INSIDE OpenOffice

The biggest release of the year is almost upon us. After hours of testing, Richard Cobbett emerges from behind his PC to tell us if it's worth the hype.

COVER FEATURE

Hit almost any website, and you're being served pages by *Apache*. You're probably using *Firefox* to read them. On a wider level, governments and companies around the world are politely inviting Microsoft to find other markets as they move to open formats and the open source packages that make the most of them. Casual users and corporations alike realise there's simply no need to pay the hundreds of pounds that Microsoft demands any more – and a big reason for this is OpenOffice.org.

Once available for free download from Star Division, it's only since Sun bought the suite and released its code in 2000 that OpenOffice.org has really started to make inroads into Microsoft's Office cash cow. The original release was slow but powerful; the 1.1 update that followed in October 2003 brought a performance boost and more features. But 2005 will be the year of OpenOffice.org 2.0 – the first release with the goal of reaching usability parity with Office, and thus potentially the release that brings Linux closer to the enterprise nirvana of being a drop-in Microsoft replacement.

But have the OOo developers maintained their high standards? Has the new version managed to pack in

OVERALL UPDATES

How the OpenOffice.org team has moved the suite on for this 2.0 release.

OpenOffice.org retains its look and feel in this new version. The interface hasn't been radically changed to a bizarre 3D engine, your spreadsheets don't play musical numbers as they process formulae, and the team hasn't lost its mind and attempted to reimagine Clippy the Office Assistant for a Linux world. If you've used the earlier versions, you'll feel right at home from the moment you load it up – and this being an open source project, you can do exactly that. 2.0 hasn't officially been launched yet, but you can download a preview build from **http://download.openoffice.org.** This is fully functional, but still beta – a rather less-than-artistic splash screen is a reminder of the fact.

As a straight comparison, OOo is roughly at the level of Microsoft Office 2000. It's not the prettiest office suite ever released, but it does do the job. Its core packages are *Writer*, the word processor, *Calc*, the spreadsheet, and *Impress*, the *PowerPoint*-replacing presentation maker. The major newcomer is *Base*, a database tool. Earlier versions relied on built-in components to handle the data side of things, but now you get Microsoft *Access*-style control over your figures from the word go.

The only component that OpenOffice.org lacks is an *Outlook* replacement to handle your email and personal information management. But the fact that every Linux distro under the sun comes with a copy of *Evolution*, *KDE-PIM* or another equally effective mail package means that you won't really miss it.

Masters of subtlety

The biggest changes in OpenOffice.org 2.0 have taken place under the hood. In many cases they're barely discernible – one of the finest compliments we could give. For starters, the suite now features native widget rendering. Working with Gnome 2.4, KDE 3.2 or higher, plus Windows, all user interface elements should ensure that OpenOffice.org's previously painfully discordant windows fit smoothly into whatever system, theme or colour scheme you're using at the time. Sadly, this doesn't apply to Aqua on Mac OS X, for which you'll need the eventual NeoOffice port (**www.neooffice.org**).

We'll come to the changes in each individual program in turn, but one constant theme in this release is its

NOW YOU CAN...

Throughout our review, these boxes will alert you to the standout new features and functions in version 2.0 that should help you get more out of OpenOffice.org.

2.0

the kind of features that users demand? Are there still areas where its open source peer, KOffice, is in the lead? We downloaded the new release and put it through its paces. Over the next 13 pages you'll see our results: what the developers have added, what they've left well alone – and just how compatible they've made it with MS Office. Should you install it? Read on to find out...

closer compatibility with Microsoft Office. Unfortunately, the dominance of Office means that no matter how good OpenOffice.org gets, it's of no use to companies unless it can read Microsoft's hideously convoluted DOC format. (In case you're wondering, OpenOffice.org itself uses XML. Rename one of its files with a .zip extension and you can open it up in your favourite archiving program and read through the raw data). In general, OpenOffice.org 1.x did a sterling job of this – we've even heard from people who've used it to open corrupted DOC files that *Word* wouldn't touch with a ten-foot long paperclip – but there were problems with its rendition.

Put simply, there was never any guarantee in previous versions that what-you-sent-was-what-they'd-get, with tables, macros, complicated formatting and more often going beyond plain text to a painful headache. This hasn't really changed, save that OpenOffice.org now catches many more problems here and there, ranging from the ability to adjust the format of text for *Writer* and *Word* respectively to being able to collapse table borders.

Most important for corporate work, however, is the ability to access password-protected files – assuming you know what the code is, of course. It's important to be able to read incoming files, but essential that anyone you send them out to is able to make sense of them.

Opening OOo

OpenOffice.org's own file formats have also been improved over the last few years. While still XML-based, the suite now favours the OASIS format, also supported by KOffice, along with support for digital signatures. And of course, if you're unsure whether or not your recipient will be able to open a file, OpenOffice.org has long been able to export any document in the universal PDF format, as well as standards like TXT and RTF. Better still, it no longer throws a fit if you try...

Should something go wrong, OpenOffice.org now features a strong document recovery system, reloading itself with any files it managed to salvage before going down for the count. These are displayed in a panel, with the option to send crash data back to Sun.

Sadly, the mere fact that we know about this shows that OpenOffice.org can still be somewhat flaky, but there's still plenty of time for bugfixing before the final launch of 2.0.

"DOES LINUX HAVE AN MS OFFICE REPLACEMENT? WE ALREADY KNEW IT DID."

NOW YOU CAN...

Export your documents in a variety of new formats, from SWF images to Strict XHTML-compliant web pages. OpenOffice.org 2.0 also uses the OASIS open file format for its own documents.

If you're looking for dramatic changes from 2.0 you'll be disappointed – but you'll soon see the difference when using it day in, day out. Does Linux have a Microsoft Office replacement capable of holding its own in the real world? We already knew it did. Hopefully, it'll take pole position a few versions down the road.

PUT WORDS TO WORK

From letters to layout, create stunning documents with *Writer*.

WRITER

NEW FEATURES

- ✔ Nested tables
- ✔ XForms support
- ✔ Word count
- ✔ Collapsible table borders

Word is undoubtedly the most popular member of the MS Office suite, so it comes as little surprise that its OpenOffice.org equivalent, *Writer*, is the first package that most people reach for. With this in mind, allow us to take a moment to leap up, punch the air in glee and yell, "it finally does word counts!" It's hard to believe just how many times we've been asked about this and how often we've moaned at having to copy sections of a file into a brand new document just to find out how many more words we need to write before the job's complete *(about 10,000, so get on with it – Ed)*.

Writer is an exceptionally comfortable word processing package, although one that can take some time to get used to. Notably, it puts more emphasis on styles than almost any of its competitors – while they all offer a dropdown box of some description where you can assign bits of text as a header, OpenOffice.org throws the browser in your face from the moment you first load it up.

This is a great encouragement to develop individual styles for your work, making it easy to perform great sweeping changes instead of tracking down every single header that you manually set as red 14pt Genericfont text and switching them for the weightier Genericfont Bold. You can create new styles at the drop of a cap, but the predefined selection covers almost everything you'd need to get started – including a range of headings, anchors, internet links, quotes and definitions – each assigned with a click of the mouse. These can then be reused when exporting, either in document form or as CSS in a HTML file. Either way, get used to the style panel and you'll never struggle with a document again.

Actually writing text might seem like a simple matter of bashing the keys as normal, but again, *Writer* offers a number of powerful features to make it easier to put down the words as fast as possible.

In particular, its AutoCorrect tool can be tuned to work out what you're typing and supply the necessary word. By default, you have to have a word with ten characters in it to work (such as sesquipedalian – 'given to the use of long words'), but this can be reduced. Rather than auto-completing the word on its own, AutoCorrect gives you a tooltip with the suggestion in it, accepted with a tap on the Enter button. This is far more useful than its original version, although we have to admit switching it off entirely because of its tendency to slip the wrong word in at just the wrong time, just because you accidentally hit the wrong key. On the plus side, its tools are for the most part genuinely helpful.

An unobtrusive lightbulb appears at the bottom-right of the screen whenever *Writer* has anything to tell you, while the built-in spellchecker automatically scribbles wavy red lines under your errors.

