

Crossover Office 1.3

MS Office under Linux

The major distributors are gunning for the last bastion of proprietary operating systems, the desktop, with Office packages such as Star Office 6.0 and Open Office 1.0.

At the same time, many users still rely on Microsoft Office – although this may purely be a question of habit. On the upside some Microsoft groupware components of MS Outlook/ Exchange still provide functionality that free Linux programs cannot offer.

The history of the Linux desktop is fraught with this conservative lateral trend: Fvwm95 was an attempt to emulate the look & feel of Windows 95, albeit without any attempt at achieving comparable functionality. And both KDE and Gnome have been seen casting occasional glances in the direction of Redmond from time to time.

The commercial Crossover Office package by Codeweavers discussed in this article is capable of running a native MS Office on Linux with some help from Wine. Additionally, it allows the user to access a whole range of commercial Windows software.

Version 1.0 of the product showed some promising aspects despite a few serious flaws. The fact that Crossover Office has now reached version 1.3.1 gave us reason enough to test the package in depth.

Installation: Easy

The installation has hardly changed in comparison to version 1.0. After logging on as a normal user, one simply launches a shell script and a few questions and answers later, the “~/cxoffice” containing the Crossover libraries – which are based on free Wine package – is automatically created.

Many Linux users may be able to omit this step in the near future, as the desktop Linux manufacturers, Xandros, have now integrated Crossover Office in their product. The Lindows and SuSE desktop Linux initiatives promise similarly integrated products in the near future.

Codeweavers, the makers of Crossover Office – with more than a little help from Wine – promise to get the Microsoft Office Suite and a few other Windows programs running on Linux without any hassle.

BY RÜDIGER BERLICH

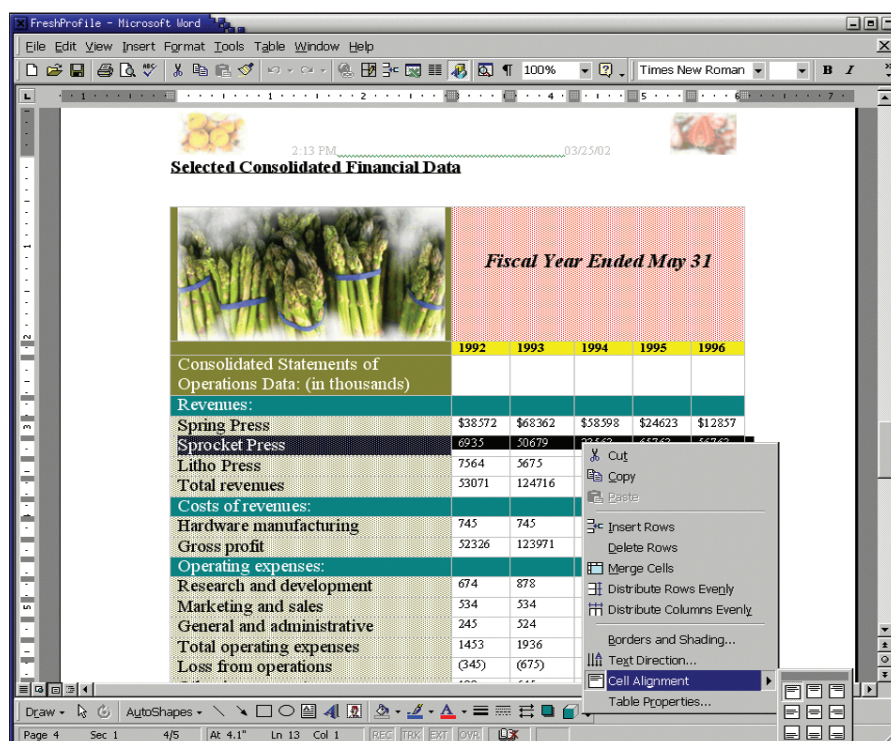


Figure 1: An embedded table within an MS Word document

The installation was entirely error free in our lab environment, which included SuSE Linux 7.3, SuSE 8.1, and Mandrake 9.0. Crossover Office can install other Windows programs on Wine. But unfortunately, it is still impossible to integrate programs that exist on a Windows partition without the original install media, although Codeweavers have stated that this feature will be available in Crossover Office 2.0.

Lindows has already taken this hurdle, although Jeremy White, the company's CEO warns that integrating programs from a Windows partition is far more difficult than a new install as the original status of the program is impossible to ascertain.

Operations: Mostly Fair

Crossover purchasers will have to get used to the fact that only the 2000 and 97 versions of, what is probably the most important program package, MS Office, will install. Codeweavers chief, White, states that they have Office XP running on Crossover Office in their labs, although there were (still) some issues with product activation. Version 1.0 showed that MS Outlook and Internet Explorer from Office 2000 above all refused to co-operate with Crossover Office.

