

Monday, January 05, 2009 4:37 PM jim.causey

Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile

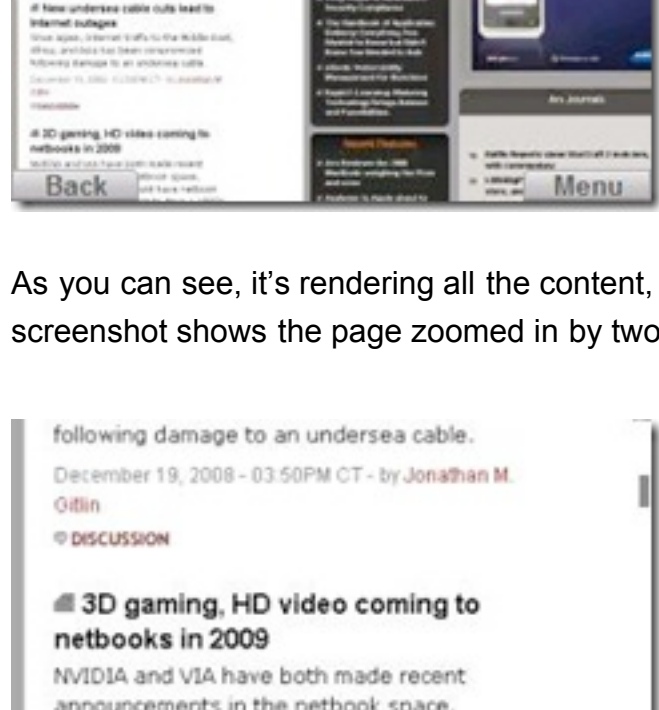
My name is Jim Causey, and I work on Core OS developer documentation for Windows Mobile. I've been working as a Windows developer in both higher education and private industry for 15 years, and have worked as a writer and editor for SAMs, Microsoft Press, and now Pointer for most of that time.

One of the things I like best about owning a Windows Mobile phone (a Samsung BlackJack II running Windows Mobile 6.1) is the diverse ecosystem of developers writing apps for my device. Whenever you have a strong developer community, you find a range of alternatives to match the way you like to work and play.

Skyfire

Skyfire uses the Gecko rendering engine from Mozilla, and loads and renders all content on Skyfire Labs' servers; this allows the browser to correctly render any Web page you could normally view on a PC, including sites using Silverlight, Adobe Flash, Apple's QuickTime, and other technologies.

The screen shot below shows the Skyfire splash screen from my BlackJack II:

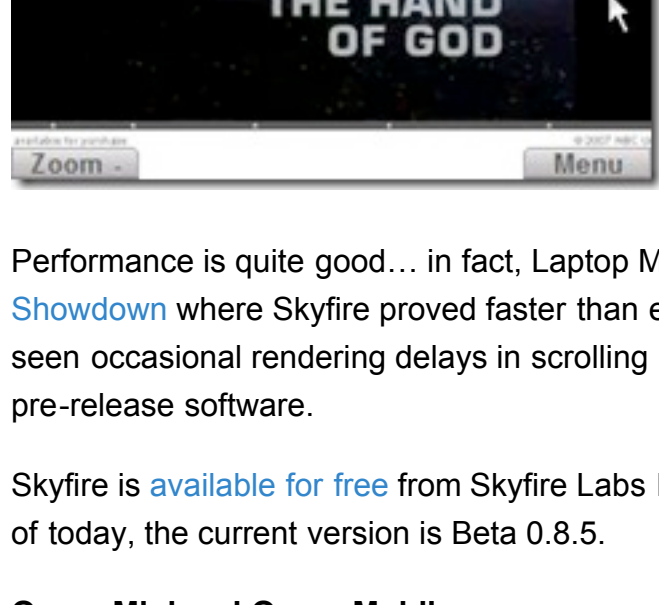


Because Skyfire doesn't report itself to sites as a mobile browser, you get the full desktop version of each page that you visit. I've had great luck using Skyfire on my Q9H and BlackJack II; I've used it for everything from playing with Facebook to accessing my online bank statements to watching TV shows at Hulu.com!

