Here at last: OpenOffice 2.0

OFFICE ARRIVAL

After many pre-release versions and preliminary reports, the new OpenOffice has finally arrived.

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The OpenOffice codebase is the foundation for two products: StarOffice is a commercial product by Sun [1], and OpenOffice is the free software package available from [2]. There are no differences between the actual office packages; instead, Sun provides a collection of colorful add-ons, such as fonts, templates, and clipart with StarOffice. OpenOffice has most of the core functionality users expect from an office suite. The OpenOffice suite comes with almost all Linux distributions and is a major reason for the recent rise of desktop Linux. When OpenOffice 2.0 arrived after many months of preliminaries, we took a look to see if the final version was truly worth the wait.

File Formats

The most significant change in OpenOffice 2.0 may be the new file formats based on OASIS OpenDocument [3]. These formats are standardized and documented in minute detail, and what's more, software vendors are allowed to implement them without restriction.

The idea behind OpenDocument – a standardized set of file formats supported by all programs on the market – is to provide genuine support for the global exchange of data. The EU has already decided to adopt open document formats, and the US state of Massachusetts has made them mandatory for all public offices by 2007.

KOffice and AbiWord both support OpenDocument, and the older OpenOffice 1.1.5 version can read it. Software vendor Softmaker will be joining suit later this year. IBM/Lotus and WordPerfect have announced OpenDocument support for future versions. Microsoft, unfortunately, has announced that it will not be supporting OpenDocument. An interview with one of the OpenDocument architects, and a discussion of the differences between OpenDocument and Microsoft's WordML format, is available at [4]. From a technical point of view, the new file format is very similar to the older OpenOffice format; it comprises a group of XML files stored in a compressed archive.

Tailored

KDE users in particular will benefit from the delay in releasing OpenOffice. Al-
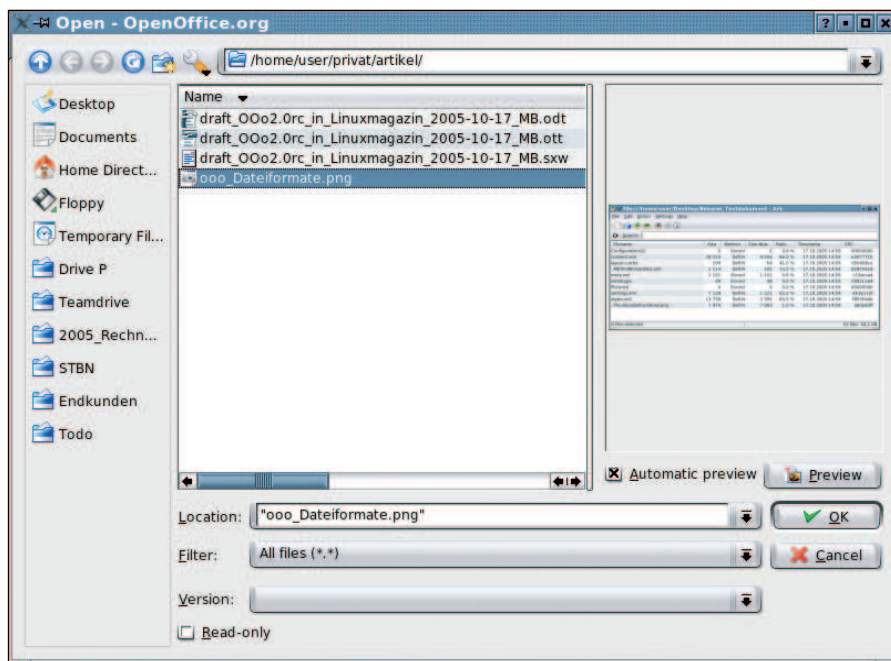
Figure 1: Version 2 provides better support for KDE. The screenshot shows OpenOffice using the KDE file dialog.

though the original plan was to modify OpenOffice's look and feel (in the file dialogs, for example) to match Windows and Gnome, KDE users will also benefit from the platform-oriented approach. This is a big advantage in comparison with the ancient looking file open and close dialogs in version 1.1 (Figure 1).