This has all changed since the introduction of version 1.3.1. On initially launching Outlook you may still see the ominous, but harmless “Unknown error”

message that disappears when you restart the program. However, it seems that the entire functionality of Outlook is available. Internet Explorer 5.0 seems to run without any hitches at first glance, but an attempt to run a Java based Internet banking application led to disaster. The applet initially launched and even produced sound output, but any attempts to access the account data were doomed to failure.

Quick scrolling in MS Word was a lot less nerve wracking than in earlier versions as previous display bugs have been ironed out – and any temporary glitches do not have any long term effect.

We did note two buggy areas: in one case the mouse focus was lost under KDE and this prevented us from clicking the icons in the MS Word title bar. This phenomenon (which we could not reproduce) was easily remedied by pressing [Alt] + [Tab] twice to move another window to the foreground before returning to Word.

In another case, the application repeatedly crashes if a highlighted excerpt in a document is copied by pressing [Ctrl] + [C] and inserted at the same position by pressing [Ctrl] + [V].

In contrast to version 1.0, [F1] (which launches the Word help application) no longer crashes the application. The Office assistant, Clippit, is not a pretty site, due to a faulty color display, and additionally fails to fulfill its allocated task. Neat: You

can now select a text passage in a “doc” file you are editing in Abiword, copy it to the Clipboard by pressing [Ctrl] + [C] and then paste it into your MS Word document by pressing [Ctrl] + [V]. Konqueror URLs can be pasted to Internet Explorer in a similar fashion.

In addition to Office 97 and 2000 Crossover Office also supports a whole bunch of Windows applications, such as Lotus Notes R5. A list of supported applications can be found at [1].

Codeweavers envisages installing some Windows programs online. The “~/cxoffice/bin/officesetup” program tries to update to Internet Explorer 5.5 instead of Version 5.0, which accompanies Office 2000. Our test showed that this neither worked for version 5.5 nor for IE 6.0 which is not officially supported to date.

Licenses

Linux users deciding to install Microsoft products cross over the border to the realms of commercial/proprietary software. And this can prove extremely dangerous to Linux hackers or the owners of computers with pre-installed Linux software.

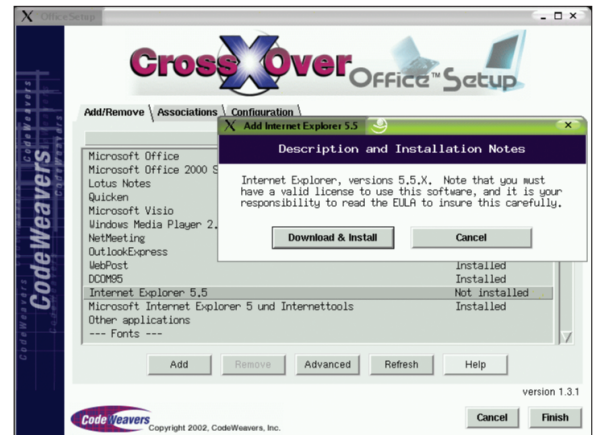


Figure 2: When upgrading MS Internet Explorer, you should ensure you have a license to call your own

You should read the licensing agreements of these products extremely carefully and make sure that you understand your own legal position. Installing Internet Explorer 5.5 off the Internet legally stipulates that you own a valid Windows family operating system license, for example.

Conclusion

The message of our last test was that a combination of MS Office 2000/ Crossover Office 1.0 was unsuited for use in a production environment. The current 1.3.1 version certainly has made some inroad on the number and seriousness of the issues. With a certain degree of optimism one can now view this combination as a genuine alternative to the established Office products for Linux.

The integration of existing Windows partitions and support for Office XP planned for the next version should see Crossover Office doing justice to the hopes placed on it. And if you are used to working with Microsoft Office, you should definitely take a look at Crossover, provided you possess an Office license.

The current Wine vintage shows Codeweavers holding their own with Microsoft Office and Windows developments. We can only hope that they can continue to keep up with this pace. And although you may miss some functionality or features, real Linux programs are still a genuine alternative. ■

Crossover Office 1.3



Type: Windows Emulator for MS Office

Manufacturer: Codeweavers,
<http://www.codeweavers.com>

Availability: Distributors are listed at
<http://www.codeweavers.com/about/partners.php>, alternatively you can purchase online by credit card

Single License Price: approx. US \$55, you may prefer to wait for SuSE's Desktop Linux, which will be available for Euro 129 and should include the Acronis OS Selector partitioning tool for NTFS partitions.

Pressure off

The existence of emulators like Crossover gives rise to fears that the development of equivalent Linux products may slow down; after all the pressure is off.

These fears are not unfounded: Corel's WordPerfect for Linux prefers the Wine environment rather than a Linux library and the Linux gaming company Loki Entertainment (who are now bankrupt) also used Wine to port their games to Linux. The most recent example is Borland's developer environment, Kylix.

Additionally, a large proportion of the functionality provided by Windows programs running under Crossover Office is already offered by Linux products, whereas Borland's Kylix and the Microsoft Outlook/Exchange combination offer functionality in areas that Linux products do not currently cover.

INFO

[1] Codeweavers Homepage:
<http://www.codeweavers.com>