

Sharing with Microsoft Office

Much as we'd like the world to switch on to the benefits of OOO, tens of millions of users are stuck using Microsoft Office and you'll need to work with them.

Any long-time Linux user will tell you how annoying it used to be to get emails with *Microsoft Word* attachments included. Before *OpenOffice.org* came along, Linux support for the *MS Office* file formats was weak at best, so when you received an email with a *Word* document attached you knew immediately you were going to have a hard time reading it. The problem is that, for a lot of people, **.doc** is the word processing document format that "everyone" can read – they assume that everyone has *Word* and therefore send documents designed for *Word* to read.

It wasn't long ago when Microsoft used to mark the *Internet Explorer* icon on the Windows desktop as "The Internet", implying that *IE* was synonymous with the internet as a whole! The people who email *Word* documents probably just don't know that *Word* isn't everywhere any more, so you can expect to have to deal with *Office* users and their files sooner or later. There are several strategies you can take when working with *Office* users:

1 If they are using *Office 95, 97, 2000, XP* or *2003*, you can just try to open their files. In our experience, *OOo* opens all of *Office 95, 97* and *XP* files just fine. *Word 2003* introduced a newer file format that was Microsoft's first attempt at XML – *OpenOffice.org* does quite a good job with these, but if people try to use this format just ask them to use plain old **.doc**.

Word document file sizes

Word .doc files have a curious tendency to grow large very quickly, even if they don't hold much content. When you open a **.doc** file in *OpenOffice.org* and resave it without making any changes at all, you'll probably find the file size drops dramatically. Don't worry – *OOo* hasn't deleted lots of important data, it's just showing how it supports the Microsoft formats better than Microsoft does!

Here's a typical document in *Microsoft Word 2002* (from *Office XP*), demonstrating some typical page formatting options...

2 If they are using *Office 2007*, they may use the new **.docx** XML file format. This is Microsoft's second attempt at an XML file format, known confusingly enough as "OpenXML".

OpenOffice.org doesn't support these files right now, so your best bet is to ask the user to save in an earlier *Microsoft Office* format – eg *Office XP*.

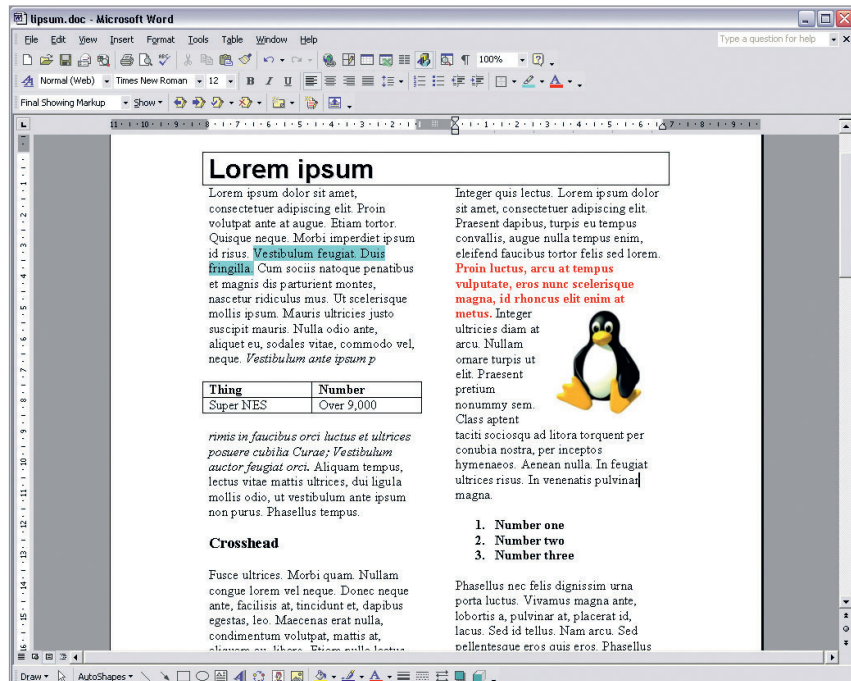
3 You can ask them to download, install and use the free OpenDocument save filters for *Microsoft Office*. These are available direct from Sun here from <http://tinyurl.com/2o9wwj>, and should install into *Office 2000, XP* and *2003*. With that plugin installed, those *Office* users can read and write OpenDocument files, which eliminates the problem completely.

