

review by Marc Messer and Brian Kelley

.5 Stars — 1 Star Poor, 5 Stars Excellent

Title: SurfExpress

Version: 1.1

Developer: Connectix

Price: around \$34.95 MSRP

Contact Info: <http://www.connectix.com/>

Genre: Web Browser Accelerator

Mac Requirements: PowerPC; Mac OS 7.5.x or higher; 16 MB RAM; Standard (TCP/IP-based) Internet connection; 12 MB

hard drive space; Version 3.0 browser or later; Open

PC Requirements: Windows 95 or NT 4; 486 or faster processor; 8 MB RAM (16 MB recommended); TCP/IP-based

Internet connection; 12 MB hard disk space;

Version 3.0 or later browser

Note: The PC version of SurfExpress was not reviewed. Please look at a PC-based review if you are a PC user wishing to find information about SurfExpress.

[review](#)

Connectix, the company that wowed us with RAMDoublor and

SpeedDoubler — two must-have utilities for many — claimed to have reached into its bag of tricks and pulled out another piece of magic software. Their newest offering, SurfExpress, supposedly combines a proxy server with a fast data cache to radically enhance your web-browsing experience.

We tested SurfExpress on two Macs. Brian tested SurfExpress on his Performa 6205, which has a PowerPC 603 processor running at 75 Mhz, 48 MB of RAM, MacOS 8.1, RAMDoubler and SpeedDoubler. Brian's connection to the Internet is via cable modem through TimeWarner Cable's RoadRunner system and his browser of choice is Netscape Navigator 4.04. Marc used a PowerMac 6500 with a 300 Mhz 603e processor, 64 MB of RAM, MacOS 8.0, and Netscape Navigator 4.03.1. He used a 33.6 baud Geoport Express modem through a local ISP. Internet Explorer 3.01 and 4.0 were also used during testing and results were similar to those achieved during Navigator use.

What it is, How it Works

Using Connectix's FASTore technology, SurfExpress stores and tracks each page you visit. With this database of web pages, SurfExpress is (supposedly) able to load Web graphics and text up to 36 times faster than your browser alone (according to Connectix). The benefits of this system are most readily apparent with pages you visit often and which don't change much between visits, but even sites which change constantly will re-use many of their graphics, so SurfExpress will shave precious seconds off those loading times.

Installation and Set-up

Installing SurfExpress was simple and painless. The installer application installs the SurfExpress extension and the SurfExpress application, an alias of which is placed in the Apple Menu. Brian found that he didn't even notice SurfExpress over the next few days, except for the times when its splash screen would pop up on Navigator's launch. Theoretically, if you're happy with the default settings, you need never interact with SurfExpress at all, and it will function unobtrusively.

Immediately after installation and restarting, the improvement was obvious for Brian. Navigator felt faster, snappier, more responsive. By replacing

Navigator's normal disk cache with what is essentially a proxy server residing on your hard drive, SurfExpress sped up the loading of pages and images to a great degree. However, Marc found very little difference from his normal web browsing experiences.

If you do choose to change the default settings, SurfExpress's nicely-designed interface makes it easy. Organized into tabbed panels, each parameter of SurfExpress's use is clearly explained in a help window. Merely passing the cursor over an item brings up a clear, concise description of its function.

e found a number of useful tips on Ted Landau's MacFixIt website at <http://www.macfixit.com/> . Using this information, and by some trial and error, each of us came up with the optimal settings for our particular system. Increasing the size of the SE cache is a good idea; Brian finally settled on 12 MB while Marc (who loves to waste hard drive space but hates waiting for images to download) chose 30 MB. Both disabled one feature, Smart Fetch, because the way it "pre-fetches" frequently-visited pages can bog down the network. After making these changes, the benefits of SurfExpress were even more noticeable for Brian.

ther Features

The FindCache panel allows you to search for items in SurfExpress's disk cache. This can be quite handy if you know you've seen some information in the past but can't remember precisely where it was. For example, Brian searched the cache for "Pisces" and in a matter of seconds SurfExpress

returned a list of online horoscopes he'd viewed that day. Double-clicking on one of these results launches the browser and quickly displays that page as it exists in the cache, complete with its associated graphics.