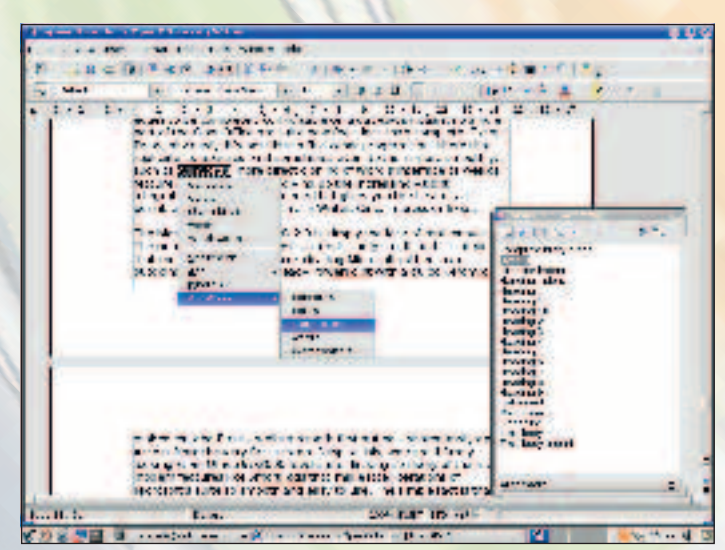
Artistic ambitions

A standard text document is easy enough to imagine – you slap down a title, start typing and you're done. *Writer* goes some way beyond this, with full support for almost every desktop publishing command this side of *Scribus*. It can break pages into columns, automatically altering their widths to make best use of the page and saving you fiddling around with convoluted table layouts.

For more direct control, you can also create dedicated text frames, which offer precisely the same column settings, along with the ability to overflow text into any other frame you link to. While the thought of us using it to lay out this page, say, would cast liquid fear into the hearts of the protective *LXF* art team, it would nevertheless be possible. For anything from school brochures to corporate

NOW YOU CAN...

Count selected words in *Writer*. Sorry if we seem obsessed with this, but it's been a long time coming! With this one simple tweak, *Writer* becomes a hundred times more useful across the board.



***Writer* will now check your spelling, but you're on your own when it comes to grammar. More's the pity.**

newsletters, you've got all you need. In the long run, you'll benefit from the ability to lock down your document files, preventing anybody accidentally resizing or repositioning part of a template. It's not the height of security – a quick right-click removes the restriction – but invaluable when you just need text poured into position, no questions asked.

Of course, there's no reason why you have to design anything at all, if you don't want to. OpenOffice's AutoPilot is back, this time with the rather more familiar name of wizard, taking you step by step through the creation of the most common types of documents. A humble letter offers the choice of business, personal or formal templates, each with more specific design variants such as Office or Marine. Whichever you pick, you can watch the template being created and altered as you try out new styles, salutations and other page elements, rather than having to wait until the bitter end to see what OpenOffice.org considers 'Elegant.'

The same system is used for creating a basic letterhead, styling the document up for individual countries (including Korea, China and Italy, but not, strangely enough, the UK – the closest you can get is US American). OOo automatically pastes in any personal information that it has on you, such as your name and address. For more involved content, you need to dig a bit deeper into the program, using tools such as the Bibliography Database to gather up your research ready for importing into the final document, but these tools are never particularly complicated. Even in that instance, the database itself is already made for you – complete with sample data. You don't need any knowledge of how to actually put one together yourself to make use of it.

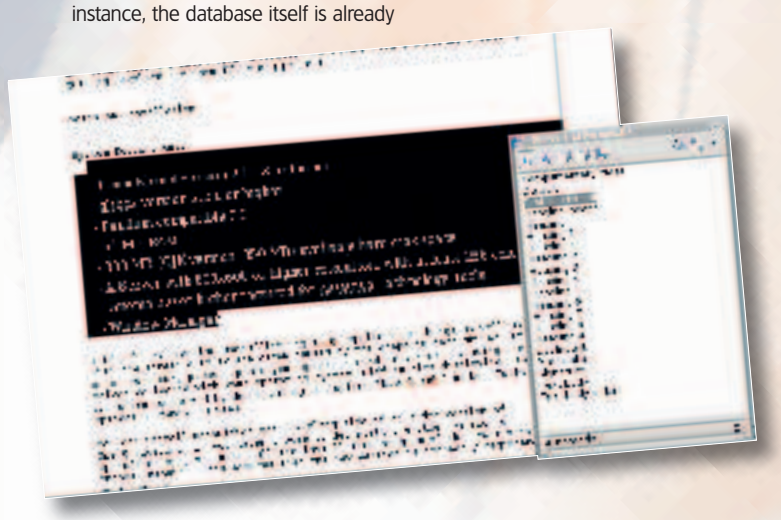
Tailored to fit

Customisation is key when using *Writer*, giving you plenty of scope for looking at your documents however you want to. Many people who use word processors all the time have realised that white on black isn't the most comfortable thing to look at for extended periods, which is why most word processors give you the option to switch it for white letters on blue.

OOo goes one step beyond this, giving you total control over the colour of your document's background and the colour of the text on it. This is merely an aesthetic change at your end – whether you export to PDF or save your text as a document, everyone will get conventional white-on-black to read. In addition to modifying colours, you can attach bits of information directly to your document – including a line count, visible displays of breaking lines and whether to display a grid to work with.

BOTTOM LINE

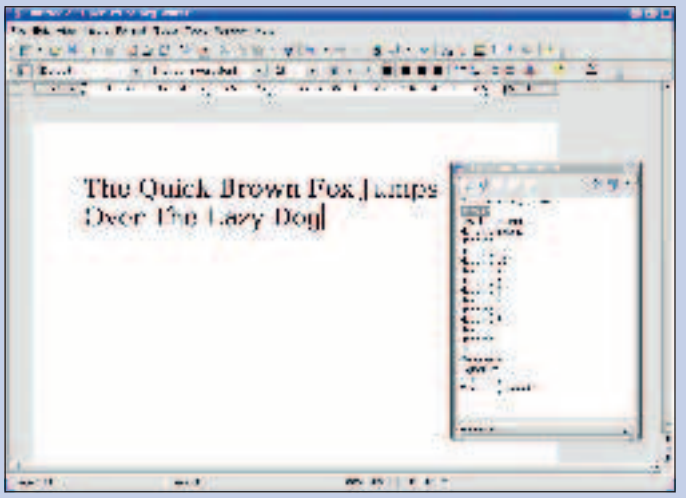
Writer is a highly comprehensive word processor, with every feature you could need – be it full change tracking or more mundane features like the spellchecker, with its ability to set how long a word needs to be before being checked. Most of the changes to version 2.0 are small but essential ones that you'll wonder how you ever used OOo without. And did we mention that the word count feature now actually works? Just checking...



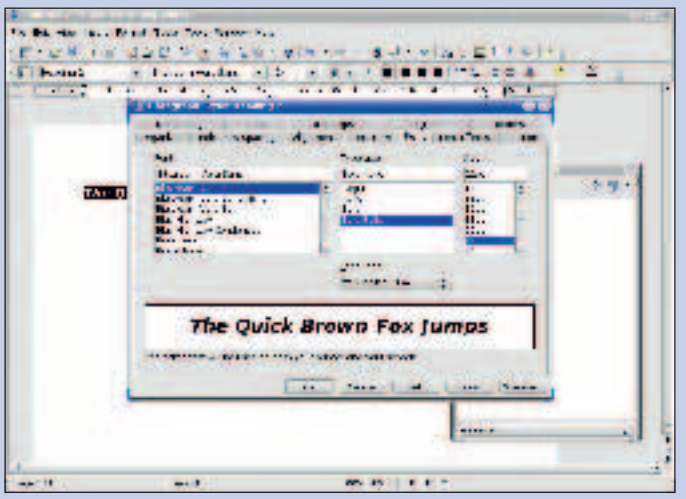
Get used to styles for formatting text and you'll be designing complicated documents in no time – and making changes is even faster.

CREATING NEW STYLES

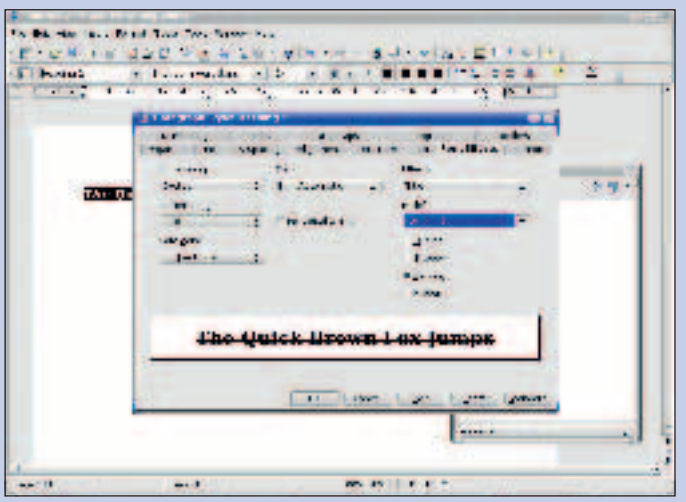
How to set up shortcuts to automatically format your work



One of the best ways to handle styles is to use the defaults wherever possible. This stops you inadvertently creating a hundred slightly different ones, and encourages you to always use 'Header 1' for titles, 'Header 2' for subheads and so on.



