Flash for phones not quite up to snuff

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At long last, Adobe's Flash Player is making its way out to modern smart phones. But consumers who have been itching to get Flash content on their phones may find themselves disappointed.

Flash is a software platform that typically runs inside a Web browser. It's frequently used for delivering advertisements, video and games, and to add drop-down menus and other interactive elements to Web pages. Adobe estimates that about 70 percent of all Web-based videos and games are encoded in Flash and that 85 of the top 100 websites use Flash, not including for ads. Some 98 percent of U.S. PCs have Flash installed.

But Flash is not nearly as prevalent in the mobile world. The version made for PCs hasn't been available for mobile devices because it requires too much memory and processing power, draining batteries.

Adobe has long offered a version of Flash -- dubbed Flash Lite -- for mobile phones, but the software hasn't been available on all phones and wasn't powerful enough to handle much of the content written for standard Flash. Many newer smart phones, most notably Apple's popular iPhone, didn't include Flash Lite. That's a problem for Adobe, because a fast-growing portion of Web surfing is being done from such devices.

So Adobe has been working on a version of Flash for smart phones that is more capable than Flash Lite but not as resource-hungry as PC Flash. In June, the company finally released Flash 10.1 for mobile devices and that software is now making its way into phones running the latest

version of Google's Android operating system.

By the end of next year, Adobe expects to make Flash 10.1 available for phones running Research In Motion's BlackBerry operating system, Hewlett-Packard's Palm webOS, Microsoft's Windows Phone 7 software, as well as for Nokia's Symbian and MeeGo platforms. Apple's iOS would then be the only major mobile operating system that wouldn't support Flash.

The coming of Flash to so many mobile devices would seem to be a huge boon for their owners. And its absence on the iPhone and related devices would seem to be a huge shortcoming for them. But after playing with one of the new Flash 10.1-enabled devices, I'm not so sure.

Adobe recently sent me a Motorola Droid X smart phone, which is running Android 2.2 and Flash 10.1. I used it to visit a number of websites, both those that Adobe has highlighted as mobile Flash-compatible and those that I tend to visit on a regular basis.

I tested a demonstration model of the phone that has already been upgraded to the new software. Verizon, which sells the Droid X, is expected to provide an update soon that will include the new mobile Flash and the updated Android software; however, the carrier hasn't said yet when it will make that update available.

Having Flash on the phone certainly has its benefits. One of my favorite Web-based video series is "The Guild," about a group of misfits who play an online multiplayer fantasy game. In the past, I've watched "The Guild" only from my computer. While I could download episodes to my iPhone from iTunes, I'd have to pay for them and iTunes doesn't yet have the latest ones. With the Droid X, I was able to watch one of the latest episodes for free.

Similarly, I was able to watch some videos from TheStreet.com, a financial news site I used to work for. Some of the TheStreet.com's videos are available on iTunes as podcasts -- but only a small fraction. With the Droid X, I could watch any of the videos from the site that I could find on my PC.

I also played a fun Flash-based puzzle game called "Assembler" on Kongregate's website, one of Adobe's featured mobile Flash users. "Assembler" was designed for a touch screen like the Droid's and worked well. Likewise, I played a puzzle-type game called "Bricks Breaking" on Yahoo's Games site. Although not optimized for a touch screen -- the bricks were a bit small for my finger to press accurately -- it worked fairly well.

But mobile Flash was not always impressive. Even if Flash content is now available for mobile devices, much of it was designed for PC users, which can make it frustrating to deal with.

The controls for "The Guild's" video player, for example, were obviously designed for a mouse pointer, not a fat fingertip. I had to press the tiny play and pause buttons repeatedly to make them work.

Electronic Arts' new Flash-based "Madden NFL Superstars" Facebook game similarly had controls that were hard to click with a fingertip. Worse, the game loaded slowly and the game screen blacked out when I tried to zoom in to press the right buttons. Such hiccups were not unusual. I had to reload several Flash sites repeatedly to get them to work.

Even with Flash installed, some of the most popular Flash-based content still isn't accessible via Mobile Flash 10.1. Hulu, for example, bars the Droid's Flash player from playing the television shows and movies it hosts. Similarly, you can't use the mobile Flash player to watch shows on

ABC.com. And Syfy's website doesn't even allow mobile devices to access the page on which it lists its full episodes; it redirects them back to its home page.

Also, Flash won't let you play more sophisticated Web-based games or those with more complex graphics. Those typically require other plug-in programs, such as Unity's Web player, or require you to install full programs that were designed for PCs.

For iPhone and iPad users, the lack of Flash can be frustrating. Some websites are entirely built around the software and are inaccessible without it. But in many cases, iPhone users won't miss it. Many have argued that not having Flash is a good thing, because it limits the number of ads they have to see.

Meanwhile, many of the videos delivered in Flash on the Web are being re-encoded in iOS-compatible formats. And with some 65,000 games available in Apple's App Store, it's hard to argue that Apple device users are missing out by not being able to play games.

So Flash's long-awaited debut on modern smart phones doesn't matter as much as one might think. Much of the Web's best content either still isn't available on smart phones or is hard to access on those devices. And a growing number of games and videos is now available without Flash.

It's enough to make you wonder if it was worth the wait.