SurfExpress even has a statistics panel (see below), so you can track how much of what you're seeing comes from the network and how much from the cache.

runching The Numbers

After using SurfExpress for a few weeks, here's how the stats added up for Brian (Marc's stats were similar but yours will vary depending on your habits and settings). As we all know, if it's in a pie chart, it has to be true:

o about 56% of the time, SurfExpress is making the World Wide Wait a little less frustrating.

Now for Brian's unofficial and highly unscientific benchmarking: I used my trusty Panama Jack digital watch (with velcro writsband). For this test, I chose a site I visit often, the Official X-Files site at <http://www.the-xfiles.com/> . Without SurfExpress, this page took about 35 seconds to load. With SurfExpress, it took just 15 seconds. While this is certainly a great improvement, it's definitely not 36 times faster, despite what Connectix claims. Caveat emptor.

Marc's benchmarking went as follows: I visit As the Apple Turns at <http://www.infoxczar.com/atat/> every day. AtAT's graphics remain largely the same but it's content changes daily. Without SurfExpress the page reloads from Netscape Navigator's cache in 31 seconds on average. With SurfExpress, it loaded in 32 seconds on average. This coincides with my overall experience — performance is about the same with or without SurfExpress.

Downside

It's very difficult to disable SurfExpress once you've installed it. Disabling the SurfExpress extension via Extension Manager (or Conflict Catcher) causes Netscape Navigator to report a bizarre "connection refused by server" error. This is because SurfExpress changes a setting within Navigator's preferences file (under advanced : proxy). SurfExpress tells Navigator to contact a proxy server (whose address is answered by SurfExpress). To "disconnect" Navigator from SurfExpress, you need to chose "Direct connection to the internet" from within Navigator's preferences.

Numerous reports from other users indicate that SurfExpress gave no boost in performance on their machines. It appears that the gains are most obvious on slower Macs (such as Brian's).

SurfExpress can cause a number of problems, including strange display glitches in Navigator, inexplicable freezes, problems shutting down the computer, and other bits of random weirdness that Brian has not experienced (knock wood) but Marc has. Again, MacFixIt continues to report on SurfExpress bugs and anomolies as they become evident.

SurfExpress requires a great deal of RAM. In addition to the 800K used by the SurfExpress application, the SurfExpress proxy extension tacks on 2 MB to the system heap everytime you start your Mac, regardless of whether you'll be using your browser during that session or not.

onclusion

Brian's overall impression:

Since I started using SurfExpress, I've never been happier with Netscape Navigator. If you're interested in speeding up your web browser, SurfExpress can give the boost you're looking for — or it could be a complete waste of money. There seems to be no way of predicting whether your system will be accelerated by SurfExpress, but if you're willing to gamble about \$35, you can find out for yourself. Based solely on my subjective experience I give SurfExpress 3.5 stars.

Marc's overall impression:

I experienced little performance gain while using SurfExpress and its bugs annoyed me to no end. I think that for slower systems like Brian's, the faster cache system in SurfExpress is indeed faster than using a browser's default caching scheme, but on my system, the processor speed makes up for any

inadequacies in Navigator's caching system. I give SurfExpress 1.5 stars.

Together, we had very different impressions of the same software. We must assume that system speed is the primary factor as to whether or not SurfExpress works as advertised. Our overall rating of the product is 2.5 stars.

Brian Kelley

brian@applewizards.net

<http://applewizards.net/staff/briankelley.html>

Marc Messer

macjunkie@applewizards.net

<http://applewizards.net/staff/marcmesser.html>

<http://applewizards.net/>