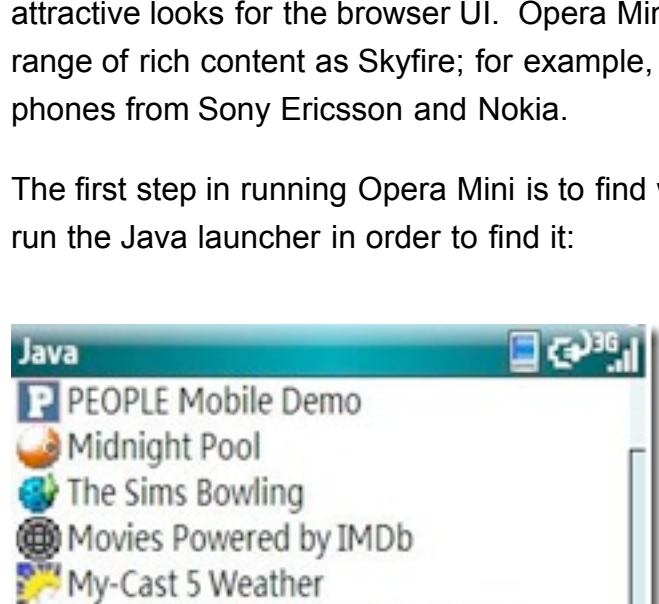
Here's the root page for Ars Technica as rendered by Skyfire:



As you can see, it's rendering all the content, including the Flash ad at the right. The next screenshot shows the page zoomed in by two levels:



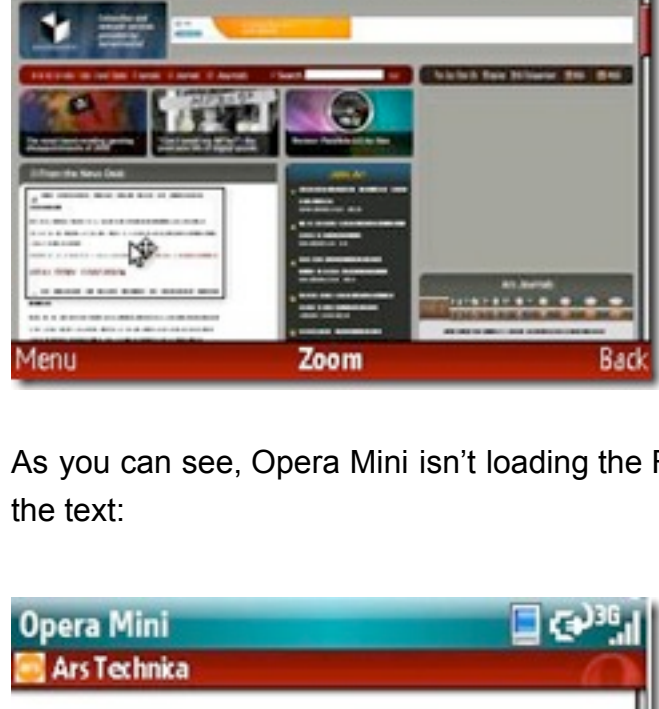
Next, I went to YouTube to pull up the Dramatic Chipmunk video; I zoomed in so you could see his beady little eyes:



Next, time to watch some Battlestar Galactica (the classic series) on Hulu.com:



...and a zoomed-in version of the same episode:



Performance is quite good... in fact, Laptop Magazine recently held a Mobile Browser Showdown where Skyfire proved faster than either Opera Mobile or Safari on the iPhone. I've seen occasional rendering delays in scrolling around a page, but nothing I wouldn't expect from pre-release software.

