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Sony Ericsson W380i Review

Funky music phone with Gesture control function

Sony Ericsson W380i is a low mid-level ranged clamshell, which introduces new features into the handset market. Besides the external touch music controls that seem to take advantage of the 'haptic feedback' technology, the clamshell also features gesture control. It is surprising that the Japanese-Swedish joint-venture decided to test new technologies by embedding it onto entry level products. Still, this policy will probably make these handsets sell much better than any other device in their range. Without impressing too much through its design, Sony Ericsson W380i proves to be an excellent choice for those music lovers that cannot afford an expensive Walkman series mobile phone.

Announced in November 2007, Sony Ericsson W380i clamshell was out on the market four months later, in March 2008. Even if it is cheaper than its Walkman series predecessors are, W380i is still worth no less than USD 320$ (SIM free) and is available in four colors: Electric Purple, Magnetic Grey, Black Champagne and Black Orange.

Design

Sony Ericsson W380i features a clamshell form factor, but it will not stand out in the crowd. The phone can very easily stay in a youngster's hands, as well as in a businessman's. It looks funky, but serious at the same time. Measuring 92 x 49 x 16 mm and weighing 100 grams (including battery), the handset fits perfectly into a medium sized pocket. The excellent plastic used gives the phone a stylish and trendy look, but W380i is still far from being a fashion phone. Unfortunately, unfolding it with a single hand is out of the question or at least very hard to carry out.

External keys are limited to a dual volume key found on the right side of the clamshell, and the three touch controls placed near the secondary external display. On the left side of the phone, the proprietary Sony Ericsson port enables users to attach the headset that comes in the sales package, the charger, or the USB cable for synchronization. There is a bad part and a good part about this kind of port. While you cannot charge the phone and listen to music to the headphones also, instead you can charge the battery of the phone during synchronization with a PC. This will definitely take more time, but at least you get this option that is not available for too many handsets. The front part of the clamshell features the secondary external OLED mono display (128 x 36 pixels resolution), which is not visible until you activate the music player or unfold the phone. At a first glance, the 3 external music controls placed right under the small OLED display seem to have only an ornamental purpose, but they're touch keys that control the music player and feature 'haptic feedback'. You don't need to press too hard on the keys, but only pat them gently as they are very responsive.

The 1.3 Megapixel camera has been placed above the small screen together with the speakerphone. On the back of the phone, you will notice a small keylock that unlocks the external touch keys, so you can start the MP3 player without unfolding the clamshell. The

internal keypad reveals itself the moment you unfold the phone. It is pretty big and features large spaces between keys, which makes typos impossible. Unfortunately, the buttons are a little bit illegible if not exposed to good light conditions, and a little bit hard to press.

The layout of the keypad is the usual, embedded into all Sony Ericsson's handsets, with one exception: the power button that can be found right under the big D-pad. There are also 2 contextual keys, the Back key, the C (Correct) key and 2 dedicated keys that gives the user direct access to Internet browsing and Task manager. If you press the upper part of the big D-pad (marked with the 'w' letter) it will open the MP3 player application, but you can also designate other shortcuts for the rest of the D-pad (left, right, down). The clamshell features a small prominence at the base right under the keypad, which hinders any possible contact between the 2 parts of the clamshell, thus keeping the keys clean and safe from scratches.

The opening mechanism is sturdy enough so you will not feel any jog even after heavy use. The only drawback I have noticed is the back cover, which opens by inserting your nail into a small gap found on the left side of the phone, right above the volume key. Because the back cover is made of pure plastic and is very slim, this action might seem very dangerous when executed in a hurry and repeatedly. Basically, every time you try to pull out the battery to put in a different SIM or want access to the M2 slot card, you have about 50% chance to severely damage the back cover. Overall, Sony Ericsson W380i is one damn good-looking clamshell, which might seem unusual for the low mid-level handset.

Display and Camera

If you are used with Sony Ericsson's latest Walkman series handsets, then you will be a little bit disappointed by W380i's display performance. Besides the fact that it is rather small (1.9 inches), the TFT main screen only supports 176 x 220 pixels resolution, but 262k colors. Benchmarks revealed that both latest SE models – Z555i and W380i features the same kind of display, thus scored similarly in performance.

Compared with other phones launched by other brands, SE W380i's results are below average, but seem to be better than devices like Nokia's Prism collection or Samsung's mid-level handsets (e.g. SGH-U100). While the internal display is barely visible, the small mono OLED (128 x 36 pixels) external display is totally useless when exposed to strong sunlight.

The 1.3 Megapixel camera features 4x digital zoom, but only when you choose the biggest resolutions (QVGA 320 x 240 pixels or VGA 640 x 480 pixels). The camera lacks autofocus, flash, and video recording capabilities.

There is no doubt about it: Sony Ericsson's W380i camera is not meant for taking pictures. I believe that the only reason this phone has a camera is for the Gesture Control feature, which requires it.

The interface of the camera is very basic and very poor in features: Effects, White balance, Self Timer and Night mode.

Furthermore, sample pictures clearly show that, if you want a good camera phone, then you better pick another device as this one will not do.

Menu and Software

Sony Ericsson W380i runs the same firmware specific to all Walkman series handsets. The most attractive feature of the phone is, without doubt, the Gesture control, which requires you to keep the camera module open. That will clearly drain your battery energy faster, so I suggest more restrain when using this features. Anyway, how does it function? The concept is very simple: when you get a call and you are in a meeting and want to mute the phone, just move your hand in front of the camera and the phone will simply stop ringing turning to 'Mute'. You can do the same thing when snoozing the alarm. Don't forget to turn ON the feature, as the clamshell comes with the Gesture control feature set to OFF by default.

