ThinkFree Office 2.1

Coffee-Office

The US ThinkFree corporation recently released take two of its office package. We decided to put the package through its paces and see what those Java applications are up to. **BY TIM SCHÜRMANN**

When Java technology was introduced a few years back, numerous software manufacturers could not resist its tempting features. An application written in Java would run on any computer with a Java environment. This not only reduces development cycles, but opens up whole new markets. Microsoft Office competitors in particular saw the advantage of this approach and started porting their own office packages to Java.

Unfortunately, most of them overlooked the fact that the principles Java is based severely impact the performance side of the equation. As soon as it became apparent that these manufacturers were unlikely to come to terms with this issue, most Java projects were shelved, only to be then ditched some time later.

But California based software manufacturer, ThinkFree, continued developing its Java based office package, presenting version 2.1 of its commercial offering, ThinkFree Office in November. When a minor update came out in the middle of February, we decided to take a closer look at version 2.1.393.

Installation

ThinkFree Office needs a pre-installed JRE (Java Runtime Environment), version 1.4.1 or better. The safest course of action is to install the Sun RPM supplied with the office package.

ThinkFree Office itself is also supplied in the form of an RPM package and has a mere 35 MB footprint following installation. There is also a GUI based installation program as an alternative to the RPM package, but this was not included in our test package.

ThinkFree is slightly finicky when it comes to operating Systems, and prefers Red Hat 7.3 as its host System. Although ThinkFree ran perfectly well on our SuSE 8.1 system, we were unable to add the package to the KDE start menu.

Considering the fact that ThinkFree Office is based on Java it runs extremely quickly, launching faster than StarOffice for example. The minimal hardware con-figuration is a Celeron 400 with 64 MB RAM: this just about provides tolerable performance, but be prepared to wait after opening dialog boxes. The package just cannot get enough memory – the more the merrier.

Operations

After launching the program, the command center is displayed and allows access to the word processor (ThinkFree Write), the spreadsheet (ThinkFree Calc), the presentations program (ThinkFree Show), and a small file manager (ThinkFree Folders).

ThinkFree does not offer a database, however, the manufacturer does offer

space on an Internet based web server for a small annual charge, starting at 30 dollars. This so-called "Cyberdrive" service can be used by Think-Free Office as an additional drive.

Operations closely follow those of the Windows market leader, Microsoft Office. For anyone with experience of other office packages should feel at home with ThinkFree immediately. The individual application interfaces are plain and uncluttered, doing without dancing paper clips and similarly overloaded windows.

The Windows style help is extremely concise and merely explains individual menu items. A help wizard is not available.

Although Java does support this functionality, the individual ThinkFree components do not cooperate well, as is evidenced by the fact that data can only be exchanged via the clipboard. Similarly, there is no way to cut and paste data from or to other Linux applications. This means saving your work to a file first, and then importing the file to the application in question.

To partly compensate for this, the word processor does provide convenient features for embedding Java applets and JavaScript, as Web developers will be pleased to hear.

ThinkFree Office uses the Java management system for font management. Unfortunately, the latter does not access pre-installed system fonts and thus entails installing fonts manually. There are a few fonts included with the package, but they are restricted to a bare minimum.

The Word Processor

At first glance the word processor does create a good impression, but you may find yourself looking for a few functions that would facilitate your daily work. There are no templates on which to base new documents – this is a feature that none of the ThinkFree applications supports. In fact, there are only two predefined types "Document" and "Web-
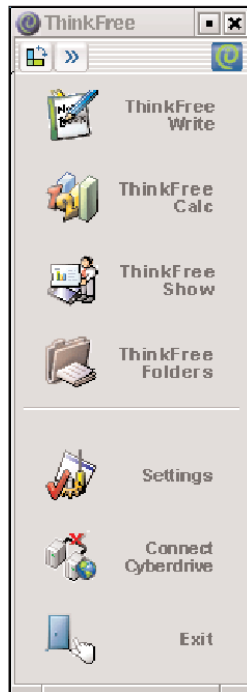
Figure 1: ThinkFree Office command center – the launch pad for the program's office components

Document" and they are identical.

