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New LibreOffice import filters

In Good Shape

Draw and Impress are expanding into new territory – the new LibreOffice Version 3.5 is the first to feature import filters for MS Visio documents, and it promises improved support for PowerPoint shapes. We investigate how the two office modules work together.

By Renate Hermanns

In early February 2012, LibreOffice developers published a new release candidate of the free office package [1]. Its components introduce new features or improvements, including the Draw drawing program and the Impress presentation software. One function that featured prominently on the community wish list for Draw in the past was the

ability to edit Microsoft (MS) Visio files. The developers created an import feature for VSD files, and the presentation tool now also has an import function for drawing objects. To test the new features, I installed LibreOffice 3.5 (RC3 from 2 February [2]) on an Ubuntu system (11.10). Before installing, you need to uninstall version 3.4 as recommended

in the wiki [3]. I created two documents to test the maturity of the new features: a network diagram created with Visio and a PowerPoint presentation with editable shapes imported into Impress.

Visions in Draw

MS Visio is very popular in corporate environments and with Windows users.

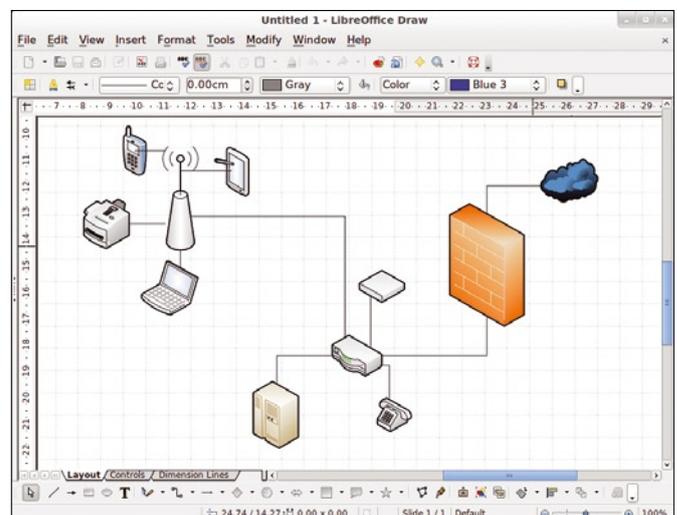
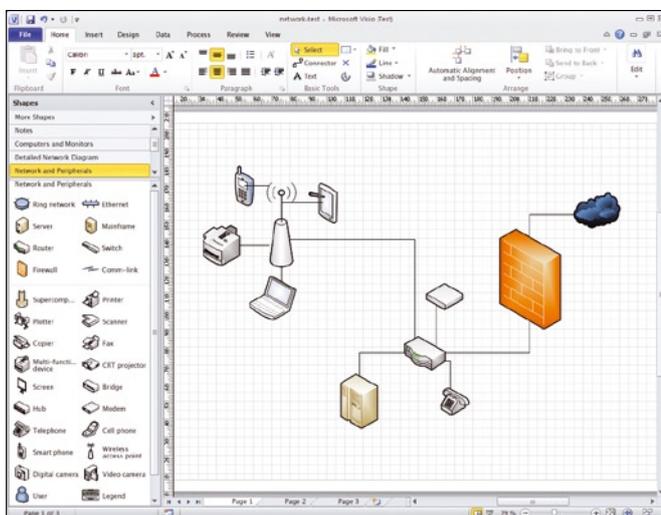


Figure 1: A diagram with network structures – in MS Visio (left) and in LibreOffice Draw (right): the fine lines and details in the shapes look unchanged after the import.

One reason is the visualization tool's intuitive interface. Additionally, you can combine Visio templates with data from databases and Excel spreadsheets.

Thus far, it has been impossible to edit VSD files with an alternative program on Windows or Linux. The only choice users had was to export to a different format. However, this changes now with the new LibreOffice import function in Draw. The developers have worked hard on the filter [4] in recent months – and the hard work has been hugely successful as my tests revealed.

The predefined Visio drawing objects are fairly intricate in many cases. The main objective was to keep the complex vector structures on importing into Draw, and users really can work well with the content that Draw gives them after conversion (Figure 1).

The drawing program will store the imported files as Open Document drawings (.fodg and .odg suffix) or templates (.otg), or as Star Office drawings (.sxd) and templates (.std). In all variants, grouped icons in the network diagram are broken down into their component parts by the import process.