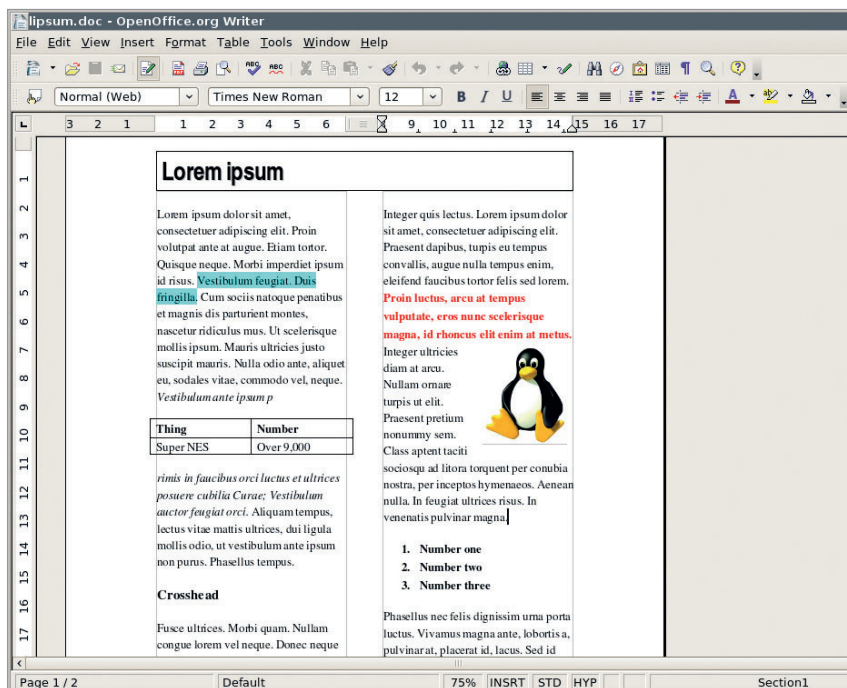
4 If you absolutely have to use the new *Microsoft Office 2007* XML files, you should try looking online to see whether you can get a plugin for your version of *OpenOffice.org* to make it support the Office XML format. The Office XML format is still very new, so support for it in *OpenOffice.org* is still quite poor – give it a few months for the developers to work their magic, and that ought to change.

Once you've taken into account the above, there are a few more things that you ought to take into account to get the best results when sharing your *OOo* files with *Microsoft Office* users. Let's look at the main four issues, and see what can be done to minimise problems...

Fonts

Windows users take for granted fonts like Arial, Courier New and Times New Roman, whereas Mac users are used to Helvetica and Linux users generally don't notice *what* fonts they're using! So this leads to a problem: if you have been given a document with very precise layout using *Microsoft Office* fonts, the layout will get muddled a little because *OpenOffice.org* will replace the missing fonts with the best alternatives. Even if the replaced fonts are very close in shape to their Microsoft equivalents, they will probably have slightly different kerning and leading values, which affects how they are spaced on the page and may ultimately break your layout. The solution here is, of course, to make sure you have exactly the same fonts as your source machine, but if





you don't have access to Helvetica and other fonts, you might find it easiest to use the freely available Bitstream Vera fonts.

OLE objects

Windows uses a technology called OLE ("Object Linking and Embedding") to embed one program inside another to share functionality. For example, you've already seen how *Calc* spreadsheets and charts can be dropped inside *Impress* presentations – imagine that with many other non-*OpenOffice.org* programs. The problem is, OLE is a Windows technology not available on other platforms such as Linux and OS X, so any documents that use OLE to provide embedded application functionality will fail. This is why *OpenOffice.org* has an option to embed Java applets: Java works on dozens of platforms,

› ...and here it is in **OpenOffice.org on Linux. There are a few minor changes to the layout, but otherwise the document is exactly the same.**

“A lot of users assume that Microsoft Office is a program that ‘everyone’ has installed on their computers...”

including all those that *OpenOffice.org* works on. As a result, embedded Java applets are much more likely to work than embedded OLE applications, so try to use Java over OLE.