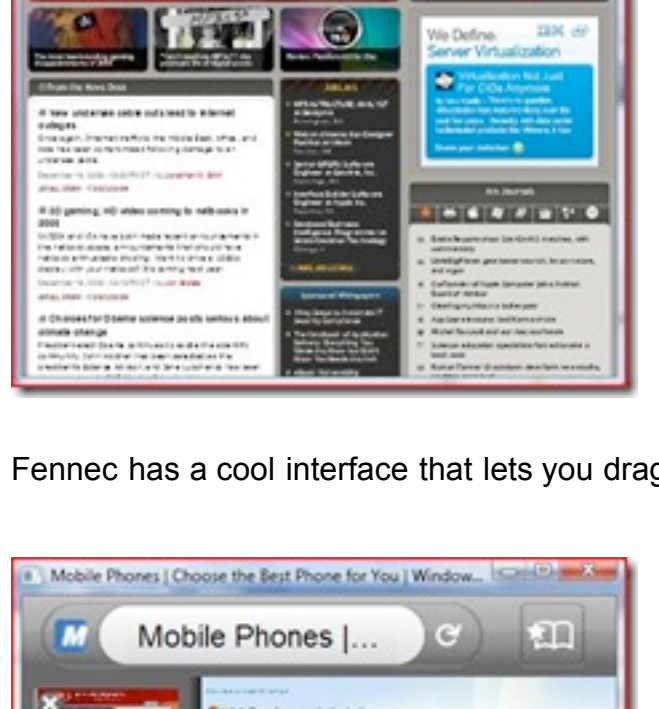
Skyfire is available for free from Skyfire Labs by joining the company's public beta program; as of today, the current version is Beta 0.8.5.

Opera Mini and Opera Mobile

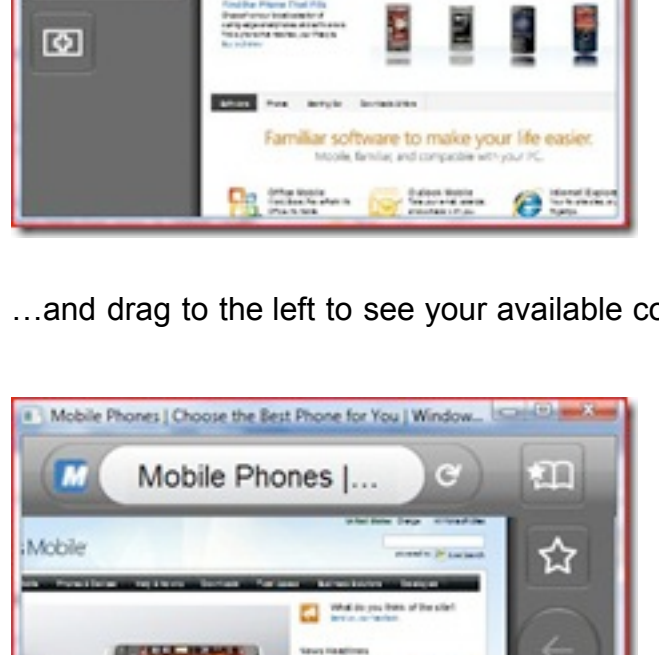
Opera Software has also brought their popular Web browser to Windows Mobile with two products: Opera Mini and Opera Mobile.

Opera Mini is available as a free download from Opera Software. Opera Mini is a Java application, and works by downloading and rendering content remotely. The current version, Opera Mini 4.2, also features Opera Link, which synchronizes your bookmarks and other personal customizations between Opera running on your desktop, or even on other mobile devices running Opera Mini.

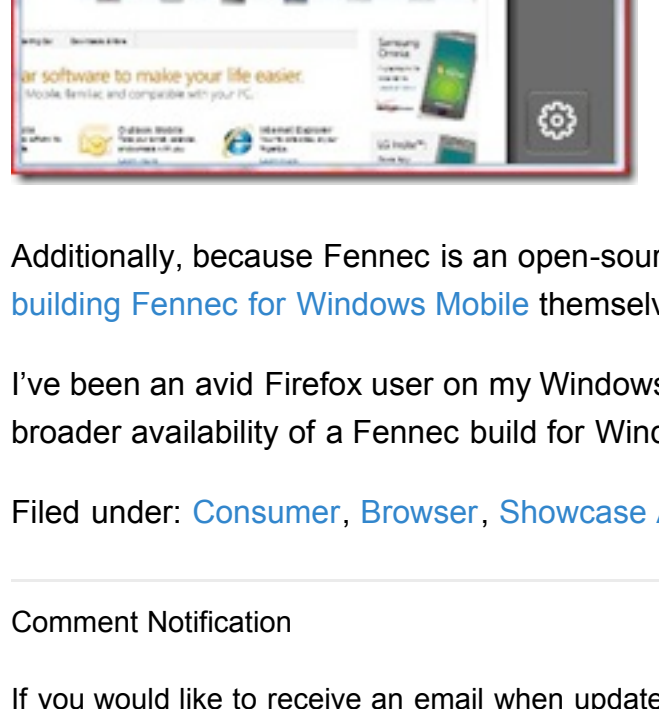
The first step in running Opera Mini is to find where it has installed; on my BlackJack II, I had to run the Java launcher in order to find it:



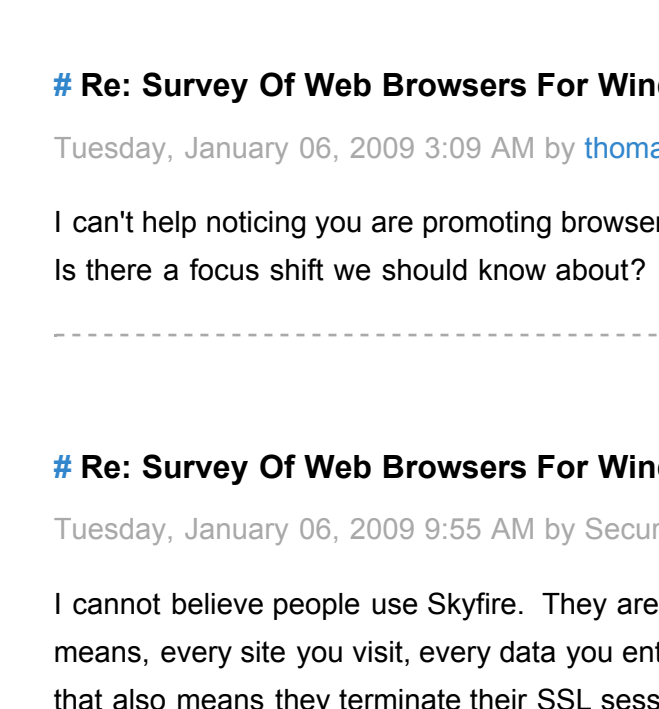
Next, you'll see the splash screen:



And, for the sake of parity, the Ars Technica home page:

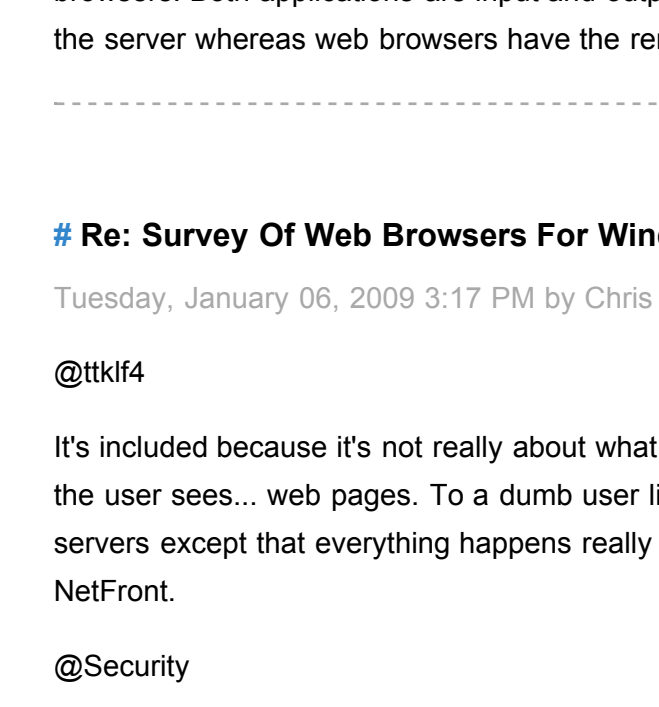


As you can see, Opera Mini isn't loading the Flash ad on the right. Finally, I zoomed in to read the text:

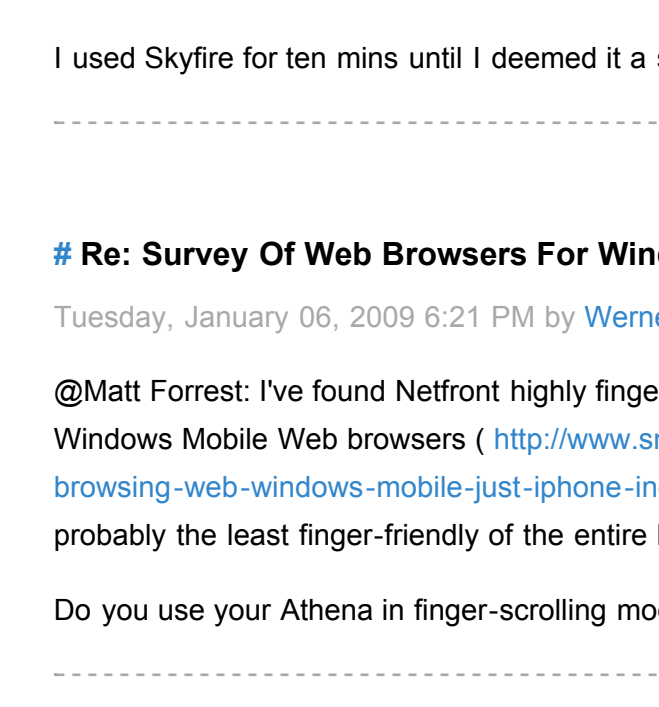


Opera Mobile is Opera's premier mobile web browsing solution, and the latest release version (8.65) is available for individual purchase as well as being bundled by Mobile Operators with their phones. You can also try the beta of Opera Mobile 9.5 for free.

Unlike Opera Mini, Opera Mobile is a full-featured Web browser, and downloads and renders all content locally. Opera Mobile defaults to a full-page Web view, and lets you scroll and zoom as needed. Opera Mobile also features multi-tab browsing and Opera's Dragonfly tools for Web development and debugging.



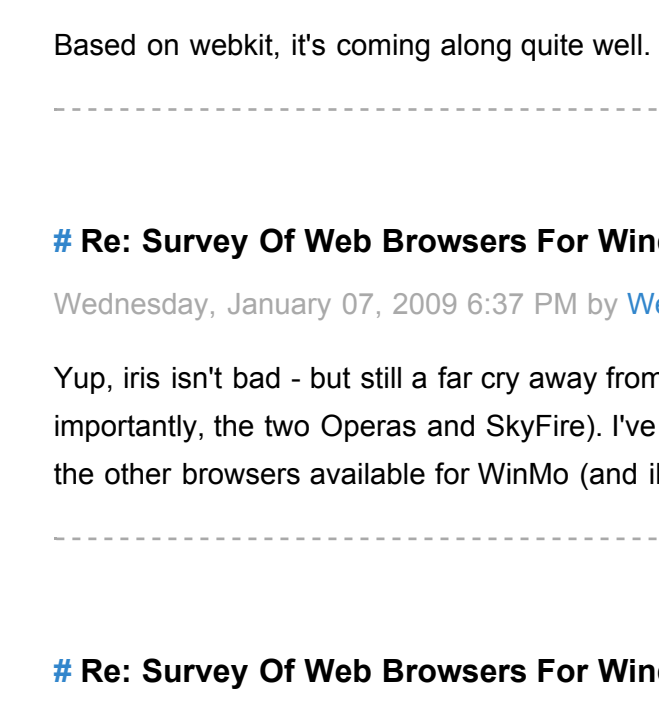
Opera Mobile is designed for touch-screen devices, and doesn't work terribly well on my BlackJack II. I did, however, manage to wrestle the device into giving me the following Opera Mobile screenshot with Ars Technica so you can see a comparison:



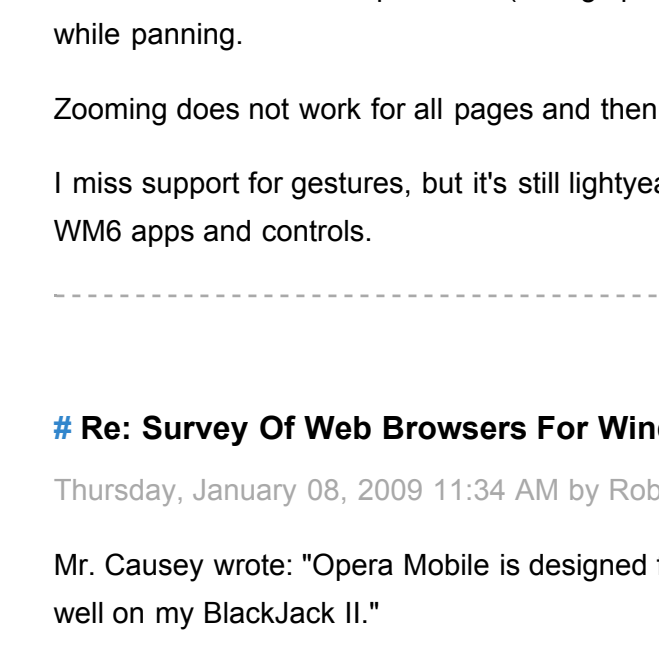
Fennec (Firefox for Mobile)

Fennec is Mozilla's code name for their effort to port Firefox to mobile devices, including Windows Mobile. Brad Lassey, the lead developer on the Fennec project, has posted a series of blog articles about getting Fennec up and running in a Windows Mobile emulator.

Fennec is still under development, so there aren't any Windows Mobile builds available for download yet. You can, however, preview Fennec by running an early developer release (Alpha 1, as of today) on your Windows, Mac OS X, or Linux desktop.



Fennec has a cool interface that lets you drag to the right to see all your current tabs:



...and drag to the left to see your available controls:



Additionally, because Fennec is an open-source project, developers can try their hand at building Fennec for Windows Mobile themselves.

I've been an avid Firefox user on my Windows machines for years now, so I'm eagerly awaiting broader availability of a Fennec build for Windows Mobile.

Filed under: Consumer, Browser, Showcase Applications

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Comments

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Monday, January 05, 2009 11:41 PM by Albert
Yeah, I think it was on this blog, or the Ch10 blog, where I heard about Skyfire and have used it ever since. I use IE for my MSN and Windows Live Mobile browsing, but Skyfire for other "regular" site browsing. It's fast and very complete.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 3:09 AM by thomassundert
I can't help noticing you are promoting browsers other than the recently announced IE Mobile 6. Is there a focus shift we should know about?

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 9:55 AM by Security
I cannot believe people use Skyfire. They are rendering the web pages in their datacenter. That means, every site you visit, every data you enter - is going through their datacenter. So assume that also means they terminate their SSL sessions in their datacenter.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 1:04 PM by jim.causey
No focus shift -- just highlighting the variety of applications available for Windows Mobile.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 1:44 PM by tkif4
The same security problems occur with Opera Mini. All the traffic is routed through the Opera server.
Furthermore I don't understand why Opera Mini and Skyfire are reviewed under the title web browsers. Both applications are input and output devices and the rendering of pages happens on the server whereas web browsers have the rendering engine on the device.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 3:17 PM by Chris
@tkif4
It's included because it's not really about what happens in the background, but ultimately what the user sees... web pages. To a dumb user like me, I don't know that it's going through their servers except that everything happens really fast compared to Pocket IE, Opera Mobile, and NetFront.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 5:22 PM by Matt Forrest
I use Net Front on my HTC X7500 winmo 6.1 and it's a great browser for my 5" screen. IE6 is good too for some sites that Net Front has trouble with which is not many.
I used Skyfire for ten mins until I deemed it a security nightmare waiting to happen.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 6:21 PM by Werner Ruotsalainen
@Matt Forrest: I've found Netfront highly finger-unfriendly. In my large test of all current Windows Mobile Web browsers (http://www.smartphonemag.com/cms/blog/9/full-roundup-browsing-web-windows-mobile-just-iphone-incl-iem6-review), I've explained why I consider it probably the least finger-friendly of the entire bunch.
Do you use your Athena in finger-scrolling mode ala the iPhone?