Additionally, we would have appreciated input features, other than the automatic detection and formatting of Internet links – and while we are at it, a thesaurus and a hyphenation function would not have gone amiss either. There is a spell checker, but it is not a background task, which is in contrast to spell checkers provided by other manufacturers.

Although you can embed pictures, the program does not allow you to modify them, and lacks such simple image manipulation functions as rotation or mirroring, preferring to leave this kind of task to an external graphics program, although you can scale images while retaining or changing their original aspect.

Additionally, there is no way to alter the text flow around an image. It seems that ThinkFree treats images just like characters. There is no way to type over an image, for example. In contrast to this, image maps are easy to create. To do so, simply use the mouse to drag a frame around the required area, and then assign an Internet address to the area.

ThinkFree also has one or two image display issues: in some cases images did not display correctly, in others the images simply disappeared. The program is incapable of creating simple graphical elements such as rectangles and circles, although users do have the option of selecting a few colorful arrows from the 'generous' ClipArts collection.

The program's tendency to provide meager formatting functions also extends

to characters. Do not look for colored logos or sophisticated headlines, but at least you can change the foreground and back- ground font color and add a frame – although unfortunately this kind of formatting will automatically extend to cover a full line.

There seems to be no end to the short comings on the feature list: no support for footnotes, headers and footers, multi-column spreads involve Herculean efforts involving a minimal table function or tabs. And speaking of tabs, the program only supports one tabulator type, leaving the user with no alternative but to left-justify.

Having said that, we did find at least one interesting feature: the "Frames" menu allows the user to split the document window into multiple frames and thus view multiple documents or document parts simultaneously. This could be a big help, particularly when editing larger documents, as an added extra windows of this kind can be exported as an HTML frameset.

While you are working with Write you cannot avoid the feeling that you are actually using some kind of Internet page editor, rather than a word processor. Many dialog boxes suggest setting HTML specific attributes or additional tags (HTML commands). And this also explains why Write does not support serial letters, tables of contents or forms, or in fact anything other than plain, old documents.

Spreadsheet

The ThinkFree Calc spreadsheet offers a better range of features, although it cannot hold a candle to competitors such as the StarOffice component. It notice-
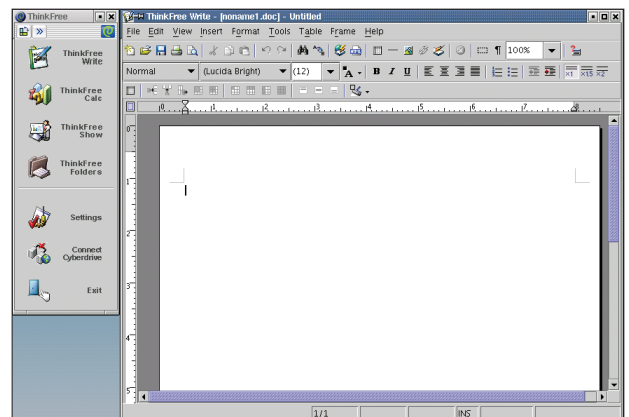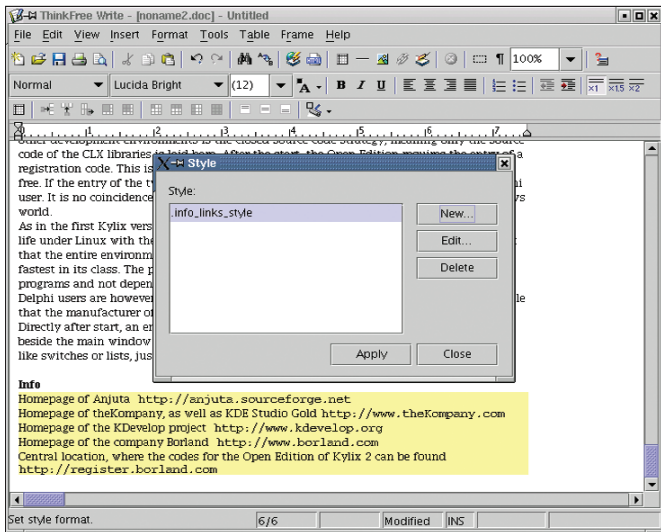
Figure 2: ThinkFree Office word processor

