Opera browser hasn't got its act all together

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Opera's new Web browser responds to commands you speak into a microphone. It rearranges pages to fit narrower windows. It adds a security bar to help reduce the risk of fraud.

All impressive features.

But when it comes to the basics, too many Web sites simply don't work as well with Opera when compared with rival browsers from Microsoft Corp. and the Mozilla Foundation.

What a disappointment, as I really like the browser's other improvements.

The latest version of Opera Software ASA's browser, Opera 8, adds voice functionality that the company considers mostly a preview of what hands-free browsing might be like one day.

Still, I was quite impressed.

After getting my microphone to work properly, I only had to say "Opera reload" to have the Web page automatically update. "Opera speak" gets the browser to read aloud a highlighted passage of text. I didn't have to do a thing to train the software to recognize my voice.

Opera's new fit-to-width feature, meanwhile, lets you navigate Web pages without having to constantly reach for the horizontal scroll bar.

Opera can automatically rearrange pages so that sentences fit, no matter how narrow the window. When pages have multiple columns, Opera may stack one on top of the other to eliminate that scroll bar. Graphics and photos are shrunk. This feature worked well with most sites I tried, though with a Flash-heavy portal, Opera simply shrunk the entire page, making text unreadable. Opera 8 also has a trash can that stores blocked pop-up windows and pages you close, just in case you need them again.

Many of Opera's returning features are similar to those of Mozilla's Firefox, which itself offers more than Microsoft's aging Internet Explorer.
I haven't run into any sites that didn't work at all with Opera, but many didn't work as well.

With Opera, I couldn't access America Online Inc. e-mail or empty Hotmail's junk folder. I couldn't use the word processor-like interface when posting new entries on LiveJournal's blogging service.

Making travel plans through Expedia, I had more options for creating discount packages from the home page using

Firefox and Microsoft's IE.

Several menu options failed to appear on Northwest's Web site when using Opera, and only with Opera did an ad permanently block me from reading tech news at The Washington Post's Web site.

Opera spokesman Tor Odland said some Web developers design their sites to work with IE and Firefox but don't bother testing them with Opera, which has smaller market share.

I can see how Opera isn't to blame, but the bottom line for me is whether it works. The $39 browser (free if you accept ads) is available for Windows and Linux computers, though the voice features need Windows 2000 or XP.

A Mac OS version is being tested.

If IE were the only option, then Opera would be a strong candidate.

But Firefox handles all the basics well. For free. And on the Mac.

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