Font and size are the two most important elements in *Writer*, but underlines, strike-outs and other text controls (such as italicisation, shown here) are available as well. Remember that any changes you make here will be mirrored throughout your whole document.



The Blink tag is firmly off-limits, so don't even consider it. The others can be used to add more subtle touches to your document, including embossing and engraving headers – ideal for creating watermarks, if not enhancing legibility.

KEEP TABS ON DATA

The all-new *Base* remembers more than a herd of elephants.

BASE

NEW FEATURES

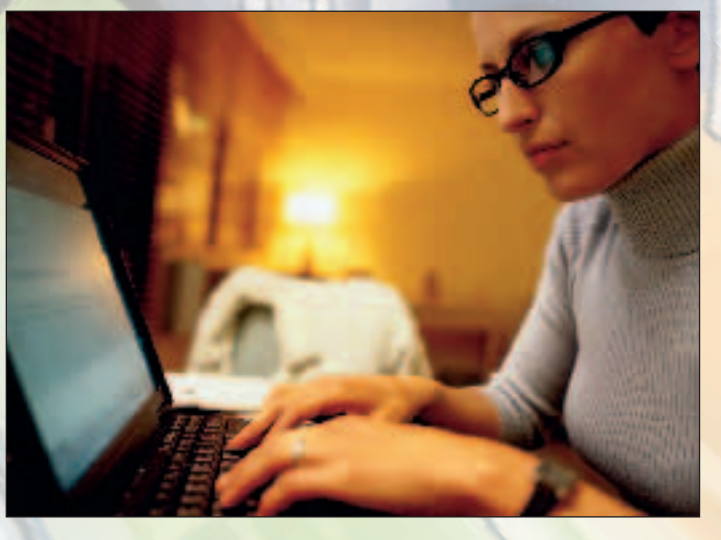
- ✔ *Access*-style GUI for easy migration
- ✔ Drag-and-drop report generation
- ✔ Menu-driven table design
- ✔ Custom form design for data viewing

Base has a lot to live up to. Not only is it the newest part of the OpenOffice.org suite, its task is one of the most difficult that an office tool can take on – to make databases accessible. Microsoft *Access* is one of the least understood applications in Microsoft's office suite, if only because most users have no real need for a database when an *Excel* spreadsheet or simple list in *Word* will do. However, if you do need one in a hurry, it's hard to think of another non-specific example that's anything like as approachable – the likes of *Filemaker* or (God forbid) a jury-rigged *MySQL* application quickly swamp the unwary.

Earlier versions of the suite got around these problems by simply not including a database application, at least, not as such. Instead, the original OOo came with nothing, while Sun's commercial version, StarOffice, made use of the *Adabas* component to create databases once you'd opened up the main program. Later versions of OOo opened up the field a bit more, with the ability to natively access *MySQL* databases, or hook up with any that you passed its way via ODBC and JDBC, with tools like the Report wizard to put the data contained within into a more accessible format.

Unsurprisingly, *Base* continues this push towards simplicity. Unlike the rest of the suite, where the first thing you see is a blank screen to start typing on, *Base* offers up a list of tasks when you arrive. First and foremost, you need to select the database itself. The New Database wizard defaults to creating a brand new one, but you can also connect to almost anything from *dBase* to a *Mozilla* address book.

Backwards compatibility is provided by built-in support for *Adabas*, with plain text as a last resort for any more obscure databases you may need to access. Needless to say, XML is the format of choice for any new databases you build. The only sticking point in this version is that it doesn't automatically set you up with a new database until you've opened the program and specifically asked for one – until then, trying to click on the various wizards and other options is likely to make you wonder if *Base* has crashed without even taking off.



NOW YOU CAN...

Create full databases with ease. A wizard-driven interface takes you through all the steps, from building tables to constructing queries. Alternatively, switch it off and take total control the old-fashioned way.

Table and form tips

Once the database has been created, saved and registered, the Table wizard appears. *Base* makes it extremely easy to add new fields, thanks to a selection of business and personal categories. Should you want to bill clients by time try the RatePerHour field; the GramsCarbohydrates field is ready for you if you want to keep a diet log.

If none of these fields matches up with what you want to create, it doesn't matter – the next screen enables you to add more to the list, cut out any you don't want, and alter each of the field settings in turn. Anyone can get what they need from a drop-down box called Entry Required, whose options are Yes and No, although it's a bit of a shame that Field Type doesn't come right out and say exactly what the difference between a Number, Decimal or Integer is.

The final settings screen, where you create your primary key, is rather more willing in this respect – explaining exactly what you're setting up, offering to create a field if you forgot to set one up, or creating a primary key as a combination of multiple fields.

As far as creating tables goes, that's it – anyone can do it, no questions asked and no need to reach for a thick manual. The Form wizard is just as simple. After you select the table you want to edit, followed by the fields to make available, *Base* handles the grunt work for you.

Forms can contain subforms, complete with support for joined fields, or just a handful of text boxes to keep note of when your favourite authors died (macabre, we know, but that's the personal library sample fields for you...). *Base* lays out the form for you, positioning explanatory labels next to each field, or converting your form into a full grid layout. Subforms get exactly the same treatment.

Next, you select the data entry mode. Set your database to be a purely research-gathering tool, presenting just the form and no background data, for example. Or you can choose to show the data, but not allow viewers to modifiy, delete or add anything to it.

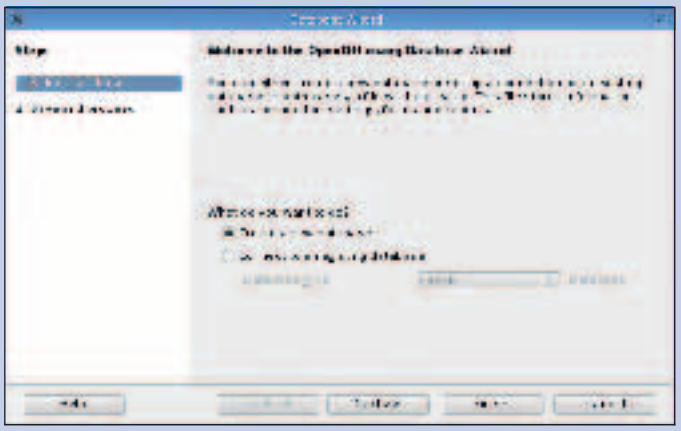
Finally, a choice of styles is on hand to colour everything and add simple or 3D borders. All very welcome, though the choice of colours leaves something to be desired.

A bit of handholding

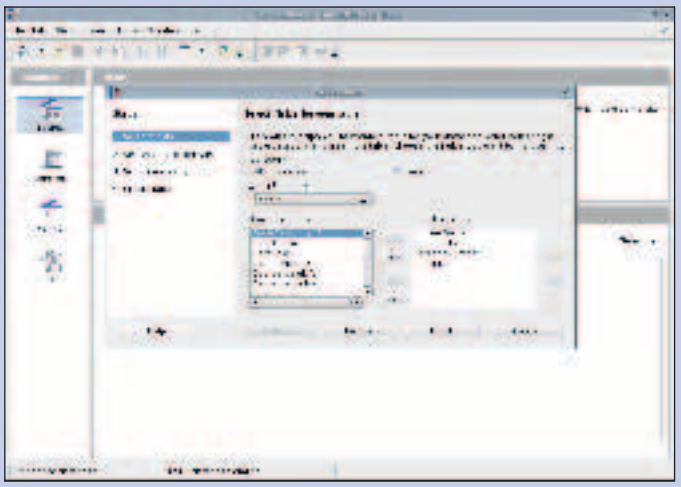
We won't go into all the details of the Query, Report and other wizards on offer, save to say that they're just as easy to use. You don't need to know a single SQL statement to pull information out of one of your tables – simply work down the list to select the

WORKING WITH *BASE* WIZARDS

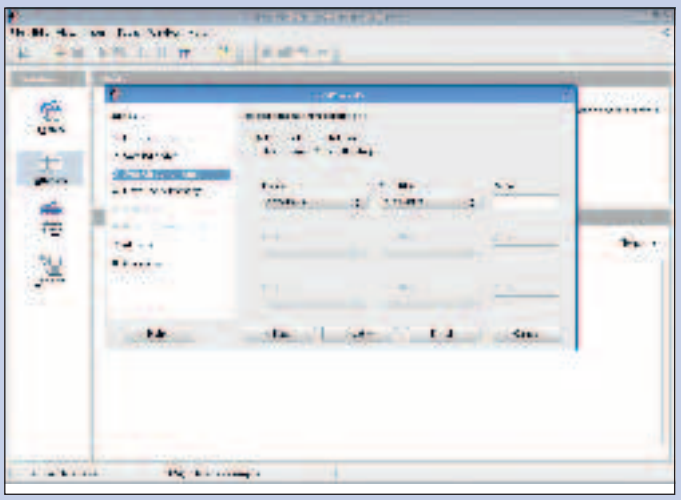
These should help you penetrate the world of databases



Creating your database is a three-step process, and each of them is handled via a wizard interface. Registering your database makes it easily available, but external data sources are supported throughout.