In all other respects, OpenOffice 2.0 looks a lot more like Microsoft's Office package than like its own predecessor. This is likely to annoy some keen followers, as changing versions means coping with a lot of changes. But the changes are not as bad as they seem once you take a closer look. In addition to the new, MS Office-style controls, most of the old tricks and operations still work.

Despite all the niggles, most died-in-the-wool users will probably appreciate one of the changes: OpenOffice 2.0 now has a format paintbrush tool. Although the paintbrush is something that word processing experts typically hate, it is all the more popular with casual users. And the format templates are still available for those users who prefer to keep to their old habits.

Writer

With each new version, OpenOffice becomes more compatible with Microsoft Office, and version 2.0 is no exception (Figure 2). In fact, 2.0 has made a quantum leap in MS Office compatibility.

Documents that OpenOffice does not import and export perfectly are the exception. The legacy problems with enumerated lists and tables have now disappeared. Enumerated lists can now be imported successfully, and Writer even handles Word specialties such as lines that cover more than one page.

The developers have enhanced the PDF export feature. This function, which is only available to MS Office users in the form of commercial third-party software, was capable of producing high quality PDF documents in previous versions. Version 2.0 now adds support for page thumbnails, PDF forms, hyperlinks to text passages in the table of contents, and links in the text. The compression level for graphics is also user-configurable.

Of course, the improvements go beyond the import and export features. The *Word count* is no longer hidden in the file properties but follows the approach used by Word with a *Tools | Word count* entry. The function can now count the words within a selection, rather than just the words in a document. Tables can now contain subtables, and page breaks can occur within a line. The text in tables can be vertical, that is, reading from the top down. Bottom-up orientation, which is more typical of tables, is still not supported.

Not everyone will view the new Mail Merge Wizard as an improvement (Figure 3). The wizard does guide the user step by step through the mail merge process, but on the other hand, the process takes more mouse clicks than the version 1.1 wizard required. On a more positive note, OpenOffice 2.0 can now create serial emails, just like its ancient ancestor StarOffice 5.1. (The serial email feature was lost in the previous version.) You need to install the JavaMail library to leverage this ability.

You probably need to be a lawyer to understand why spellchecker dictionaries are not provided by default, but you can download a spellchecker dictionary from the OpenOffice servers via a macro
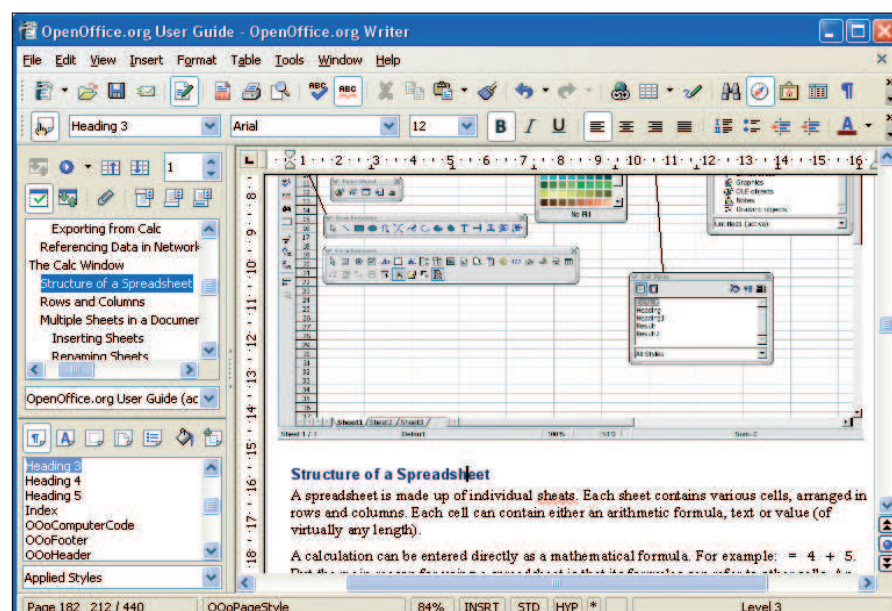