Figure 3: The Stylist stores formats for future use. Some formats, such as the yellow background apply to a full line

Figure 4: The ThinkFree Calc spreadsheet in action inserting a diagram below a table

ably lacks evaluation and entry functions for large spreadsheets. Additionally, innumerable minor niggles tend to spoil the fun, such as the fact that only US date formats are supported. Non-US formats need to be defined via the "Custom" type.

The function wizard is designed to help the user create complex conditions and formulae. However, the wizard in Calc is useless to all extents and purposes, as it merely organizes existing functions by category. The program lacks a means of applying multiple functions and fails to supply a description for a selected function.

Again, you need to resort to the online help for a description, and unfortunately, you cannot use help while the wizard is running. To top things off, some of the functions the program offers do not appear in the online help, or are simply blacked out (see Figure 5).

Users are partly compensated by the fully featured diagram wizard, and the fact that they can select arbitrary, non-contiguous cells. Incidentally, ThinkFree Calc is the component in the whole office package that allows you to create headers and footers for document output.

Presentation Program

ThinkFree Show goes to some lengths to hide its "Design Templates". As the name suggests, the templates comprise styles that can be applied to existing presentations. Having said that, the program is supplied with a miserly collection of only six types.

Apart from that, Show is quite a useful presentation program that provides a copious selection of graphical symbols and line types. It allows users to create master slides, and comes equipped with animations that should suffice for most standard scenarios.

Getting back to those niggling details, a tree view would be a welcome addition, and animation assignments could be more granular. Animations always affect a whole object and thus cannot be used to gradually fade in the levels in a tree. Cross-fading from slide to slide is not supported either.

You will also be disappointed if you are looking to embed multimedia or interactive elements. It is also difficult to export shows created by the presentation program: you cannot create an executable slideshow, and the program does not provide an external player. And finally, ThinkFree Show also has a few
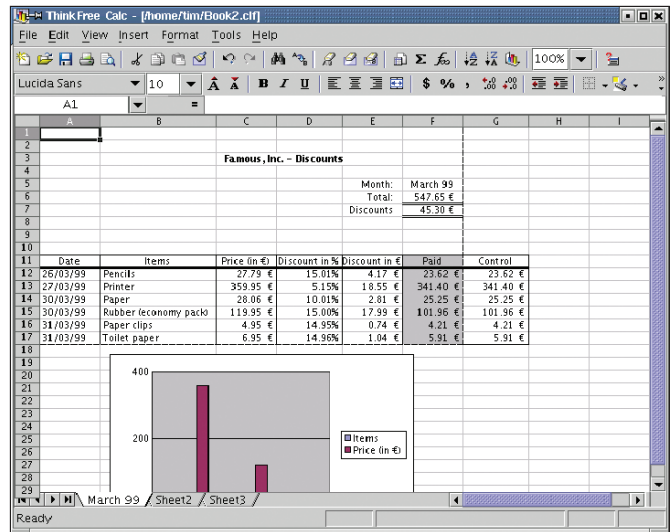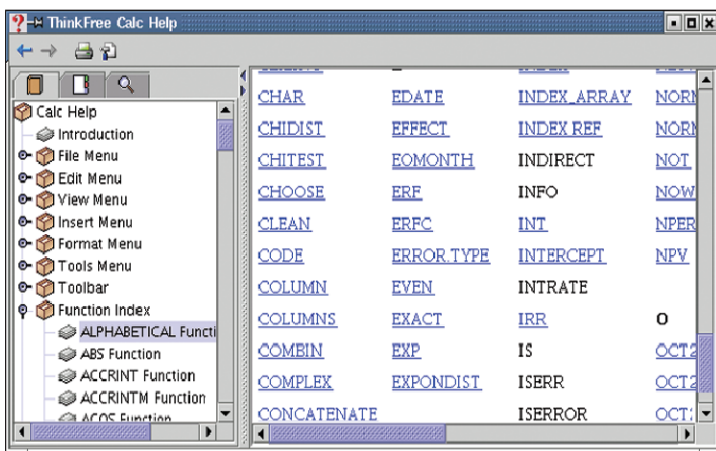