The Table wizard pops up as soon as you've saved your database. It simply asks you to select the fields that you want to include in a table, then creates one. The field names themselves don't matter – you can change them as necessary.



Data queries are, at heart, a simple matter of saying 'show me everything that matches these specifications'. You can go beyond this and enter pure SQL if you prefer, but most OpenOffice.org databases will be well enough covered by the Query wizard.

sort order, search conditions and grouping. Likewise, Reports tap into *Writer* to produce stylish, professional summaries of your tables based on individual tables or queries, re-labelling anything in the interests of readability. These can be either static or dynamic.

Importantly, none of these wizards is mandatory. If you already know how to create a database table, you can just open up the Design View and start typing away. Likewise, queries can be handled from a blank page with nothing more than a text prompt for typing in an SQL statement, or a

"THE REPORTS WIZARD TAPS INTO *WRITER* TO PRODUCE SUMMARIES OF YOUR DATA."

Design View grid to mix speed and approachability in one fell swoop. One of the most flexible, the Report Editor, handles everything from cueing macros to adding new data fields on the fly.

For more complicated functions you will of course need to go beyond the basic dialog boxes. To give just one example, the Query wizard's search conditions restricts you to three basic conditions, along with the choice of whether one or all of them is necessary for a record to be picked up – but this is perfectly acceptable for the smaller databases that you're likely to run a wizard for anyway.

BOTTOM LINE

Creating a good database is still as much art as it is science, and like most apps, *Base* largely assumes you know what you're doing – more direct assistance from the wizards wouldn't go amiss, although it's refreshing to be spared database jargon when you just want to save some basic information.

Because the program offers database templates, it's easy to get started. And the integration of the suite makes it possible to perform complex tasks with ease – notably including the necessary parts of your database in a *Writer* document.

Base is undoubtedly one of the high points of OpenOffice.org 2.0, although with the proviso that the data it handles is suited to individual offices rather than power developers. It's easy to use, and powerful enough to handle anything your needs with aplomb.

MAGIC NUMBERS

Calc takes the hard work out of spreadsheets.

CALC

NEW FEATURES

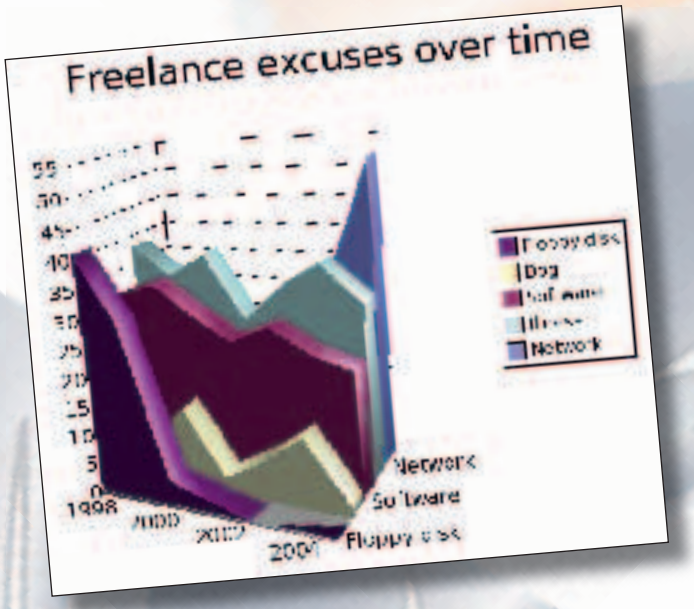
- ✔ Scenario protection
- ✔ Conditional array calculations
- ✔ Increased row limit
- ✔ Enhanced number recognition

Think of a world without spreadsheets. No business plans. No payday. No more quizzes turning up in the office at half-past three on a dull Friday afternoon, holding everything up as everyone pits their skills against the Geek Test. Spreadsheets are so pervasive in the business world that their figures can be more persuasive than reality. Just ask Enron.

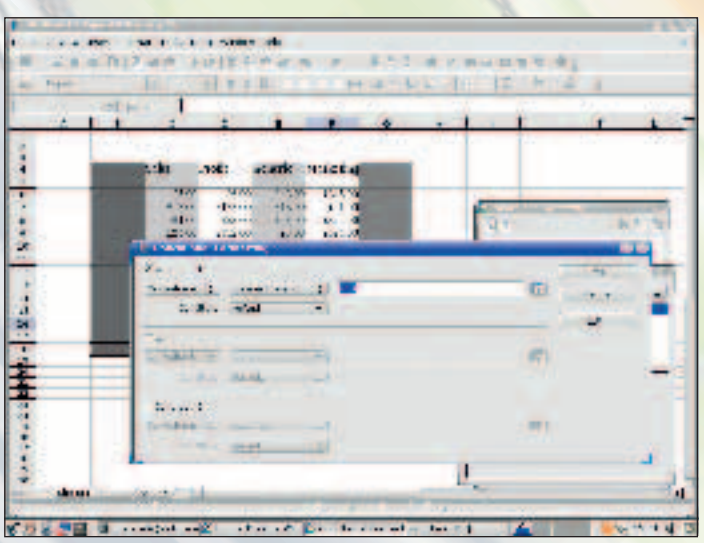
Despite all this, there are still some spreadsheet programs that never go beyond throwing down a grid, splicing in some rudimentary maths logic and declaring the job done. *Calc* is not one of these. Just as *Writer* handles *Word*, *Calc* excels at being *Excel*.

Data is a spreadsheet's stock in trade, and *Calc* has absolutely no trouble spinning it in whatever ways you need. You don't need to remember any of its function names to begin designing calculations for each square, courtesy of a Function wizard tool that makes it as easy as double-clicking. Each command is broken up into categories, complete with their full syntax. ACCRINT, if it wasn't immediately obvious from the name, returns the accrued interest for a security that pays periodic interest, while XPNV returns the net present value for a non-periodic schedule of repayments. All very easy to remember, we're sure you'll agree. The list is impressive – database, date and time, logical, financial and text being just a handful of the categories.

Luckily, while a finished function might seem nonsensical at first glance – any bets on what '=ASIN(ISPMT(12;2;15;5%))' does? – selecting part of the formula displays the necessary command and all of its parameters in full detail. You can get a more visual display of how it breaks down, with long formulae displayed as an expandable tree-view.



"THE FLEXIBILITY THAT'S ON OFFER HERE IS EXTREMELY IMPRESSIVE."



Conditional Formatting combines OpenOffice.org's excellent styles system with the power of your custom-written formulae.

NOW YOU CAN...

Hand a copy of OpenOffice.org to a newbie without phrases like AutoPilot confusing them. OpenOffice.org now uses standard office software terminology throughout, renaming the AutoPilot functions 'wizards'.

You do the maths

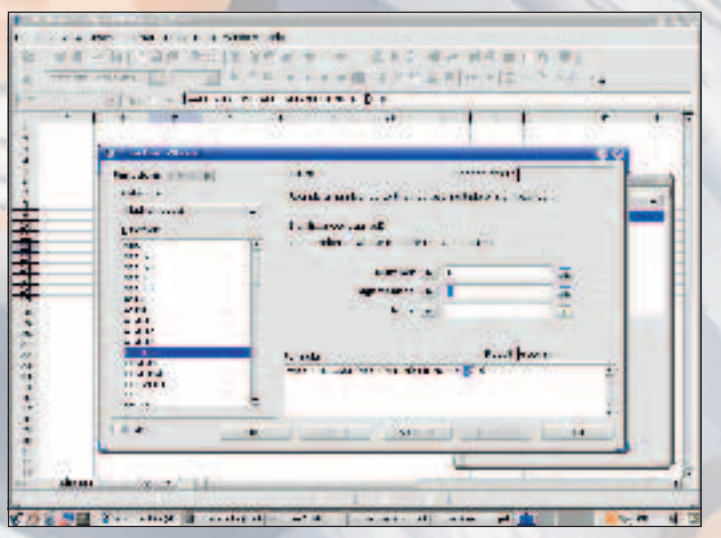
Calc enables you to use natural language when setting up your formula cells. To give a simple example, SUM('Column One') will automatically tot up the column with that at its head – all you have to ensure is that anything you want to have recognised as part of a natural language equation starts with a capital letter and OpenOffice.org does the rest.

