OpenOffice.org 1.0.0

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO BE TOMORROW?

At the time of writing OpenOffice.org 1.0.0 had just been released. Richard Ibbotson takes a look at the project's history and what the first full version has to offer

When the latest version of OpenOffice.org appeared on the Net on 2 May 2002, the OpenOffice servers suffered what has become known as the Slashdot effect. Some of the mirrors were working – many weren't – but they were running at a snail's pace due to the massive demand for the new office suite. On the following day, the message "internal server error" was seen on thousands of computers around the world. There is such an amazing demand for this office suite that the OpenOffice infrastructure, and that of the whole Internet, cannot keep up with the download requests, or for further requests for an improvement or an update.

This once again reinforces the fact that Open Source and Free software is very much in demand, and many of the world's economies are in need of such well-finished products. The OpenOffice site hosts a project mission statement which highlights its goal: "To create, as a community, the leading international office suite that will run on all major platforms and provide access to all functionality and data through open-component based APIs and an XML-based file format." Even in its early stages it is turning heads and much debate is taking place amongst the international GNU/Linux community about issues related to this office suite and possible future developments.

Changing text options in the word processor

History

Where did the OpenOffice project come from? It didn't just spring up out of the ground in the way that so many things do. Back in the 1990s a German company called Star Division authored an office suite called StarOffice. As it was, it was a bit old fashioned and some people didn't like it. But, it did work and it could be used to produce some reasonably good finished documents. The concept of the free office suite had been born of a mindset which is not normally found outside the borders of Europe.

In the summer of 1999 Sun Microsystems, over in California, came to the conclusion that it was high time that someone gave Microsoft some competition on the office suite front. It was at this time that the US Department of Justice was getting the antitrust case together against Microsoft. It was therefore a fashionable time to offer an alternative to the MS office suite. Sun saw that StarOffice could be improved a little bit with their help and support. StarOffice 5.2 was thus produced and distributed into every corner of the globe.

For a long time all you had to do was load up the Sun Microsystems Web site into your browser and order a free CD which Sun would send to you at no cost to yourself. On arrival you could use the software contained in the CD with several different versions of Unix as well as GNU/Linux and MS Windows.

In October 2000 Sun Microsystems provided open access to the StarOffice source code, APIs and XML-based file formats in order to promote growth and innovation in the field of XML. This Open Source project attracted a global community of developers, centred around *http://www.openoffice.org*. Sun continued to have close links to the OpenOffice project, and itself contributed code.

Future versions of StarOffice, including the 6.0 release, will be built using the OpenOffice APIs and file formats. The source code is written in C++ and produces language-neutral and scriptable functionality including the Java APIs. This technology introduces the next-stage architecture enabling users to access the suite

as separate applications rather than one large piece of uncontrollable bloatware. Other features are also present, which includes XML-based file formats. There will be a commercial version of StarOffice and a separate OpenOffice project.

There are probably a lot of people out there who are wondering about licensing issues. OpenOffice uses a dual-licensing scheme for source-code contributions. These are the GNU Lesser General Public Licence and the Sun Industry Standards Source Licence. There is a definite road map to the development cycle, which is being closely followed by all parties involved. There are more than twenty different public projects involved with OpenOffice, all of which are broken down into sub-projects – each one with a specific task or goal.
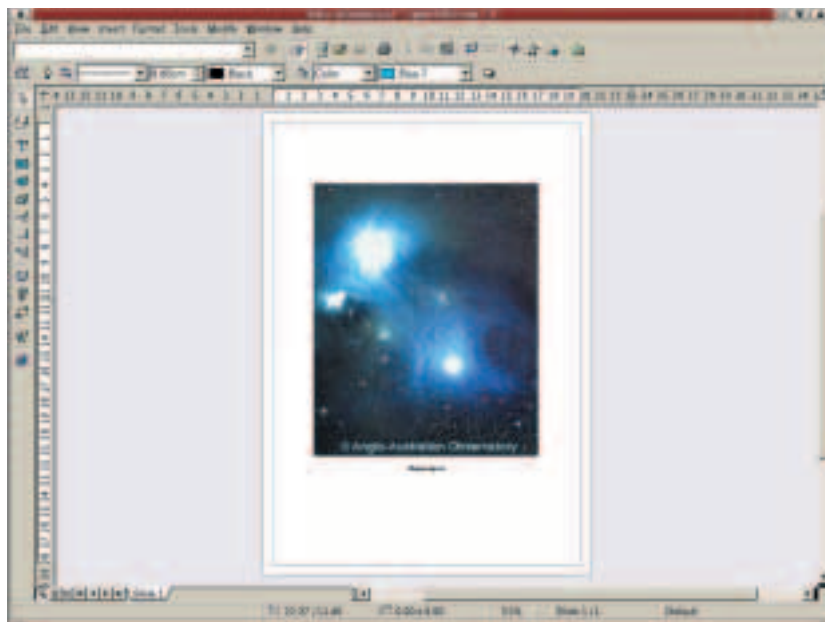
What makes OpenOffice so popular?

