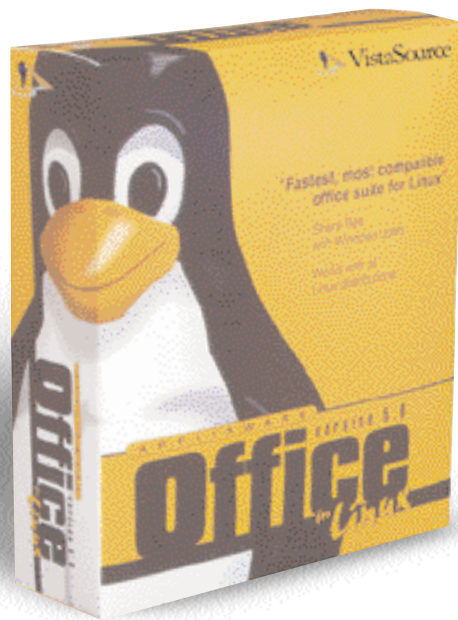


Applixware Office 5.0

LITTLE SPRINTER

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Applixware was the first office package to become available for the Linux platform. In recent months it has been somewhat overshadowed by the free, open source StarOffice from Sun and the arrival of Corel's WordPerfect Office 2000. But version 5.0 has recently been launched, and our test shows it has no reason to hide behind its major competitors.



Perhaps the most significant change in this release is the conversion of the window library to GTK, which is already used successfully by the GNOME desktop and the graphics program The Gimp. The latest version of the library must be installed on your system to avoid errors occurring in the individual applications. The setup program detects whether and which version of GTK is installed and provides a suitable update for the distribution if necessary. Despite this change, experienced users will get to grips with the new applications right away. During installation you can choose to have a Microsoft Office style screen layout or the traditional Applixware one. Unfortunately, once this decision has been made it can only be reversed by reinstalling the program.

Like all the other office packages for Linux, Applixware is integrated automatically into the KDE and GNOME start menus. The package contains all the components you'd expect in a modern office package including word processing ("Words"), spreadsheets ("Spreadsheets"), presentation program ("Presents"), a graphics program ("Graphics") and a database ("Data"). As an added bonus, an email program is supplied along with an HTML editor.

After the main toolbar – a kind of central Applixware control point similar to the Microsoft Office toolbar – has been started for the first time, a help window immediately opens offering the user various help files and several examples. Each of the main applications has been given a tutorial too: something rival products could do well to emulate. Unfortunately, this help dries up as soon as it has been offered. For example, several links in the online help lead to non-existent entries and, on our test system, we were unable to start the tutorials. The way the online help has been structured is somewhat chaotic and it is not as user-friendly as the equivalent help system in WordPerfect Office 2000. It can therefore take some time to locate specific information.

The manual provided works well as a short introduction. Clear examples and helpful tips appear in several places. Unfortunately, a considerable amount of more detailed information is lacking, as are references to the relevant places in the online help where more information might be found.

You can take the advertising slogan on the packaging – "the fastest office package for Linux" – quite literally. No emulation is necessary as with WordPer-

fect Office 2000. The speed of execution is considerably faster than that of the other major office packages. However, we found that a large graphics file in PNG format caused considerable distress to both Applixware Words and the HTML editor.

As the product is so Linux-orientated, Applixware boasts several Linux-specific features that other office packages don't have such as the user-friendly allocation of access rights when saving a document. A further indication that the package is clearly rooted in Linux/Unix is the restriction to one document per opened window. Using Applixware it is not possible to manage several documents within an application as it is in all other office packages.

The range of programs on offer may confuse a new user at first. Although several types of document can be edited by one and the same program, each document type has its own start symbol. Taking graphics as an example, the presentation module is always used to edit them. The main toolbar mentioned earlier could make this a lot clearer.

Version 5.0 has revised import filters, however they still cannot stand up to our Microsoft test documents. The biggest problem is still the import of graphics embedded in Word 97 files. The other office packages don't seem to be able to crack this hard nut either. The result of importing PowerPoint presentations into Applixware Presents is even worse than it is in StarOffice. It's worth noting that Applixware cannot export the current WordPerfect format nor support StarOffice file formats.