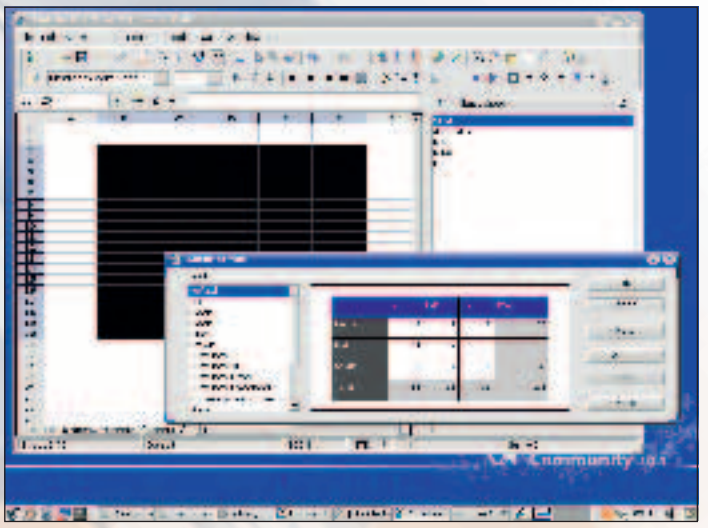
The Scenario tool is similar, offering a simple way to compare takes on a particular set of numbers.

Math is a dedicated formula creation utility, and can be run either as a dedicated program or by default when you add a formula to your *Calc* document. Its ability to build up a complex formula with the help of context menus, clickable components and both text and graphical renditions may come in very useful.

Hidden gems

The biggest catch with *Calc* is how easy it is to miss the many features it has on offer. Styling offers a perfect example. In the first instance, it's possible to style up everything in your spreadsheet just as you would a





paragraph of text, simply by selecting a cell and tapping a list entry like Header 1 or Result. The amount of flexibility on offer here is extremely impressive, ranging from spinning your text around 135 degrees to specifying whether the contents are currency, a date in any language from Japanese to Lithuanian, scientific results, or your own user formatting.

But to make things faster, you can use the AutoFormat tool to quickly set up specific types of grid. This doesn't set up anything particularly exciting – tapping out at a lavender-coloured currency grid – but does greatly simplify the process of creating a readable grid without the need to create styles for every single line.

Styles have one other particularly useful function, accessed via the Conditional Formatting tool. *Calc* can handle information from dynamic data sources as well as static content, and these offer a way to tell at a glance if there's anything you need to react to. You can ask it to check the content or formula of a cell to see if its contents are higher/lower/equal/etc to a set figure, then alter its style accordingly. Using this, you can have a standard, neutral cell style for everyday figures, a calm blue for all-is-well and blazing 72pt red for a burn-the-books-everyone's-fired emergency.

Macros, found throughout the suite, only really come into their own when assigned to your spreadsheets. Plenty of sample downloads can be found at **www.ooomacros.org/user.php#98242**, including a box-plotting/histogram tool, converter for QIF files (as used by Microsoft *Money* and the defunct *Quicken*) and a crossword solver.

Which leaves at least some space in the market for a follow-up to chart your results. Just a thought...

BOTTOM LINE

Calc is an excellent spreadsheet, with the advantage that migrating across from *Excel* is no harder than shifting to *Writer* from *Word*.

However, there is still scope for problems to emerge. A slight slip when setting up macros or functions can send a whole spreadsheet spiralling out of control, and you have to take care that you're not importing or exporting anything that's going to rely on Microsoft's built-in features.

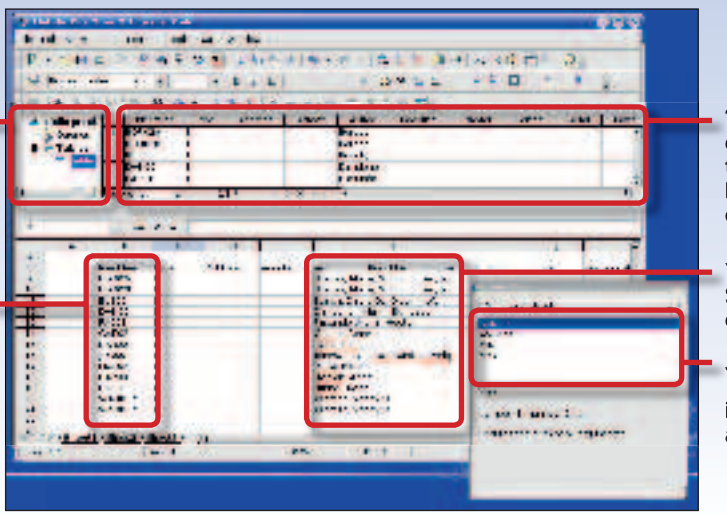
Text-based documents, by contrast, prove very easy – some of the formatting may be affected from machine to machine, but the fundamental information is likely to make it through unscathed. In an all-OOo environment, there's little to worry about, but we'd still recommend a few dry runs before trading files with clients or customers in anything but fixed PDF format.

Above left: **Nonsensical function or fiendishly clever? Clicking the mouse button on its components will give you the full story.**

Above right: **AutoFormat takes the sting out of quickly generating tabular layouts, while leaving you free to add your own edits later.**

Below: **Any data source registered with OpenOffice.org can be dragged and dropped straight on to your template from the top bar.**

THE *CALC* SPREADSHEET – A CLOSER LOOK



Just another piece of integration that you can only get in a full suite: *Calc* offers instant access to *Base*'s data.

Headers aren't just text. OpenOffice.org can automatically recognise them, just as long as they start with a capital letter.

This is where you'll find elements to drag on to your table. Here we have the supplied Bibliography database, but it could just as easily be the Gallery.

Your spreadsheet itself. Simple, but effective – and easily restyled.

Just as styles are on offer in *Writer*, *Calc* makes functions instantly available at the click of a mouse.

SHOW AND TELL

Impress will take care of your presentations and add flair if you need it.

IMPRESS

NEW FEATURES

- ✔ Now handles nearly all *PowerPoint* slide effects
- ✔ New GUI keeps common controls to hand
- ✔ Smarter cross-platform font handling
- ✔ Shape and style improvements inherited from *Draw*

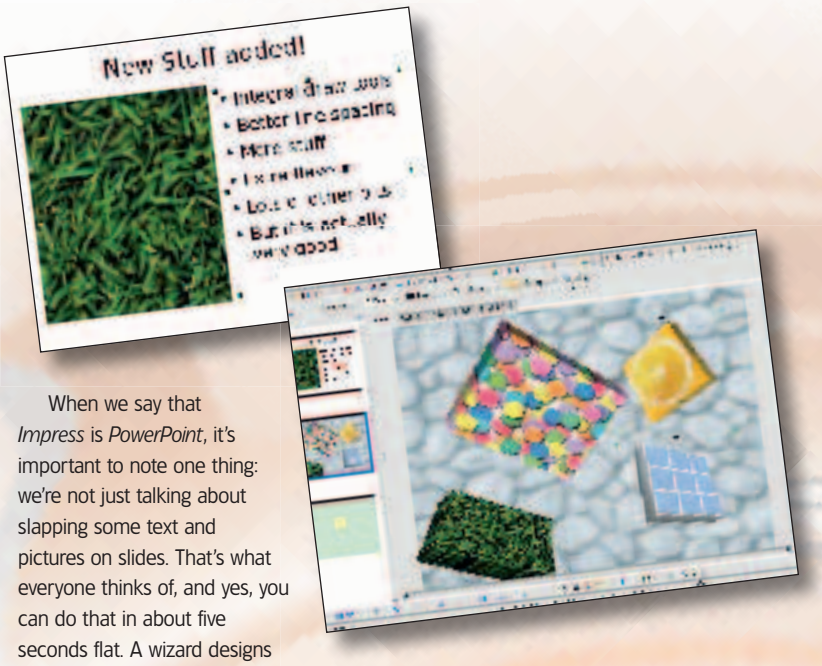
NOW YOU CAN...

Enjoy OpenOffice.org with native widgets on both PC and Linux. You're lumbered with out-of-place X11 on Mac for the moment, but an Aqua/Cocoa port should fix this before too long.

Ladies and gentlemen it's *PowerPoint* time – so grab your wading boots. Microsoft's presentation tool has become somewhat over-relied upon in the world's corporate towers, to the extent that just hearing its name can send a whole room to sleep faster than a hypnotist with a hundred cups of Horlicks.

If you're one of those people who's been longing, nay, craving for a chance to inflict a hundred-slide presentation full of charts and graphs and mission statements, then bad news: running *Impress* will destroy everything on your hard drive, hack into your bank accounts and donate all the money to penguin sanctuaries. You should turn to the next page now. Quickly. Don't look back. Don't read on. Flee!

Now that we've scared the bad men away, the simple truth is this: *Impress* pretty much is *PowerPoint*. From the opening slide templates to the fades and wipes that transition between slides, you'd be forgiven for thinking that someone from OOo had just nipped into Microsoft HQ with a pack of CD-Rs. In practice, this is one of the nicest things that could be said about it. Love it or hate it, *PowerPoint* is a crucial business application, and having a free version that can not only play whatever you throw at it (courtesy of OOo's document filters) but create clones to throw back again is great.