Besides the usual productivity tools included (Calendar, Notes, Calculator, Image viewer, Organizer, World time, and Tasks), multimedia lovers will be happy to discover the usual applications that are not missing from any respectful Walkman series handset: MusicDJ, TrackID, Sound recorder, but also some games (ExtremeAir Snowboarding, QuadraPop and Sims 2). The phone can be customized to look more stylish by taking advantage of the Flash Lite themes support.

The File manager of the phone does a great job and features 3 list modes: All (both memories), phone memory and external memory. MP3 and MIDI files can be added as ringtones, if you want to change the default ringtones. The embedded HTML browser is also poor in features and, because of the small display, it offers a 'crippled' browse experience.

The Java emulator works with just about any compatible application, I had no troubles running any benchmarks, games or productivity software. Nothing really changed into the 'ol' good' Sony Ericsson's interface, which makes the user forget that he is using an entry-level phone. Overall, SE's W380i user-interface is very easy to use and offers maximum functionality to a 'noobish' user as well as to a mobile phone freak.

Communication

Only the standard features have been included into W380i clamshell, but that is more than enough, especially if these are working within the parameters. The phone features GPRS and EDGE Class 10, as well as the High-Speed Circuit-Switched Data speed transfer. EDGE speed benchmark revealed average results – 107 Kbit/s download and 53 Kbit/s upload, but it is much better than GPRS at least.

The handset is also Bluetooth 2.0 with A2DP compatible; it features USB 2.0 connectivity and a RSS reader. Pity that Bluetooth data transfer speed didn't exceed more than 41 KB/s when sending files and 46 KB/s when receiving files, but at least it works and looks to be average.

In terms of messaging, the clamshell is compatible with SMS, MMS, EMS, RSS feeds, Push email, POP3 and IMAP protocols, and can be used to send Instant Messages.

The triband (GSM 900 / GSM 1800 / GSM 1900) network compatible handset has a good GSM signal reception. The sound is very clear and pretty loud, so don't be afraid to talk in crowded areas. The vibration alert has also very good intensity.

Processor and Memory

Sony Ericsson W380i features an ARM9 family processor running at speeds up to 125 Mhz. This is one of the lowest CPU that has been lately embedded into a Sony Ericsson handset, but the Japanese-Swedish company is renowned for not using powerful CPU's. Not much to talk about it, as the processor does its job, especially that we are handling an entry-level phone. Even if it is a little bit slow, you still get a nice experience when playing some Java compatible games.

The 14MB internal memory is not nearly enough, especially when we are talking about a phone targeting music lovers. Fortunately, the clamshell comes with an additional 512 MB M2 card that can be used to store enough music for a time.

The M2 slot card can be found on the left side of the device, but only after you take out the back cover. The memory is hot-swappable, but if you are planning to pull out the memory card very often, take care of the flimsy back cover. If you think higher, you can take a 2 GB M2 memory card for more storage space.

Multimedia

Sony Ericsson W380i clamshell features only Walkman 2.0 version, but other than that, it is a pure Walkman phone. The Equalizer has the Mega-Bass setting, as well as some others: Bass, Treble boost, Voice and Normal. There is no option for adding new settings if you do not like any of the above-mentioned. The included HPM-64 wired stereo headset offers above-average quality music experience.

You can even change the headset with any 3.5mm compatible headphone, as the sales package also includes an adapter. The speakerphone on the front cover of the clamshell sounds good also, but a little bit low.

If you are fed up of listening the music from your memory card, you can use the Radio FM

that features RDS. It can store up to 20 base stations and has the Autoscan feature. The sound is a little bit louder than that of the music player, but I had minor problems with the reception.

There are also a Video player and the usual TrackID music recognition application. Overall, Sony Ericsson's W380i offers an exceptional multimedia experience for a phone in its category.

Battery

Sony Ericsson W380i uses a Li-Ion 920 mAh standard battery that has a standby time of 300 hours and up to 7 hours of talk time. Infact, the phone's battery exhausted after about 4 hours of talk time and about 200 hours in standby mode. Numbers are still great for such a mid-level phone, not to mention that the playback time is about 15 hours, depending on the volume. I would not expect less from a Sony Ericsson handset battery, and it's good that it has become a standard for the company to include good batteries on all its handsets.

Impressions

The first time you notice W380i, you really cannot say that it is a low mid-level clamshell. Because of the polished plastic, the handset seems stylish and sparky. The external touch keys also contribute to this opinion and it doesn't take more than 3 seconds to be caught by its beauty. Sony Ericsson W380i is definitely one of the best-looking mid-level phones, which will probably boost its sales.

The Good

Besides its design, W380i clamshell offers exactly what a Walkman series phone should offer – an excellent multimedia experience. If you are a music lover and cannot afford a much better device, then this is the right choice for you. If you intend to acquire one, you will also get a device with high playback autonomy (around 15 – 16 hours), that doesn't miss any feature embedded into a Walkman series device. Not to mention that the Gesture control function is amazing and works great, even if that means lower talk and standby time.

The Bad

Most of Sony Ericsson's fans are complaining about the low camera module, but I wouldn't put it this way. First of all, it's obvious that this camera has been included for a totally different reason: Gesture control. Yes, you have a Walkman series clamshell that lacks a camera; you don't like it, buy yourself another phone. The only thing that I consider 'negative' about W380i is its high price. There is no way that this phone is worth USD 320$, even if it has some top-notch technology embedded. In addition, I guess SE could have been more resourceful and include a bigger display, as this one is ridiculously small.

Sales package

Sony Ericsson W380i handset
920 mAh Li-Ion Battery (BST-39)
512 MB M2 memory card
Wired stereo headset (HPM-64)
USB data cable
Charger
User Guide
Sony Ericsson PC Suite CD

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