Losing grouping turns out to be an issue when users open the modified file after storing. Some drawing objects, such as the phone and the laptop, move a couple of lines (Figure 2), and regrouping the objects before storing in Draw doesn't solve the problem – this calls for some manual attention.

Incidentally, there is no way back to the Microsoft application. The Windows program could not open any of the formats supported by Draw, and exporting as a vector graphic (.svg) also failed to return usable results. This is something users can live with, though; after all, the feature was announced as an import filter and not an export filter – maybe the export filter will follow sometime in the future.

Impress vs. PowerPoint

The list of new features for Impress and Draw in LibreOffice 3.5 [4] is documented by two screenshots of the enhanced PPTX import with custom shapes.

The previous version (3.4) modified many of the custom shapes, and some shapes simply disappeared during the import process. The new release, however, keeps all of the shapes created in PowerPoint, as you can see in Figure 3. Even the linked reference line in a legend shape is kept.

Users can now continue to work with visually identical shapes. Size and positional changes, and changes in the text fields the shapes contain, also turn out to be unproblematic.

That said, the 3D functions in some complex shapes are of limited use. For example, you can't modify the reference line in a legend. If you attempt to work around this restriction, the line will disappear completely.

When I attempted to save a presentation of this kind in Impress, I was a bit disappointed. Both the original PPTX format and the native ODP do their own thing with the file and change the shapes until they are virtually unrecognizable (see Figure 4). A note to the effect that the document might contain formatting and content that the program can't save in the current format is of little consolation.

The promised ability to import Smart-Art graphics into Impress also failed. In PowerPoint, you can use objects of this kind to add some visual verve to presentations. Interestingly, the user can edit text content like normal text and doesn't

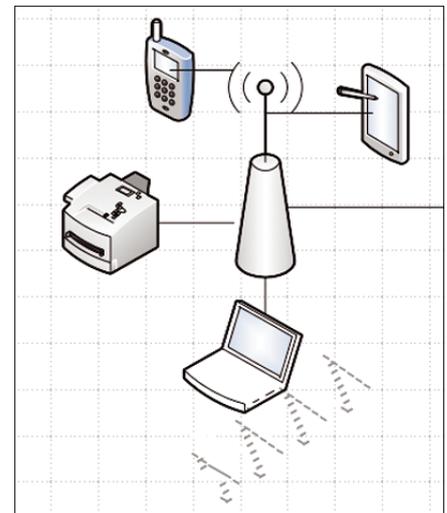


Figure 2: After the file was stored as an ODG and reopened in Draw, some of the lines in the laptop had moved.

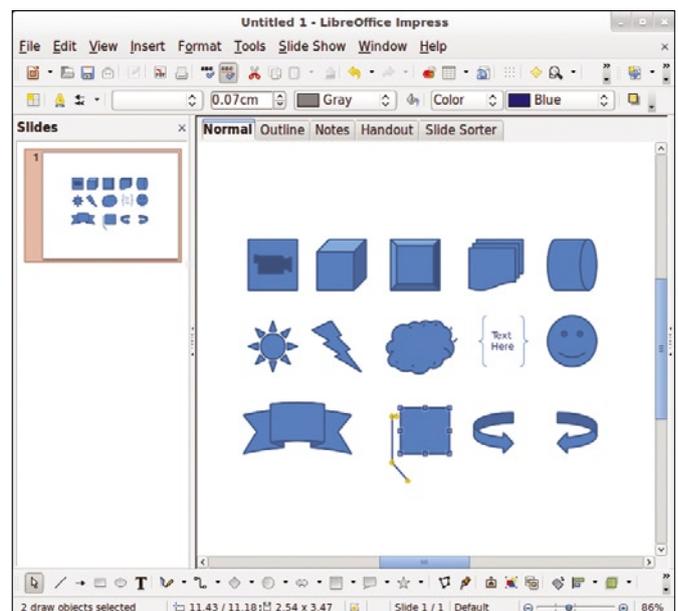
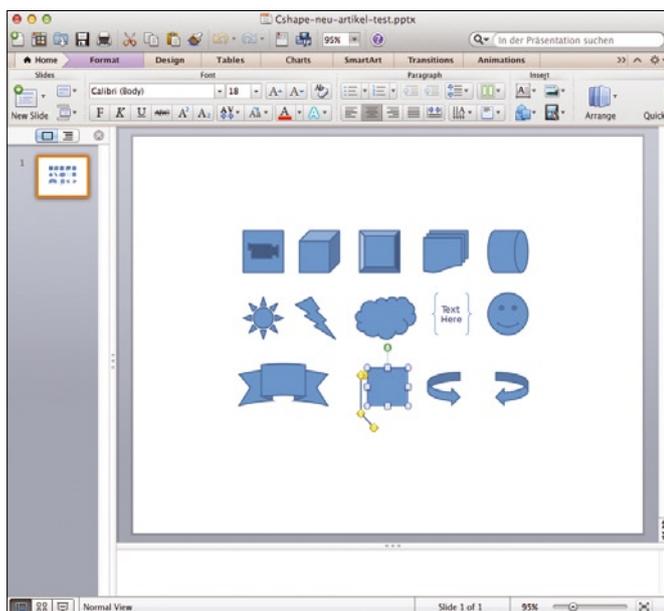