When we say that *Impress* is *PowerPoint*, it's important to note one thing: we're not just talking about slapping some text and pictures on slides. That's what everyone thinks of, and yes, you can do that in about five seconds flat. A wizard designs the basic look and feel for you (or will – in our build, the list was empty), while slides can either be built up from scratch or via pre-made panels with slots to drop in text, bullet-pointed lists, clip art, images or anything else you might need. Once finished, slides can be individually exported as templates, making it quick and easy to reuse specific designs whenever you need them.

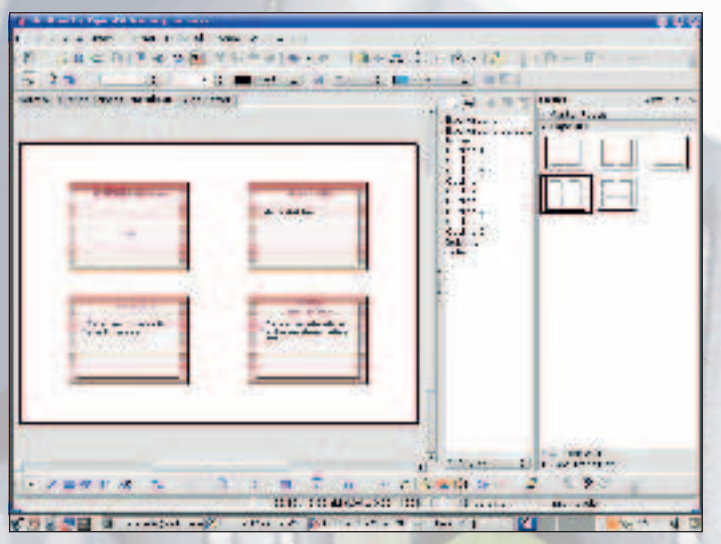
"_IMPRESS_ WORKS BEST AS A FULL REPLACEMENT FOR _POWERPOINT_."

The wizard performs a few other important functions, including selecting whether your slideshow is intended for the screen, paper, plastic foils or other sources – although without templates on hand, it's impossible to know how much of a difference this will make to the finished presentation. Even so, one use of the templates is very obvious: making it possible to type in some very basic information about exactly what the slideshow is going to cover. If nothing else, distilling it down to a basic line of 'what do you plan to talk about' should help you avoid the rambling everything-under-the-sun presentations that nobody on the planet ever wants to listen to.

But *Impress* offers many more powerful features. For a taste, we can look at animation. The most basic tool on offer is Transition – a simple effect that fades, wipes or otherwise removes one slide from the screen in favour of the next. These range from checkerboard effects to spinning clocks, wedges to sliding uncovers, and are all fairly simple. In most presentations, you can get away without using anything else.

Getting animated

Advanced users can go beyond these with the Custom Animation tool. Let's say you have some introductory text on a new product. You want a logo to appear first, followed by some text, bullet point by bullet point. Rather than creating multiple copies of the same slide, Custom Animation enables you to design the whole page in one go and assign each element its own sequence. The logo doesn't simply have to appear in place – it can pinwheel in from the outside of the



It ain't pretty... _Impress_ templates are unlikely to live up to their name, unless your handout's audience is colour-blind.

screen. Each line of text can be cued up to shoot in from the sides of the screen, or bounce a heart-shaped path around the screen. The only real limitations – beyond taste, of course – are how jazzy you want things to be. Each object can have multiple animations attached to them, following in sequence after a set time-period, or when individual objects are clicked.

Calc integration

Of the static images, charts are by far the most common type that you'll need, beyond logos and photography, of course. For complex arrangements, you'll need to fire up *Calc* and make use of its dedicated spreadsheet tools, before copying the result across to your presentation.

Simpler needs can be covered within *Impress* itself. It offers a simple table to enter your column data and the usual selection of charts: 2D and 3D variants of pies, bars, nets, stocks and the like, complete with more specific variants such as pie charts with the pieces broken out, or split into concentric rings.

Like the rest of the OpenOffice.org suite, *Impress* can call upon the Image Gallery *(see Draw review, page 64)*, and it shouldn't come as a surprise that it's undoubtedly the application that benefits the most from being able to do so. The artwork provided isn't anything special, but the ability to add your own within specific themes, as well as to simply drag and drop components on to the screen at will, is another extremely good way of cutting down the length of time it takes to create your presentations. A number of generic shapes are also on hand to illustrate more simple points, including speech-bubble callouts, flowchart components, lines, arrows and big smiley faces.

The printout

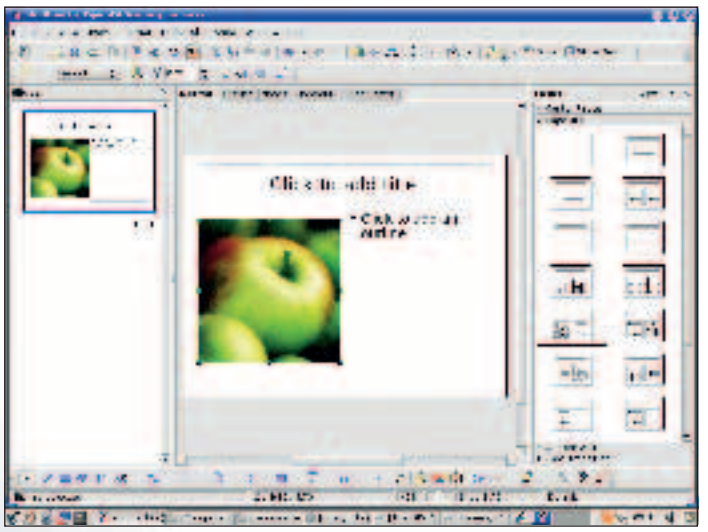
Impress handles this final part of your presentation just as competently as creating your slideshow in the first place, providing a thumbnail in one of a selection of templates that can hold between one and six slides.

Printouts can be assigned page numbers, titles and other page furniture, although our attempts to add anything else on to the page, while successful, invariably brought OOo to a screeching crash. Of course, this isn't usually a problem – handouts are one of those things where it's the information rather than the design that really matters.

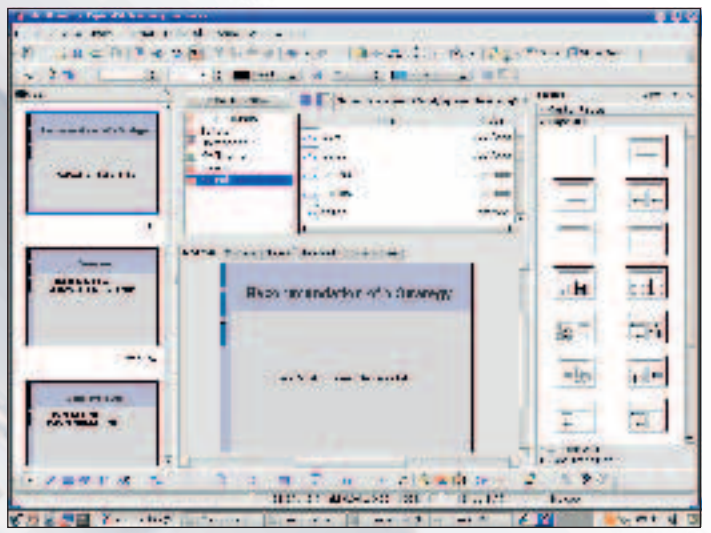
BOTTOM LINE

Impress may not offer hundreds of features to make it superior to *PowerPoint*, but that's not the point. Like *Writer*, it works best as a full replacement, and its performance is so smooth you'll barely notice the switch.

The only real caveat is that you'll have to be very sure indeed that your presentations will play as you intended – it must be said that *Impress* was by far the most noticeably buggy program of the suite during our test. Save early, save often – but above all, save the full facts and figures for a suitable time and place, rather than making everyone sit through the whole lot.



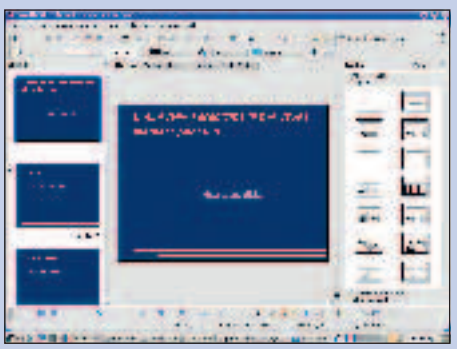
Page Layouts save you precious time, with most standard corporate layouts provided from the right-hand pane.