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 6:23 PM by Werner Ruotsalainen
@tkif4: IMHO, it's pretty understandable these two browsers are reviewed here. They're, after all, excellent and hugely popular in the WinMo community - for reason. In my roundup, they were also finalists in the "top three" browsers.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 6:24 PM by Werner Ruotsalainen
@Security: if you feel unsafe about SkyFire (Opera Mini), then, visit the pages you consider unsafe in an alternative browser using direct connections: NetFront, Opera Mobile, PIE/IEM etc and only do the rest in SkyFire (Opera Mini).

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Tuesday, January 06, 2009 8:42 PM by JB
Don't forget about Iris from Torchmobile.
Based on webkit, it's coming along quite well.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Wednesday, January 07, 2009 6:37 PM by Werner Ruotsalainen
Yep, iris isn't bad - but still a far cry away from any of the more established browsers (most importantly, the two Opera and SkyFire). I've very thoroughly compared the latest version to all the other browsers available for WinMo (and iPhone) - see my above article if interested.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Thursday, January 08, 2009 3:31 AM by Henry Boehlert
Opera Mobile 9.5.1938 is the default browser on my HTC Touch Pro.
It's ok unless there a website with frames or "smart" javascript scrolling.
It has some font-related problems (wrong spacing) as well as a nasty habit of activating links while panning.
Zooming does not work for all pages and then navigating larger pages is a drag.
I miss support for gestures, but it's still lightyears ahead of panning/scrolling and zooming in WMB apps and controls.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Thursday, January 08, 2009 11:34 AM by Roberto
Mr. Causey wrote: "Opera Mobile is designed for touch-screen devices, and doesn't work terribly well on my BlackJack II."
Opera Mobile 8.65 is probably the most keyboard-friendly browser from the bunch, maybe with the exception of Opera Mini. In fact, Opera Mobile 8.65 is the default browser on the Moto Q9 devices, which are all non-touchscreen units. It isn't the greatest when rendering Flash-based content, but I've lost count of the many sites that don't work with Internet Explorer Mobile that do work with Opera Mobile. There are separate versions of Opera Mobile for touchscreen devices and for non-touchscreen devices though. I've moved up from a Moto Q9h to an IPAQ 910c and I still prefer Opera Mobile 8.65, precisely because it is the friendliest real browser out there for keyboard-oriented users.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Thursday, January 08, 2009 5:16 PM by Fennec
http://www.mozilla.org/projects/fennec/1.0a2/releasesnotes/
I'm not sure why this article links to the old Alpha 1 of Fennec when Alpha 2 has been available since last month.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Thursday, January 08, 2009 7:13 PM by Kevin
How ironic that the very company who argues that the browser is part of the OS is the company that lacks a decent built-in browser on its mobile platform, and has to rely on third parties to improve on it.
Hello, Microsoft? Can you just use WebKit already?
And can you do something about all that 80's technology still bogging down WinMo development?
This is really getting silly. Spill the WinMo7 beans already, MS.

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Thursday, January 08, 2009 7:26 PM by Werner Ruotsalainen
@Roberto, exactly.
Incidentally, in my 2007 edition of the MS Smartphone Web Browsing bible, I've even published a huge chart of all the hotkeys of all the browsers of all the mobile platforms:
http://www.smartphonemag.com/cms/blogs/3/2084 - See 1.6 Keyboard shortcuts (in the second part at http://www.smartphonemag.com/cms/blogs/3/2089).
Direct link to the chart: http://www.winmobiletech.com/072007SPWebBrowsers/chart.html
And, guys and gals, don't forget to read my other Web browsing-related articles. Again, start with my last roundup at http://www.smartphonemag.com/cms/blog/9/full-roundup-browsing-web-windows-mobile-just-iphone-incl-iem6-review

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Thursday, January 08, 2009 8:49 PM by JPD
Is there any mobile browser that can display a file passed down from my document server as a .cfm file? On my desktop IE will display these courtesy of an Acrobat plug-in I think. On the WinMo side WHAT will work?

Re: Survey Of Web Browsers For Windows Mobile
Sunday, January 11, 2009 1:05 PM by Cassio
how about Netfront 3.5 Concept Edition? :P

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