Figure 3: The test document looks exactly the same in PowerPoint (left) as in Impress (right). The presentation tool interprets all of the shapes without any trouble.

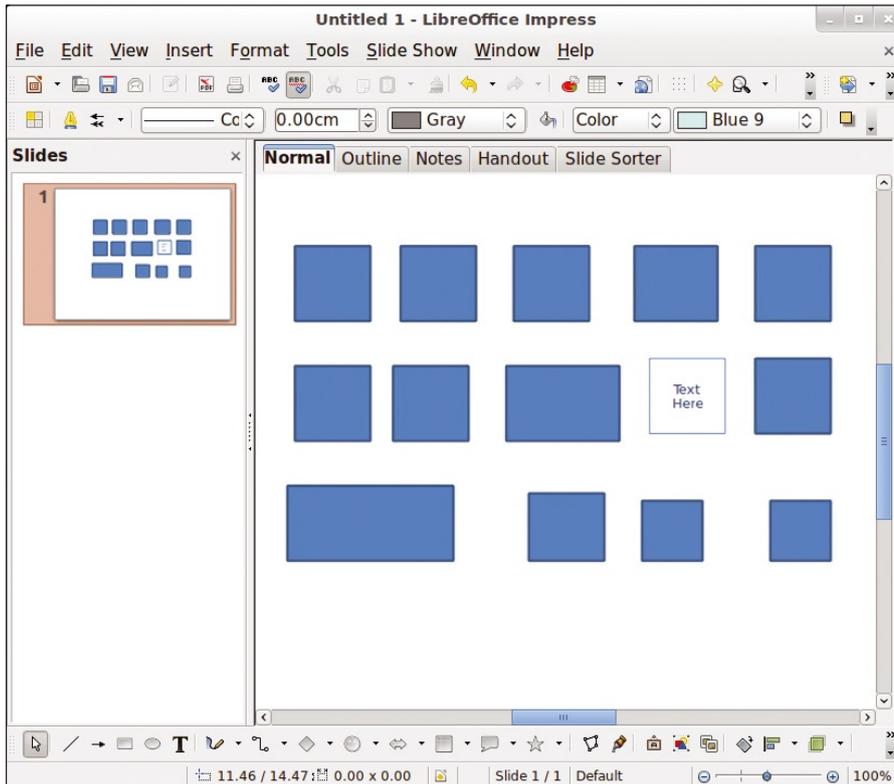


Figure 4: After storing and reopening a PowerPoint presentation with shapes, the results are well removed from the original. The PPTX file only contains squares and artifacts.

have to type directly in the object. The new version of Impress will import SmartArt graphics but loses this functionality in the process.

After the import, the user only has the elements broken down into individual graphical objects and text boxes. You need to edit the labels in the object. This would again be something users could

live with, but the results are devastating if you save and reopen. The objects are far from smart; in fact, most of them are gone. This means that users have no option for manual corrections.

Almost Remarkable

The developers have taken a giant leap forward with the improved import func-

tion for Draw. LibreOffice 3.5 can open Visio drawing objects, and users can continue to edit their documents.

The positive impression stops when you look at the Impress filter for PowerPoint files. The LibreOffice presentation tool might be able to import and edit the files, but it can't save the results in a usable form, and when you reopen your documents, you might not even recognize what LibreOffice shows you. ■■■

INFO

- [1] LibreOffice: <http://www.libreoffice.org/>
- [2] LibreOffice download: <http://www.libreoffice.org/download/>
- [3] Installation guide: http://wiki.documentfoundation.org/Installing_LibreOffice_on_Linux
- [4] LibreOffice enhancements: <http://www.libreoffice.org/download/3-5-new-features-and-fixes/>

AUTHOR

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