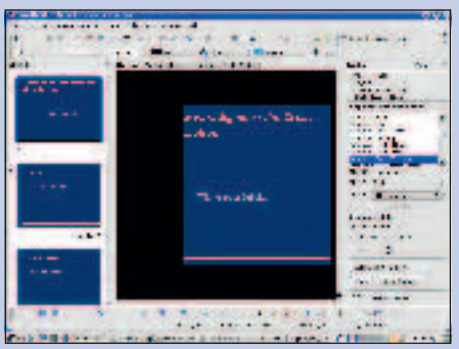
Finally, the Sounds part of the Gallery comes into its own – the advantage of being able to access your media assets across the suite.

TRANSITIONS AND ANIMATION IN *IMPRESS*

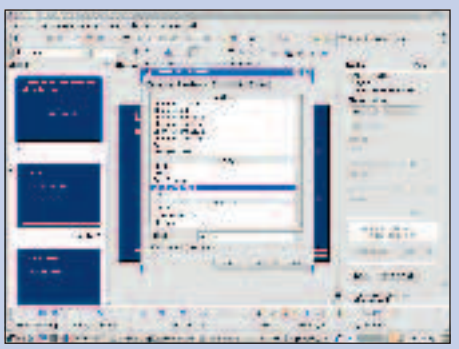
Yes! You can make your slides whizz around the screen to keep your audience awake



The sample presentations on offer are unexciting to say the least (bland and rubbish, if we're being unkind), but they're a start. Choose one and you get an immediate headstart on structuring your presentation, and entering new content.



Transitions are the standard way of moving between slides, offering wipes, fades, crosscuts, spinning dissolves and all the other standard tools. They're selected with a click, and require no tweaking or fiddling around to get them looking good.



Custom Animation is a very different beast. Here, you build up each animation piece by piece, setting each object's triggers by hand. It's no replacement for the likes of *Director*, *Mediator* or *Opus*, but it's good enough for most purposes.

DRAW

NEW FEATURES

- ✔ Improved shapes and connectors
- ✔ Auto-preview of pages while you work
- ✔ Easier insertion of multimedia content
- ✔ New, more intuitive icons

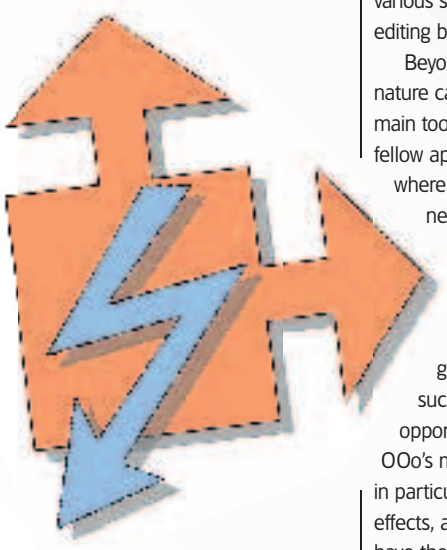
THE VECTOR FACTOR

Sketch from scratch or choose from hundreds of *Draw*'s smart shapes.

From the start, *Draw* was the black sheep of the OpenOffice.org suite: the only program without a direct link to part of Microsoft Office, and the one that gets missed off the list when people are enthusing about it. It's not hard to see why. Vector drawing struggles for the kind of attention that funkier bitmap-based illustration programs like *Gimp* get.

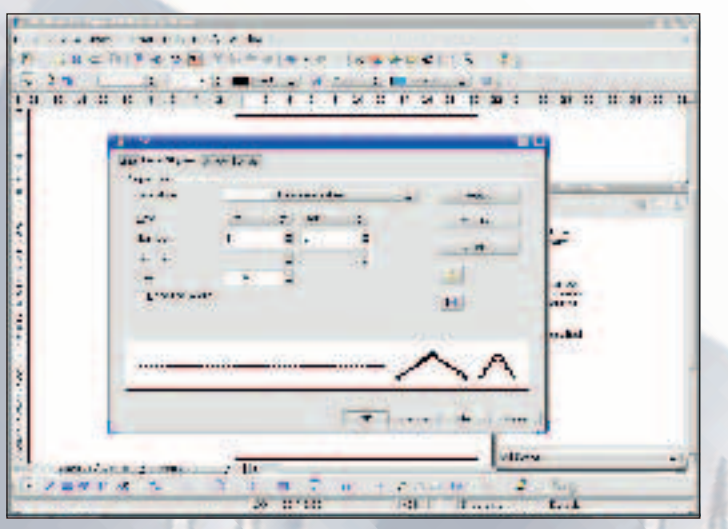
Certainly, it's hard to get used to making art with shapes and lines than with old-fashioned brushstrokes, but anyone who's used the likes of *Inkscape* will be the first to tell you that it's not necessarily restrictive. No, the key problem is that *Draw* is the part of the set that almost nobody has much of a need for. If you can draw, you've got better software to do it in. If you can't? Don't expect Da Vinci. Even the OpenOffice.org homepage itself seems to have thrown up its hands when trying to illustrate it in use – avoiding stunning works of art in favour of various scribbly pictures of the suite editing basic pictures.

Beyond this, OOo's suite-based nature causes another problem. *Draw*'s main tools are already built into its fellow applications, notably *Impress*, where they're most likely to be needed on a regular basis. With this in mind, there are few reasons to open *Draw* specifically but plenty to use the more advanced graphics that it provides. As such, it gives us the perfect opportunity to look at some of OOo's more artistic side in general – in particular, its drawing tools, 3D effects, and the Gallery. All of these have their uses, whichever application you're in at the time.



Focus on the task

The drawing tools on offer are simple but effective enough, starting with scribbling lines across empty sheets, more or less finishing when you fill them. You have the regular freeform pen, more polygonal-minded ones that lock lines to 45 degrees, curves, filled objects and all the other usual tools.



***Draw* hides all sorts of control behind its plain main screen, but not sadly the smoothness of the *Illustrators* and *Freehands* of this world.**

Beyond that, however, *Draw* largely restricts you to artistic skill or deploying a few flashy special effects here and there. It's only when you approach *Draw* with a specific goal in mind that you can really start finding a use for it – as art programs go, you'd have to look hard to find one that so little rewards experimentation.

Flowcharts are one of *Draw*'s most immediately useful tricks. It's difficult to put into words just how irritating it can be to create a flowchart in a word processor, even if you have the necessary tools. With *Draw*, you can just open up the necessary symbols, slap them down wherever you like on the page, link them with connectors and relax. Move a symbol and the connector prevents it breaking away from its rightful place. Moreover, because *Draw* treats these components as actual parts of a flowchart rather than simply a handful of shapes, you can see at a glance that the hourglass means collate and that the rounded rectangle is an alternate process. The connectors offer a similar amount of freedom, with some adding arrows onto the end, others offering bezier curves rather than straight lines, and all of them offering the ability to unhook and re-attach to other parts of a shape.

Putting a more stylish spin on these shapes is a very literal process, courtesy of *Draw*'s 3D support. Extrude a shape in your *Draw* file and a whole new array of graphic-editing options open up. Unfortunately, when we say 3D we really mean '3D effect' – there's no polygon pushing on offer. What you can do is alter how far an object stretches back or what colour its 3D portion should be, tilt, rotate and reposition it, relight it from any direction, and select a finishing from a selection of wireframe, matte, plastic and metal.

"THE 3D TOOL CREATES HEADERS THAT STRETCH TO INFINITY AND BEYOND."

NOW YOU CAN...

Create full flowcharts in *Draw*. Add components to your sheet and hook them up with Connectors to design professional-looking charts that can be dragged, dropped and redesigned at a moment's notice.

The results are firmly on the cheap-and-cheerful side of the art world, but that doesn't stop them coming in handy when you don't want to resort to clip art to jazz up a document or slide.

It's also notable that flowchart objects can be extruded, twisted and reshaped, and generally still connected seamlessly to any others you might need to hook them up to, just like the 2D versions. Even if not, the line is close enough that it doesn't have to make any difference.

Horror show

Where would any potential Office killer be without the option to create

eye-poppingly ghastly headers from random bits of text? Office named its version WordArt, OpenOffice.org calls its own Fontworks and Dante wrote about both to get in the right frame of mind for a trip to the Inferno. Your shapes include curves, stop-signs, perspective effects and more, and some of them are enough to make an artist weep. If you really must, you can combine them with the 3D tool, creating vile-looking headers that stretch back to infinity and beyond – but please, if you do, have the good taste not to inflict them on others...

