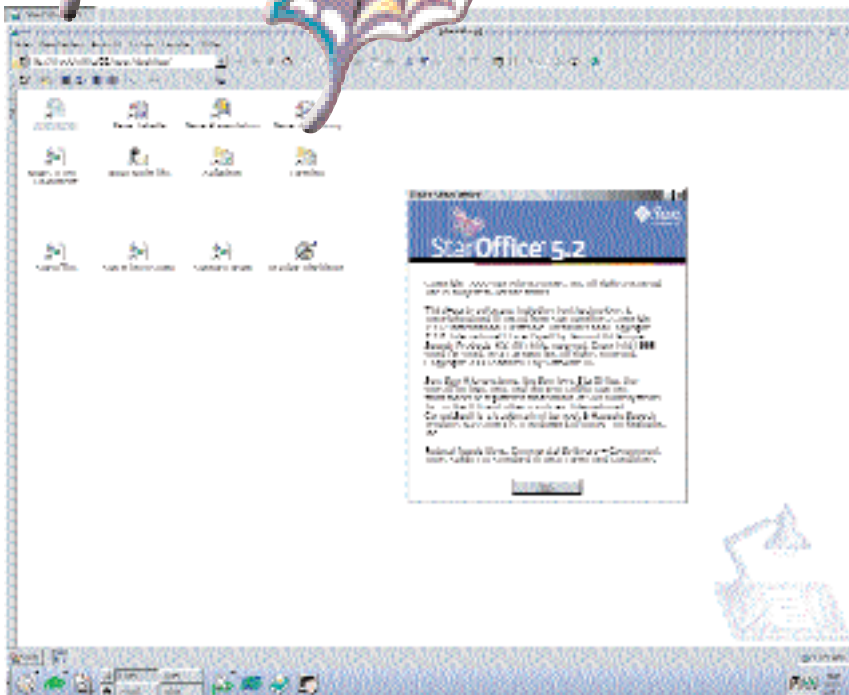


StarOffice 5.2

# STAR TURN

TIM SCHÜRMANN



**Figure:** The long-awaited new version of StarOffice is finally available

According to Sun, StarOffice 5.2 incorporates more than 100 improvements. However, as the version number suggests, these changes are mainly improvements, not new features.

As usual, the installation procedure uses the wizard with which users of StarOffice 5.1 will already be acquainted. An automatic migration option is supposed to help you transfer your existing settings from the earlier version. Unfortunately, during our test, neither toolbar nor menu modifications were transferred from StarOffice 5.1.

## The changes in general...

One thing StarOffice shares with its Windows counterparts: it's a big piece of code and takes a long time to load. Once started, things look much the same as

**The new version of Sun's StarOffice 5.2 office suite, which is free of charge and now open source, has been around for a few months. It has many improvements, but does it have what it takes to tempt office users away from Microsoft Office and Windows?**

version 5.1. It's still an integrated package with its own dedicated desktop. This makes StarOffice feel very different to every other office package, and it's a solution that confuses newcomers and irritates old hands alike. It's rumoured that Sun will revert to using separate, standalone applications for StarOffice 6.0: if so, this will be a very welcome move.

Experienced users of StarOffice will find that Sun has extended several of the existing functions so that they can now be used more efficiently. For example, the AutoComplete function, which was introduced in StarOffice 5.1, has been extended to other parts of the package. As soon as the first characters have been entered in file dialog boxes or internet address entry fields, for example, the rest is added automatically. Where there are several possible options a simple press of a button is enough to

run through all the possible entries. The extended context menus and the improved navigator in the word processing program are claimed to help make the package more user-friendly.

Spell-checkers for many languages are included with the package but you can now incorporate additional languages, even dictionaries from external suppliers. Buyers of the CD version of StarOffice 5.2 gain another advantage besides that of avoiding a 100MB download: the CD contains additional language modules which can't be obtained over the Internet. However, the proofing tools don't stretch to a grammar checker, something that only WordPerfect Office 2000 provides.

