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Review: Skyfire 1.0 mobile browser

Browser brings a desktop-like experience to smartphones, including Flash video

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The Skyfire mobile browser is a free download designed to give smartphone users a web experience that as closely as possible matches that of accessing content from a PC.

Available to download now, Skyfire enables users to view almost any web page that can be viewed with a desktop browser, including those with Java and Flash content, such as videos on YouTube. It also supports Silverlight 2, making Skyfire potentially interesting for accessing web-based business applications.

We found the release version of Skyfire much improved in its speed of response over earlier betas, and it does indeed allow you to watch video from sites such as the BBC and vnunet.com on your handset.

On the downside, we found that using Skyfire can quickly eat up the battery life of the phone, and we also had to keep a close eye on how much the browser was using up our airtime plan.

Skyfire 1.0 supports a range of handsets based on Windows Mobile 5, 6 and 6.1, both touch-screen and keypad only, plus Symbian handsets with Nokia's S60 3rd Edition. The latter largely restricts Symbian support to Nokia's N and E series phones; Symbian-based devices from Samsung and LG are not supported, nor are phones with the UIQ user interface or earlier releases of S60.

We tested Skyfire on a [HTC S730](http://HTC.com) handset, a phone with a slide-out Qwerty keyboard running Windows Mobile 6 Standard Edition.

Using the phone's built-in Internet Explorer browser, we downloaded the Skyfire installer, a 635Kb .CAB file, from m.skyfire.com. Users can also get the browser by visiting get.skyfire.com and downloading the files to their PC for synchronisation with their phone, or by having Skyfire send a link to their handset by SMS.

In use, we immediately noticed a number of changes over the earlier beta release. Firstly, the browser starts up faster, and you can also start keying a URL into the address bar while the rest of the front page loads.

The front page itself is a portal showing feeds from various sources. Skyfire comes with a number of pre-defined feeds from news and media sites, but users can customise these with updates from their Twitter or Facebook accounts, for example. The front page also has links to bookmarks and browsing history.

On our test handset, one of the buttons immediately below the screen accessed the browser menu, while the other displayed context-sensitive functions, typically serving as the back button while browsing.

As with other mobile browsers such as [Safari](http://Safari.com) on Apple's iPhone or the popular [Opera Mini](http://Opera.com), Skyfire renders the web page as it would appear on a desktop PC browser. As this makes the text too small to be legible, the user typically has to select an area and zoom in to read it.

Like Opera Mini, Skyfire provides an on-screen mouse pointer that can be moved using the phone navigation key. An on-screen frame outlines the area that you would see if you zoom in.

In the release version of Skyfire you now double-click the navigation key to zoom in, but you can also highlight and click on links in the full-page view without having to zoom in first, saving a few seconds if you know where you want to go.

We found that web pages also load faster in this release than in the earlier betas, and the browser feels more responsive when you scroll and pan around the page. The browser still displays a checker board pattern when you scroll to an area of the page it has not yet cached, but Skyfire now catches up faster.

However, page loads still take longer than on a desktop PC, and obviously depend on the network connection. Users should expect to see a lot of the swirling circle, which Skyfire uses as its busy indicator.

Oddly, we found that pages did not load noticeably quicker when using our phone's Wi-Fi connection for browsing than when we had an HSDPA cellular connection. However, it was noticeably slower than either of those if we were in an area where the network connection downgraded to 3G or even GPRS.

But the most eye-catching feature of Skyfire is its ability to play video content. You can click on videos, and these play in place, just as you would expect on a PC. We found the videos would often start off a little jerky at first, but were otherwise very impressive.

An on-screen volume control appears whenever you play a video, allowing you to adjust the sound level, which always seemed to start off quite loud on our test handset.

However, there are some limitations. Windows Media content will play if it is embedded in the page, but not if it spawns a separate pop-up as Skyfire suppresses these. Skyfire supports Flash 10, Silverlight 2.0 and QuickTime, and the company said it intends to support more in the future.

We also tested Skyfire on several web-based applications, and found it generally worked very well for tools

such as web mail. We were able to use Google Maps, and even managed to bring up Street View on the handset. However, we found a web-based blog editing tool we use displayed correctly but the drop-down menus did not function.

Like Opera Mini, Skyfire uses a proxy server to render web pages, rather than using the phone's processor to do the legwork. This also means that your browsing history and cookies are stored in Skyfire's datacentre rather than on the handset itself.

Overall, we were impressed with Skyfire. There are inevitably some things you can do on a desktop that you cannot replicate on a mobile handset, but Skyfire comes the closest to the desktop experience of any we have so far seen, and it's a free download.

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