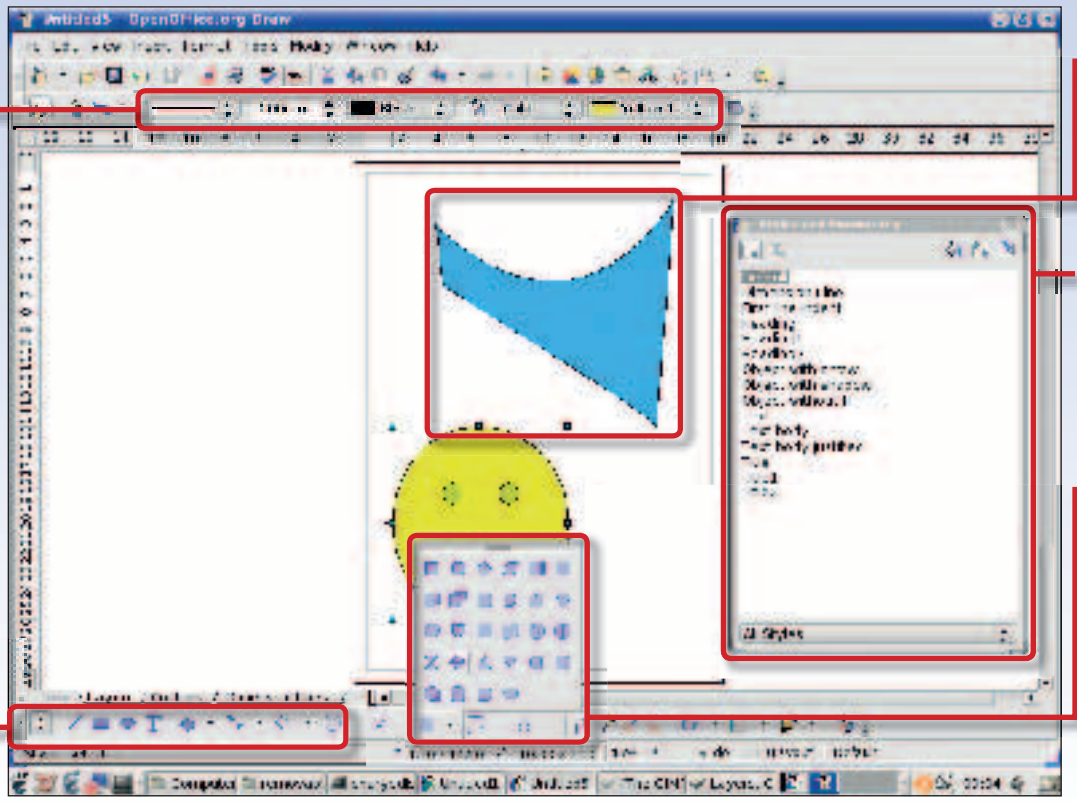
Fleeing with horror to more tasteful climes, we come to the Gallery, where things start to perk up again. Here you have immediate access to a range of bullets, rulers, sounds and other clip-art items, although history shows that you'll almost certainly have to look to Sun Microsystems for a full collection. Where this section becomes useful is when used to store your own images. The Gallery is shared across the entire OOo suite, making it possible to store and reuse a logo in a *Writer* document and an *Impress* presentation. You can create full themes and drag and drop components around at will, as well as view the many components in your collection as large or small thumbnails. Hopefully, the clip art released as part of Sun's main StarOffice 8 launch will offer a decent selection of images to get started with.

BOTTOM LINE

With the most notable update of *Draw* being SWF export (nice, but of limited value to almost everyone), this program still comes across as being a thin shell around OOo's drawing tools rather than an application in itself.

The only real way OOo can change this is to go with all-out with programs like *Inkscape*, but dedicated drawing tool teams will always be several steps ahead – there's not much point when you can download a rival separately.

THE *DRAW* WORKTOP – A CLOSER LOOK



Control your line styles from the handy palette at the top.

Draw **is at its best when manipulating set objects, such as squares, circles and smiley faces – and there are plenty of them on offer.**

A lost Picasso? Unlikely. But if vector graphics are your thing, *Draw* should serve your basic needs.

The Styles panel appears here as well, this time controlling the look of lines rather than fonts.

Creating flowcharts is easily one of *Draw*'s most useful abilities. It's only drawing, not a dedicated package, but much faster than trying to scrawl shapes everywhere.

THE VERDICT

New addition *Base* gets the thumbs up – but we'd have liked to see more advances in 2.0. Still, it's getting closer to MS Office and worldwide domination...

OpenOffice.org is by no means the only fish in the sea. KOffice, *AbiWord*, *Gnumeric* and many other open source office packages out there are coming on apace and promise to continue chipping away at Microsoft Office's market share.

So the obvious question is: is OpenOffice.org still the free software world's best chance for dominance?

"THE LION'S SHARE OF WORK HAS GONE INTO REMOVING IRRITATIONS."

Ultimately: yes. To see why, you need only compare it with KOffice directly. KOffice has more features, but those that OpenOffice.org does feature have been honed and refined to a far sharper point.

A bigger problem for OOo 2.0 is its lack of real innovation. *Impress* was already effectively *PowerPoint*, it's just been given a quick interface makeover, and *Base* – while a superb first outing – shamelessly apes Microsoft *Access* from the very first screen. Open source ideology aside, the fact is that OpenOffice.org trails behind its competitor. Technologically speaking, of course.

On the other hand...

Is it all bad news? No. In other areas, OpenOffice.org certainly starts picking up points again. *Writer*'s word-count feature alone is a reason to download 2.0 as soon as it hits final release, but the lion's share of the work has obviously gone into removing irritations rather than adding frivolous features. From tables-in-tables to slight tweaks of how *Writer* handles line spacing, the emphasis is firmly on preventing you from running into trouble.

With its anti-Office remit, the key to OOo's success is being able to slip in and take over from its arch-rival at a moment's notice. It already featured stunning support for Office file formats, whether you're importing or exporting files, and the addition of *Base* reinforced that. Just how easy the package is to use really can't be overstated – anything from a home CD collection to a full-size office employee management system can be made without the slightest knowledge of SQL or other database techniques. Although it remains to be seen how well *Base* runs in the long term, it's certainly got off to a very impressive start indeed.

One thing to bear in mind: there's still a while to go before the full, complete release ot 2.0. The preview release is as feature complete as it's going to get at the time of writing, but it's also loaded with more bugs than the Amazon rainforest in mating season. We expect most of these issues to be scrubbed out by the time we hit the actual 2.0 release.

BOTTOM LINE

OpenOffice.org remains the open source world's best hope for wrenching market share away from Microsoft Office. Even if you couldn't care less about doing so it's a superb suite with acres of features to explore. LXF

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

The *LXF* review of version 2.0 in easy to digest FAQ form.

Q What are the main changes to OpenOffice.org in version 2.0?

A The most striking change is the addition of a complete program to the suite – the excellent database app *Base*. Otherwise it's just a case of tweaks here and there – we'd pick out widget rendering, wizards and an improved recovery system. You'll find a full list of updates at **http://marketing.openoffice.org/2.0/featureguide.html**.

Q What are the strongest features of the new package?

A Aside from *Base* we'd say its cross-platform nature, which makes OpenOffice.org the only integrated suite that can be used anywhere, on anything. The use of the same file format ensures that you remain fully compatible across the entire set, whichever machine you happen to be on at the time.

Migrating across to it is therefore a snap: there's no need to find a whole set of applications that are willing to play nice on all three main platforms, and you can still use native image editors, mail clients and other important applications rather than being lumbered with a half-finished clone.

Q And what are the weaknesses or letdowns?

A It's obvious that much of the developers' focus has been on replicating Microsoft rather than outdoing it. That means a disappointing lack of new headline features, but all the same, version 2.0 is still only at an Office 97/2000-level, lacking many of the more modern features such as SmartTags that make later releases of Microsoft's suite so smooth and easy to use.

For Mac OS X users, the basic install looks hideous beyond all comprehension. The NeoOffice upgrade is sorely needed.

Q Where does OpenOffice.org stand against its open source rivals now?

A Despite that lack of advancement, OOo is still the strongest open source competitor to MS Office. It doesn't have as many features as KDE's KOffice package – there's no bitmap image editing tool (*Krita*) nor a direct flowcharting package (*Kugar*), but KOffice still has too many rough edges for it to be completely comfortable on a day-to-day basis. It's possible to find other programs out there that do OOo's features better, such as *AbiWord*'s more direct cloning of *Word*'s interface, but this means giving up the increasingly tight integration between *Writer*, *Calc*, *Impress* and *Base*.

Q All in all, is it worth installing version 2.0?

A To be blunt, you don't have much of a choice – this release has all the features of 1.x, and adds more. Most distros coming out after May 2005 will come bundled with OOo 2.0 only, so you will either have to get used to the upgrade or try and download unofficial packages. Of course, you should ask yourself why you're bothering with the hassle – OOo 1.1 is dead, long live OOo 2.0!

NOW YOU CAN...

Buy a copy of StarOffice 8. Due for release at the same time as OpenOffice.org 2.0, it'll ship with extra clip art, fonts and other small but useful additions to get you started. It's the exact same program though, so there's no need to spend money unless you want to.