing for a launch party for its first device, a tablet called the DC-1, it’s clear he’s worried about how the world will respond to his big idea about the future.

Daylight wants to be more of a lifestyle brand than a gadget maker. In recent months, Katta has been on a tour of podcasts and YouTube channels preaching the high-minded gospel of minimalist gadgets, arguing that blue light exposure is killing our sleep and that we need devices that incentivize us to use them less and more deliberately rather than luring us in with bright lights and notifications. Instead of modeling themselves off of purveyors of high tech like Apple or Samsung, Katta and Daylight seem to idolize companies like Patagonia, which both made good things and stands for something. And I suppose if Patagonia can sell vests to VCs, Daylight can sell tablets to tech enthusiasts.

The DC-1 costs $729, which is a lot for an Android tablet, and it's especially a lot for a tablet that feels very much like a company's first product. It's thick, it's heavy, it's powered by old chips. I like the speckled back and the clicky buttons, but I can't stop noticing the very slightly misaligned ports or the fact that I can slide my fingernail between the display and the case and literally pry the thing apart. I've had no actual hardware issues using the tablet so far, but the lack of manufacturing polish feels like a first try.

Katta tells me that the DC-1 isn't yet finished, especially the software. The device is meant to run software called Sol:OS, a customized version of Android meant to help you keep things minimal and quiet. Right now, my test model is running a lightly customized version of the popular Niagara Launcher, and at one point, when I factory reset the device, it lost a lot of the features the team had loaded on for me to test. All of that is to say this device isn't ready for a full review — we'll get to that when it launches Sol:OS for real, which Katta tells me should be this fall.

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/ The Verge

For now, I mostly just want to talk about the screen. The DC-1 has a 10.5-inch screen, and Daylight calls it a “Live Paper” display. Just to be clear: Live Paper is not E Ink. E Ink is the tech you find in a Kindle and most other e-readers and uses actual ink. That means it looks really good in the sunlight and only uses power when it’s moving the ink around. (Technically E Ink is a brand and “electronic paper” is the technology, but everyone uses them interchangeably. E Ink is Kleenex.) Live Paper is actually designed to solve some of the weaknesses of E Ink — particularly its slow refresh rate and the ghosting that leaves faint impressions of stuff on the screen for too long.

What Live Paper actually is, Katta tells me, is an adaptation of a reflective LCD display tech that has been around for a long time. Reflective LCDs are LCD displays without a backlight; they use a mirror at the bottom of the stack to reflect natural light back through the pixels. That makes them great and comfortable to use in bright light, means they don’t use much power, and allows them to be cheaper, thinner, and lighter. All good things! But there are just as many downsides: RLCDs, as they’re known, obviously struggle in bad lighting. They’re also hard to find in color, at large sizes, or at high resolutions.

There are some well-liked RLCD devices out there already. (The HannsNote2 is a favorite of the r/RLCD subreddit, and the HiSense Q5 got some good reviews a few years ago.) Katta says he’s spent the last five or so years trying to solve RLCD’s problems and improve on the whole system. He hasn’t solved all of them — the DC-1 doesn’t do color, which Katta tells me is technically possible but causes a bunch of other compromises — but the Daylight team has managed to make a 10.5-inch reflective LCD that is almost as easy on the eyes as E Ink and almost as responsive as a typical tablet screen.

I say “almost” because it’s not all the way there in either

case. On the E Ink side of the spectrum, Live Paper has a little more glare, uses a lot more power, and has significantly worse viewing angles than my Kindle. The viewing angles are maybe E Ink's most obvious advantage — you're always going to get glare on an LCD, and while the Live Paper is an improvement, it's still not as clear and crisp in the sunshine as an E Ink screen. E Ink feels like paper; Live Paper feels like a screen.

Meanwhile, compared to an iPad or smartphone, when you scroll quickly in an app, the DC-1 lags a bit (though not as much as any E Ink screen I've tried), and you get a bit of that wiggly "jelly scroll" that used to plague lots of devices. I also see a tiny bit of ghosting if I'm moving things around quickly; Daylight says the Live Paper screen refreshes at 60 frames per second, but I definitely notice it stuttering sometimes.

There's a case to be made that Live Paper is actually a jack-of-all-trades in just the right way

Basically, the DC-1's screen isn't as good as a Kindle in ideal Kindle conditions or as good as an iPad in ideal iPad conditions. But there's a case to be made that Live Paper is actually a jack of all trades in just the right way. It's responsive and fast enough that I can easily type on the DC-1 or even watch a video (albeit in black and white). E Ink is often fine in a pinch, but you can get much more done smoothly on the DC-1 than on a Kindle or a Boox tablet.

The DC-1 is also much easier to look at in bed or any kind of bright light than something like an iPad. Personally, I'd most like this display in slightly smaller form — I'm on record for loving the Boox Palma as a pocketable Android device, and I suspect I'd like it even better with a Live Paper display — but if you're the type to use an iPad for reading, web browsing, and maybe journaling and crossworking, the DC-1 does it all really well. It's just not a good Netflix machine, you know?

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As for the backlight, Daylight’s clever idea was to let you control not only the brightness but also the temperature of the light. (You can do this on lots of e-readers, too, by the way — some recent Kindle models have a “warm light” mode that I like much better than the default light.) It can go from normal, daylight-blue light to a deep, warm, amber glow, which is ostensibly better for reading at night without screwing up your circadian rhythm and sleep. The overall theory is sound, but whether your phone screen is enough light to really do huge damage is harder to say. But even from a comfort perspective, I really like it; I now read in bed with the light pretty low and very warm, and I don’t know if I sleep any better, but it’s certainly easier to look at in the dark.

The cooler thing is that you can turn the backlight all the way off. At the lowest setting, the DC-1 emits no light at all. It relies entirely on ambient light to show you what’s on the screen. (An RLCD with a backlight is sometimes also called a “transflective LCD,” for whatever that’s worth.) With no light on, though, the DC-1 looks very dim and low-contrast even in bright sunshine. I hardly ever turn the light all the way off.

Everything in Daylight’s office feels as frantic and new as the DC-1 does. There’s a guy outside, barefoot, putting tablets into tiny grass boxes to give to people later in the day. There’s a table filled with plush cases for the DC-1 and another with Patagonia slings for the early buyers. There’s outdoors-focused art everywhere. This company seems to know exactly what it’s about, but maybe not exactly what to do about it. After using the tablet for a while, I’m skeptical about the case for the DC-1 at $729, but I’m pretty bullish on

what a lineup of Live Paper devices might look like. Maybe the middle ground of iPad and Kindle can exist after all. In a world increasingly mediated by screens, Daylight asks a fun question: what if you just changed the screen? I think it might change a lot more than that.

https://www.theverge.com/2024/7/20/24201356/daylight-computer-dc-1-hands-on