The new font manager makes it possible to use TrueType fonts under Applixware. Unfortunately, this manager confused the Fontastic Font Installer – its WordPerfect Office 2000 counterpart – to such an extent that no fonts were available to this package's applications. Restarting the X-Window system provided the only cure.

The range of functions provided by the Applixware applications is comparable with that of StarOffice but not up to the standard of WordPerfect Office 2000. The first thing you notice in Applixware Words is the lack of user-friendly writing functions. There is no automatic correction in the background and no option to quickly create outlines. To create an outline you must first laboriously enter all the key points and then mark them. Finally, you add the numbering using the relevant function.

Anyone who has worked with word processing programs in the pre-Linux era will recognise an old friend in Words. Applixware still provides features that have almost slid into oblivion. For example, you can have text components, which are saved text passages that can be inserted into the current document at the click of a mouse. Anyone who has to work with a large number of standard texts will love this feature. Another function we searched in vain for in other packages is the ability to create forms with entry fields. This allows users to quickly create documents they need on a regular basis such as

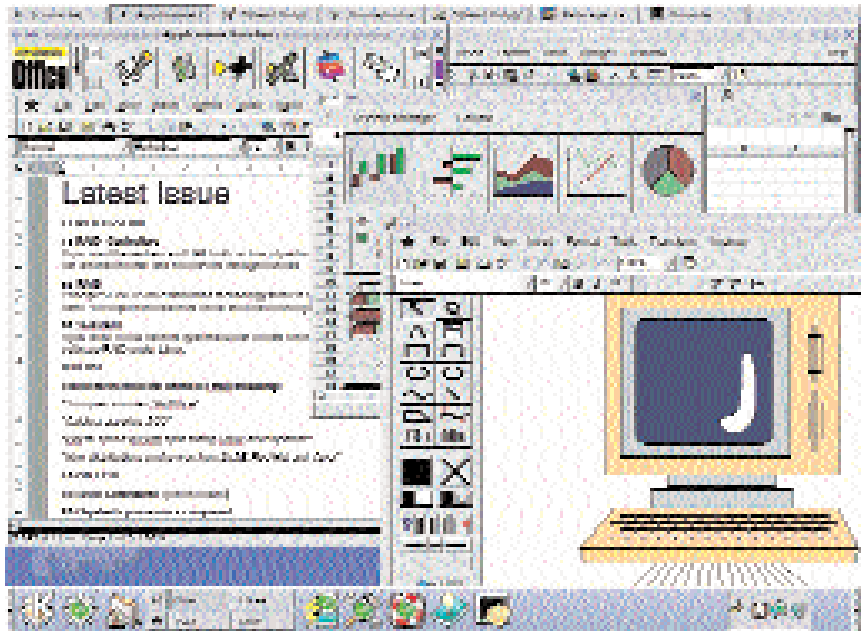


Figure 1: Word processor, spreadsheet and the main toolbar of Applixware Office 5.0

memos. Applixware Words displays the relevant fields, which then just need to be filled in.

Sadly, we discovered a number of weak points in the other applications. The HTML editor – which in terms of functions is comparable to Netscape Composer – and the presentation program Presents are both only suitable for simple tasks. While the HTML editor is adequate for small Web sites, it will fail to make the grade on larger projects.

In just the same way, the presentation package also fails to match up to its StarOffice counterpart. The reason why you can only insert two dividing lines (one vertical and one horizontal) remains a puzzle. Only the Spreadsheets application compares favourably with that of StarOffice. It also offers a number of real-time functions which allow you to integrate live information such as up-to-date stock market prices into your spreadsheets.

One good point about this package is that the individual programs are well integrated. For example, a double click on a graphic in any document directly opens the relevant editor.

On balance

The launch of Applixware version 5.0 has not brought a lot that is new. It would have been better if the new developer VistaSource had concentrated on integrating functions that are already present on other office packages rather than spending time converting to the GTK window library. The functionality in some areas is slightly inferior to that of StarOffice while in others it is about comparable. The strengths of the package lie mainly in its speed and its excellent integration with Linux.

Applixware Office is a solid office package that is worth a look if you cannot get to grips with the StarOffice desktop or consider WordPerfect Office to be too expensive. But if speed and integration into the Linux operating system are your most important criteria, look no further than Applixware Office. ■