Figure 5: Thinkfree's help is fairly Spartan and fails to explain many functions, as you can see by the black spots
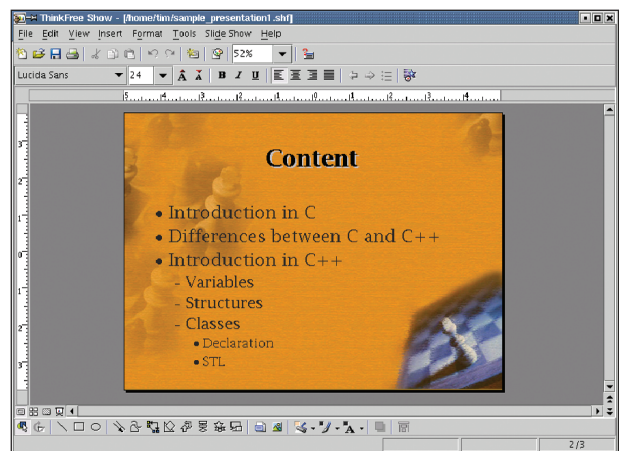

Figure 6: A Design Template provides the background for this Think-Free Show presentation

issues when displaying images during a slideshow.

Import

ThinkFree Office supports only the Microsoft Office input formats, HTML, simple ASCII files and its own proprietary format. Although ThinkFree had warned us that some Word elements would not be converted correctly, the results were tolerable – apart from missing or corrupted graphics and elements not supported by ThinkFree. The picture is similar for the other Think-Free Office applications: ThinkFree Show will even convert some PowerPoint animations. Surprisingly, files are saved in Microsoft format by default.
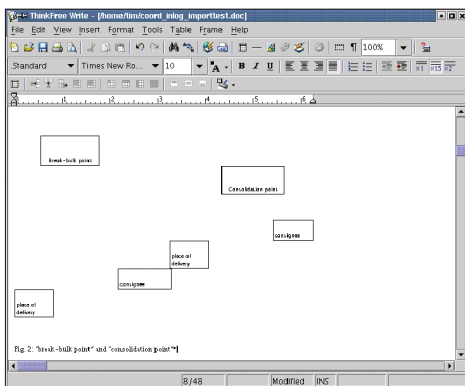
ThinkFree is less destructive when importing HTML documents, producing some of the best results that current word processors can offer, although still far from perfect.

Conclusion

ThinkFree Office is a small footprint, and compact Office package. We were unable to crash the program during our complete test program. Having said that, the program totally lacks highlights that would set it apart from its competitors. Additionally, the program's functionality lags well behind the standard set by OpenOffice.

The word processor component particularly needs some urgent attention. The Calc spreadsheet and the Show presentation module are more satisfactory, although not on a par with the Linux market leader.

In fact, we can't imagine using ThinkFree except to exchange data in heterogeneous environments or networks. The manufacturer currently offers packages for Windows, Linux and MacOS X starting at US $50 on its homepage at *http://www. thinkfree.com*. ∎

Figure 7: The import filter more or less destroys any graphics