Figure 2: The latest version of OpenOffice Writer looks even more like Microsoft Word.
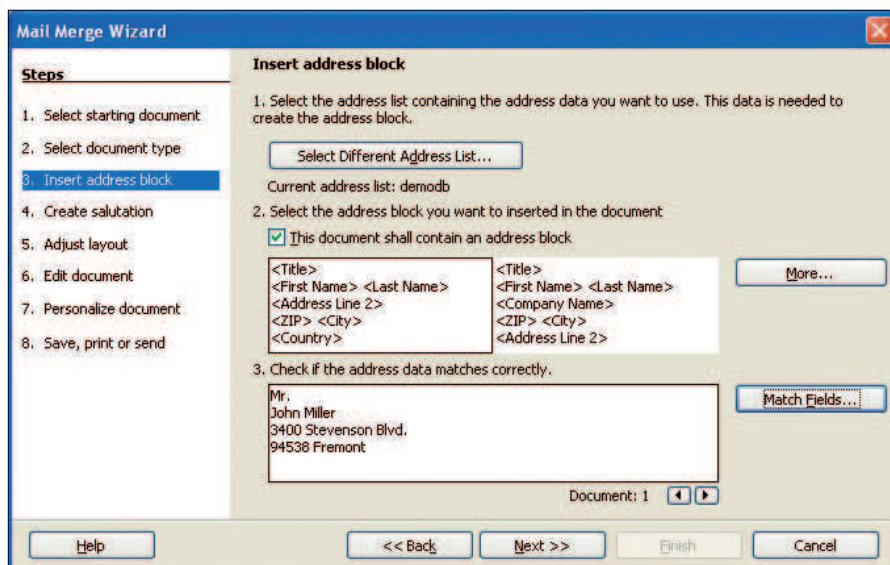
Figure 3: The Mail Merge Wizard requires more clicking, but the additional steps make the tool easier for beginners.

whenever you like. The spellchecker is reliable and versatile, offering a selection of languages from Afrikaans to Zulu.

Calc

The most obvious change to the new Calc version is its MS Excel-like appearance. Menus and toolboxes are more or less identical to their Excel equivalents. Not much has happened under the hood. The new file format can now handle 65,536 lines, just like Excel. One of the biggest weaknesses is more apparent in Calc than anywhere else. OpenOffice version 2.0 is still incapable of handling VBA macros. The DataPilot [X] now adds many analytical skills in comparison to the previous version (Figure 4). But there is still a lot to do: MS Excel PivotTables can do more and are easier to use.

Keyboard experts can now do without a mouse. In previous versions, you could use the keyboard to select cells in a table, but you needed the mouse to unselect. This is no longer true. The same keyboard shortcut [Ctrl] + [Shift]-[Pageup] clears a selection in the new version. Another genuine weakness has been removed: the abysmal print function. Ten years after its competitors, Calc now finally lets users specify how many pages wide and long a hardcopy of a spreadsheet should be.

Impress

The Impress presentation program has been completely reworked. The GUI now so closely resembles PowerPoint that users might have difficulty distinguishing between the two at first glance. However, this does not detract from Impress – the new GUI is a giant step in the right direction (Figure 5). Thumbnails on the left, and layout templates, showcase the presentation and facilitate navigation as well as editing. Earlier versions of Impress had really tiny buttons for the most important functions, but you can leave your magnifying glass in the drawer with Impress 2.0. All the major functions are clearly visible and easy to access. This is particularly true of the *Start slideshow* function, which now sits on top of a large button top right, instead of hiding behind a miniature icon in a whole for-

est of miniature icons on the right-hand side.

The latest Impress also provides big improvements for exchanging data with MS Office. Impress now supports Microsoft's AutoShapes – which are referred to as CustomShapes in OpenOffice – and can import shapes without causing any damage. Previous versions converted shapes to graphics, but the current version keeps the ability to scale and edit shapes. This also applies to rotated or modified fonts. Impress now supports more transition effects and animations so that an imported PowerPoint file more closely resembles the original. Just like its predecessor, Impress 2.0 can export to HTML and Flash.

The new GUI also has its drawbacks: its look is completely different from all the other programs in the package. Let's hope the developers find a way of adding practical sidebars to the other OpenOffice applications.