Macros

If you have a large collection of Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) macros in your documents, you might find *OpenOffice.org* a little frustrating to use: it can either disable the macros or ignore them, but either way it can't get them to work! The difference between disabling a macro and ignore it is different: when macros are disabled, *OpenOffice.org* actually turns the code into comments, which means they will no longer activate when loaded into *Microsoft Office*. When set to ignore macros, *OOo* will leave them enabled but just pretend they don't exist – a much smarter solution.

But there's another alternative, in the form of *OxygenOffice*: a special build of *OpenOffice.org* that adds lots of cool clip art and photography, but also includes a working VBA interpreter for *OOo* that should let you run all your *Microsoft Office* macros in *OOo* without any editing or disabling. Check out the project site

of *OxygenOffice*: <http://sourceforge.net/projects/ooop> for all the latest on this project.

WordArt

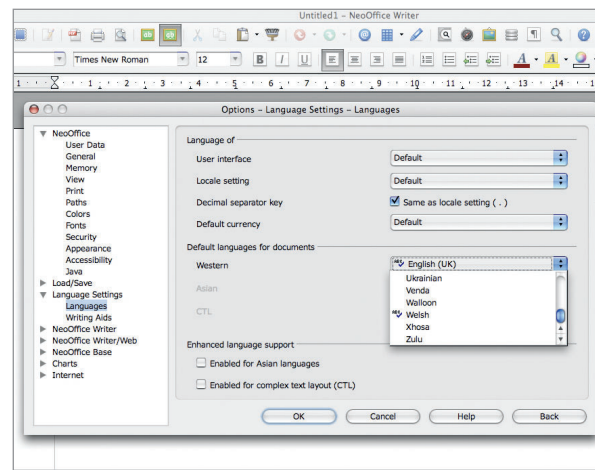
Microsoft's fancy text generator might have "Word" making up half of its name, but that doesn't seem to tip people off that it might cause problems when moving away from *Microsoft Office*. *OpenOffice.org*'s equivalent, *Fontwork*, can replicate *WordArt* quite closely if you take time to fiddle with it, but in our opinion a much better solution is this: delete the *WordArt* and replace it with plain text – your document will look much less tacky!

Print previews

This is one of the more surprising issues when switching from *Microsoft Office* to *OpenOffice.org*: *Office* applications generate their print previews in conjunction with your printer, whereas *OOo* is able to do it without your printer being involved. This is annoying in *Office* because a) if you have no printer installed, you can't do a print preview, and b) changing printers, or passing the document to someone who has a different printer, will actually make the print preview look different. *OOo* does its print previews the same on every machine regardless of what printer you have installed, which means the best way to solve this particular problem is to ignore what *Office* says the page will look like and use *OpenOffice.org* where this feature is needed.

Language support

Here's one major problem that there really is no solution for, but you still need to be aware of: *OpenOffice.org* supports many more languages than *Microsoft Office*, which means you need to be careful as an *OOo* user not to send files that will be illegible to *MS Office* users. Problem languages include Hindi, Lithuanian, Slovenian, Slovakian, Tamil, Catalan, Estonian, Welsh, Vietnamese and many others. In fact, there are over 90 localisation projects as part of the *OOo* movement, and work is constantly underway both to make that number higher and improve the quality of existing language support. **LXF**



› **OpenOffice.org supports many languages in both the interface and application – turn to page 96 to find out more.**

A note about versions...

Microsoft Office comes in multiple versions: Standard, Professional, Small Business, Professional Plus, Enterprise and Ultimate, of which two don't ship with *Access*. This is Microsoft's equivalent to *OpenOffice.org Base*, which means that you cannot send *Access* files to someone from *Base* if they do not have a sufficiently expensive version of *Microsoft Office*. Hurray for Free Software!