StarOffice woos new users with its improved and extended file import and export filters, which are said to guarantee complete compatibility with Microsoft Office 97 or 2000 documents. As we found during our test, Sun has in fact managed to achieve the best import results of all the office packages we have tested. StarOffice smoothly imported our Office 97 test files, which have never before been correctly processed. The only flaw was the position of a few of the images. If a file contains Visual Basic code StarOffice simply ignores it. There are no tools to assist the conversion of this into StarOffice's own script language "StarBasic", so users who need to must go to the trouble of doing it manually.

No matter how good the ability to import Microsoft Office documents, the benefits are wasted if you can't keep the same fonts. StarOffice's TrueType support could do better. These fonts can only be printed after you have converted them to Type-1 format. The other office packages offer a more user-friendly option in the form of an external TrueType font manager.

## X-Server shut down

We found one still unsolved fault. Any attempt to open the 3D-Convolver (which conjures a three-dimensional object out of a two-dimensional object) in StarDraw resulted in a black screen and immediate termination of the whole X-Windows system.

Like its competitor Applixware, StarWriter now incorporates "text components" which are here known as "AutoText". This function allows you to associate a passage of text with an abbreviation. When the relevant abbreviation is entered into the document it is replaced by the corresponding text. This can make things considerably easier for users who frequently need to use standard text passages such as those recurring in business letters.

Sun seems to have borrowed an idea from WordPerfect and added an option to create different directory forms such as content directories or glossaries. StarOffice even allows you to create a literature directory which takes its data from the relevant database. For smaller documents these directo-

ry functions are easier to use than the equivalents in WordPerfect. In particular, the graphics displayed by these functions are much clearer. However, in the test on larger documents, the procedure under WordPerfect proved to be more user-friendly as a helpful tool bar is permanently displayed.

Fonts in StarWriter are now displayed in the drop down font list box using the actual font so that you can see exactly what each one looks like. However, this function doesn't go as far as the real-time preview from WordPerfect Office 2000, which shows the effect in the document itself.

The formula editor has also been improved. If you have a good command of the associated command language you no longer have to use the formula editor window when entering formulae. You can now enter the formula command directly in the text document.

## The rest of the action

A notable new feature of StarCalc is the euro converter, which is now available in the Autopilot. Adabas D has also been licensed for the integrated database StarBase. Unfortunately, this alternative search engine isn't a direct component of StarOffice so you will have to download a package of about 10MB for this module from the StarOffice website.

The vector drawing program StarDraw now supports transparency and can create graduated colour fills. This puts the module used to edit bitmap graphics in the shade. The image editing tools in this module urgently need to be extended. On the other hand, the presentation program StarImpress is still unbeaten under Linux in respect of its range of functions.

As with StarDraw, StarImpress also supports transparency and graduated fills. This is also the only presentation program under Linux that is able to produce animations similar to the animated GIF images. Output options have also been greatly extended, particularly as regards network capability. It is now possible to export a presentation as a "WebCast". To do this you first store the necessary files on a server in HTML format. The presenter then controls the presentation from his computer, determining when a new slide should be displayed in the viewers' internet browsers.

A small, standalone program by the name of "StarOffice Player" has been developed which can be used to play presentations on computers on which StarOffice is not installed. This can also be downloaded free of charge. Finally, it's worth mentioning that the e-mail program built into StarOffice has been greatly improved by the addition of an integrated PGP coding feature. However, this requires a Java environment to be installed. ■



### On balance

*The price/performance ratio of StarOffice is and remains unbeaten. With its wide range of functions this office package almost matches up to the considerably more expensive WordPerfect Office 2000, which itself lacks a few facilities that StarOffice has. However, Sun urgently needs to do something about the user interface, and in particular the integrated desktop, which many users will find far from intuitive.*

*The long application load times are also annoying. Start-up takes longer than it does for WordPerfect Office 2000, which is not exactly a speed demon. Most of the enhancements in version 5.2 improve on the details and allow for more efficient use of the package. Overall, StarOffice 5.2 is an excellent office package.*