Base

The OpenOffice package previously did not have a MS Access database counterpart. Although the software had some database functionality, it was well hidden. To change this, the developers grouped the database functionality in a new program, Base, and put together a new GUI (Figure 6). Base can be used as a front-end for databases such as MySQL or PostgreSQL, but it also has its own easy-to-use database. Base saves records, forms, and queries in a single file; it does not need a database server, and it
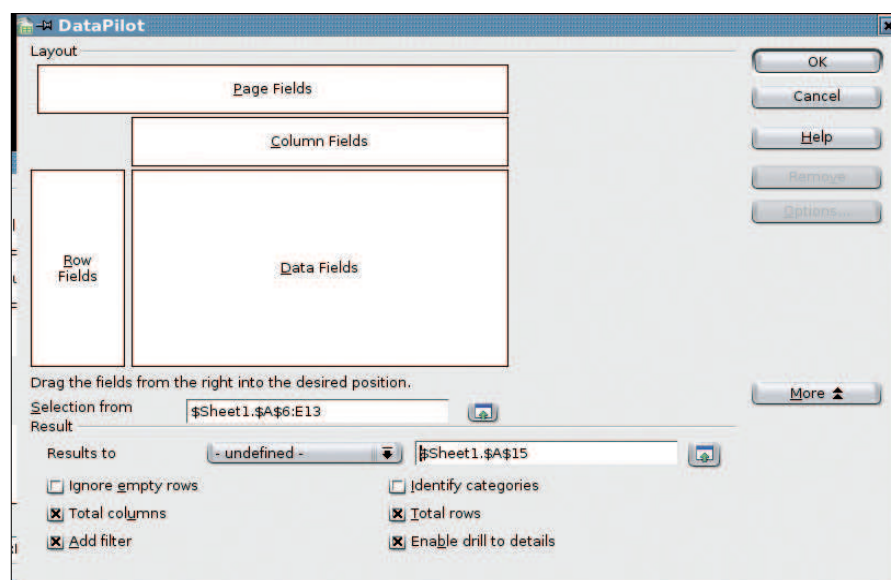

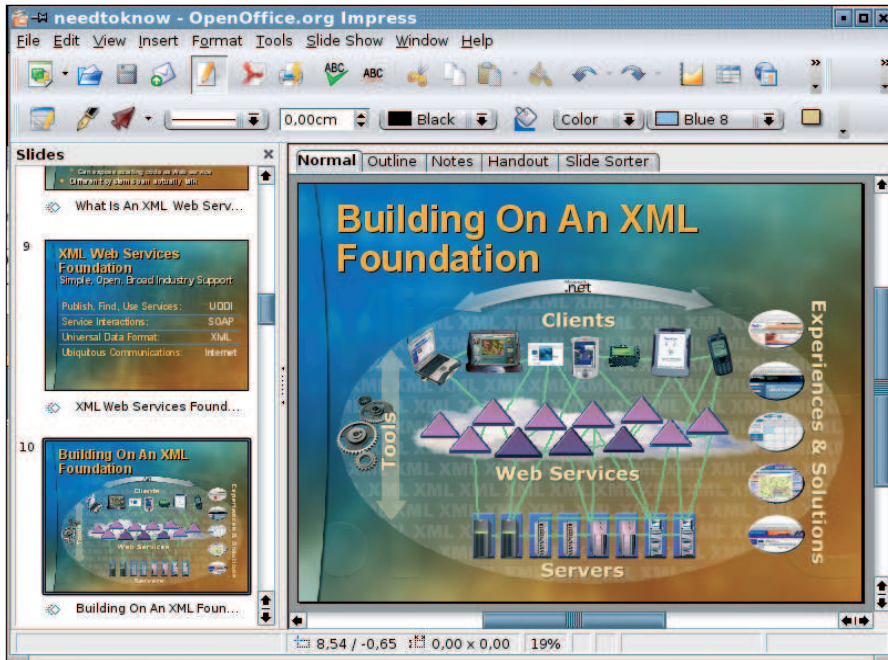Figure 4: The reworked Calc DataPilot now has far more data analysis options.

Figure 5: Impress now imports more complex PowerPoint files without any fuss. The figure shows an original Microsoft presentation on the subject of .NET.

supports easy exchange of data with other users.

