Hands-On With Deepfish

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Microsoft's Deepfish technology isn't really a browser, it's a browser feature. But it's a feature that Microsoft's Pocket Internet Explorer desperately needs.

Microsoft announced Deepfish on Wednesday, and the company is being a bit cagy about it. According to them, it's a "new mobile technology ... designed to offer mobile users quick and convenient Web browsing." It's a solution to a real need: relatively few Web sites create special versions for mobile phones and PDAs, and desktop sites often look awful in Microsoft's Pocket Internet Explorer.

I tested Deepfish on a Motorola Q. Punch in a URL, and it displays a "zoomed-out," shrunken-down version of a desktop Web page, with pretty much all basic formatting intact. Your cursor is a gray box about a quarter of the size of the page. Using the cursor keys, you scroll around and down smoothly, with a bit of an inertial feel that takes some getting used to - it's easy to overshoot your mark.

Click, and the browser zooms in to a readable mode. A little image of the full page sits up in the top right corner of the screen. You can move around with your cursor keys here, too; as you move over new territory it appears in a low-res form, resolving into clarity if you stop and wait.

Click one more time, and you finally get a pointer. The pointer hops from link to link as you move the cursor keys, and it lets you click on links. The browser's pretty spare - no Javascript, no Flash - but this is from Microsoft's experimental Labs, not a final product.

Deepfish advertises speed, and it delivers. The initial page image downloads very quickly, and the zoom-ins practically feel like you're working with a local document. The trick is massive server-side processing, with your device only downloading what you're seeing at the moment, according to Microsoft.

I've seen this kind of technology on other products. Picsel Viewer has a very similar scrolling mechanism and also pans quickly over a low-res image, zooming in for a high-res view. Nokia's new Series 60 Web browser has a "mini map" feature that shows a zoomed-out version of a Web page in a ghostly overlay on top of the zoomed-in page you're viewing.

The upcoming Opera Mobile 9 has a very similar approach to Deepfish, initially showing you a zoomed-out page and letting you zoom in on part of it. But Opera Mobile 9 loads the whole page at once, not just part. That means Deepfish will probably initially feel faster than Opera Mobile 9, but that Opera will catch up if you're scrolling around a page after it's been fully loaded.

Up until now, though, Microsoft's Windows Mobile browser has been way behind the curve. Pocket Internet Explorer is dog-slow and ugly, with no adequate way to see where you are on a page. That's why we prefer Opera Mobile 8.6 , which does its best to reformat pages for a mobile screen. Opera Mobile strips away navigation bars and ads to give you the information you're looking for. Deepfish and Opera Mobile 9, on the other hand, try to duplicate the desktop Web experience by letting you zoom in and out easily.

One big thing missing from Deepfish is text reformatting in its zoomed-in mode. When Deepfish zooms, too many text columns end up running off the right-hand edge of the screen, requiring horizontal scrolling. Nobody should ever have to horizontal-scroll to read a column of text.

Deepfish is at labs.live.com/deepfish , but the beta program is full for now. I hope the technology will pop up in Pocket Internet Explorer soon - the mobile browser really, really needs it.

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