Maybe it's because it's a feature rich full-blown office suite that does all or most of the things that MS Office can do and a few other things besides. The full suite was tested in several small companies around the Sheffield area. A few office secretaries were asked to use the software without training. The result was they all said that they found it hard to tell the difference between OpenOffice and the Microsoft equivalent. Some of them even took theirs home and they now use it out of working hours for their own documents under Windows 98 and Windows 2000 and Windows XP.

Slimmer and quicker

In the original StarOffice the user was presented with a heavyweight GUI, which was extremely sluggish. OpenOffice works in a different way. You ask for a word processor by selecting File/New/Text Document and what you see on the screen a few seconds later is just the word processor that you asked for. You can do the same for spreadsheets or the OpenOffice drawing package – which is excellent – or if you want to produce a completely and truly cross-platform PowerPoint presentation, you can produce it on a GNU/Linux workstation or laptop or MS Windows workstation. After producing an MS Word document on your GNU/Linux computer you can print to file as a Postscript document and then convert that into PDF format or TeX using something like *ps2pdf* or TeXmacs or even an HTML document for Web pages. The possibilities are endless and you can keep your MS Word document handy on your computer just in case you need to email it to someone who is still bogged down in the world of proprietary software.

If you do need or want a database then it's much easier not to be tied to Access. You can use a GNU/Linux-based database or any other MS Windows-based database such as MySQL or Oracle, both of which are much more stable. If you want support for OpenOffice then there is a great deal of help from the mailing lists. See the info panel for the relevant Web page. If you do have any problems installing or configuring OpenOffice

Drawing functions

then it's best to consult this online treasure trove of helpful folk who know what to do next. You might also find it useful to know that there is an enormous online help manual, which you can get into by clicking on Help/Contents. What comes up on the screen next makes other proprietary look a bit tame and out of date. Each part of the OpenOffice suite has it's own help file which is extremely comprehensive, to say the least. So, if you can't quite understand what to click on, try clicking on Help first and that should sort you out.

To sum up, there's no real reason for paying for proprietary software at exorbitant prices and with such peculiar licensing schemes when you can get hold of an application like OpenOffice. Whether it's for home use or that all-important corporate presentation there's not much point in using anything else. This review of OpenOffice 1.0.0 was written using OpenOffice 1.0.0. At no time did the office suite show any signs of instability neither did the computer have to work too hard to produce a finished document. The hardware was exactly the same as that which is available in most offices around the world. OpenOffice would seem to be everything that it's authors claim it is. To get hold of your copy have a look at the info panel for a Web page to download from.

Info

OpenOffice.org Web site: *http://www.openoffice.org*
OpenOffice download: *http://www.openoffice. org/dev_docs/source/1.0.0/index.html*
OpenOffice documentation: *http://www.openoffice. org/documentation.html*
OpenOffice projects: *http://projects.openoffice. org/index.html?JServSessionIdservlets=czxtikdas3*
Ask questions on the mailing lists: *http://www.open office.org/mail_list.html*
TeXmacs: *http://www.texmacs.org*

OpenOffice	
Supplier	OpenOffice.org
Web	http://www.openoffice.org
For	Big improvement on StarOffice 5.2
Against	Database support not ideal
rating	🐧🐧🐧🐧🐧🐧🐧🐧🐧