Base comes with a wizard that helps users create databases and the accompanying forms and queries. This said, Base is quite obviously a young application. The GUI is not particularly intuitive, and the application itself crashes quite often. The current version of Base is more a tool for casual users who don't object to some teething trouble. On the other hand, the GUI is too complex for this user group, and this spoils the show.

Generics

OpenOffice 2.0 also includes two smaller applications: Draw, a simple drawing program, and Math, a formula editor. Both of these applications have hardly changed in comparison with the previous versions, but they do benefit from the generic improvements to OpenOffice. For example, Draw can now handle CustomShapes, just like Impress.

Many powerful functions are now available across all OpenOffice applications. For example, the PDF export function available with Writer will also give you perfect PDF files in all other applications.

All applications support digital signatures to allow the recipient to check the origin of a document with a high degree of certainty. Macro execution can also be linked to proof of origin. Unfortunately, the documentation for this feature is fairly terse, and you can expect your mileage to vary when experimenting. There is no support for GPG, a signature method that has a strong following among Linux users.

The developers are also starting to backslide in the security stakes: the first developer versions of 2.0 set the highest macro security level *Very high* by default; the program now just prompts the user before running macros. Although this may be a step towards more MS compatibility, you might ask if Open-Office really needs to emulate all of MS's poorer qualities.

Conclusions

The new OpenOffice version quite obviously focuses on improving interoperability with Microsoft's Office package, and the program has made a quantum leap in this direction. OpenOffice 2.0 also includes modifications to the GUI designed to make it easier for users to make the move from MS Office. At the same time, the changes might annoy some long-serving OpenOffice users.

The new database program, Base, still suffers from teething trouble but shows a lot of promise. We are looking forward to the next couple of versions. The OpenOffice PDF feature is a genuine highlight that makes OpenOffice 2.0 a powerful tool for creating PDF documents and forms.

The new file format is the most significant change with OpenOffice 2.0. Open-Document format promises long-term readability, pain-free exchange of data, and freedom of choice. All in all, the developers have done a great job with OpenOffice 2.0. This office package can do everything better than its predecessor, just like you would expect of any healthy five-year-old. ∎
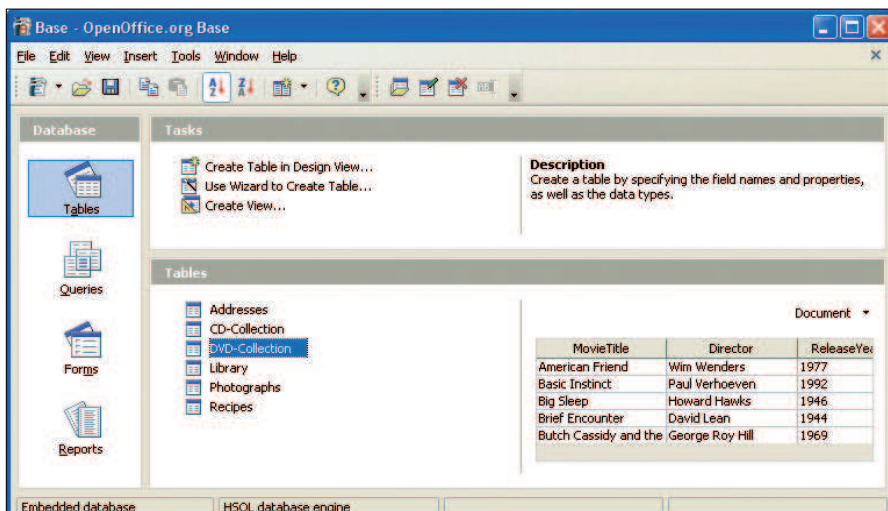
INFO
[1] Staroffice: *http://www.sun.com/ software/star/staroffice/index.jsp*
[2] OpenOffice: *http://www.openoffice.org/*
[3] OpenDocument: *http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/OpenDocument*
[4] OpenDocument and WordML compared: *http://madpenguin.org/ cms/?m=show&id=5304*

Figure 6: The new Base database tool at last gives OpenOffice a desktop database.