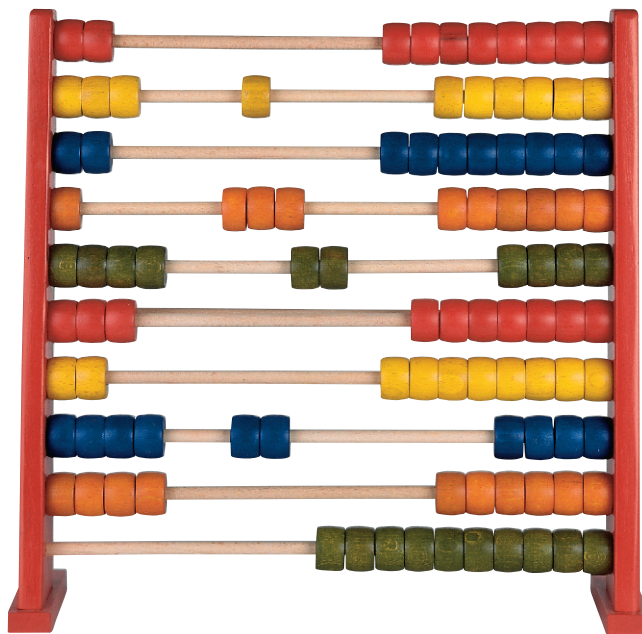**PlanMaker**

Spreadsheet Wizardry

After porting its TextMaker word processor to Linux last year, SoftMaker now follows up with its PlanMaker spreadsheet application. We take a look at the pre-release version, which is close to completion.

BY TIM SCHÜRMANN

SoftMaker [1] is a software manufacturer with various office products in its portfolio. Besides the TextMaker word processor and the DataMaker database (which is only available in a Windows version at present), the product portfolio includes PlanMaker, a spreadsheet application, which was recently released in a version for Linux.

Just like the word processor, PlanMaker is an extremely lean application, taking up a mere 15 MBytes of hard disk space – including the PDF-formatted manual, which also serves as a help file. The manufacturer does not include online help, in contrast to most other programs. The trial version that we looked at was also missing the templates and sample docs. However, to make up for that, there were numerous dictionaries for French, Portuguese, and some Scandinavian languages. If you install all of them, hard disk space use rockets to about 31 MBytes.

PlanMaker's frugal hard disk requirements are happily typical of the application, as other areas show. If you are familiar with office packages on the scale of OpenOffice, you will be pleasantly surprised at the speed with which the application launches and reacts to commands. This said, there were occasional, but noticeable lags when importing documents.

We had no complaint with stability. The program did not crash in our labs, although there were one or two display glitches while importing documents.

GUI

The user interface feels familiar (see Figure 1). SoftMaker uses its own GUI **toolkit**, which first saw the light of day when TextMaker was released. The toolbars and menu structures follow today's standards, and that should make moving to PlanMaker easy.

PlanMaker's so-called object mode takes some getting used to. The program enters object mode automatically whenever the user inserts or modifies a diagram or image. This prevents inadvertent changes to cell content, but it does tend to irritate anyone who is used to working with another spreadsheet.

TextMaker users should be familiar with this quirk. Fortunately, most users will not encounter object mode all that often, as PlanMaker tends to enable and disable object mode automatically as required.

Functionality

PlanMaker gets good marks for supplying a generous selection of graphical elements for illustration purposes. You can even put flowcharts together in next to no time by clicking on connecting lines. The latter snap to objects, and automatically move with them. Unfortunately, you do need to open a dialog (under *Object | New Drawing | AutoShapes* to access special elements of this kind (see Figure 2), but most users will be quite happy with the arrangement, as illustrations of this kind are a less common task.

Apart from that, PlanMaker is a simple, but rock solid solution, although it can not keep the pace set by Open or StarOffice. The only big helpers that PlanMaker has on offer are the **Goal Seeker**, a function that finds the source values for a given result by approximation, and the ability to group arbitrary cells. The program lacks many of the useful functions that OpenOffice has, and that take the pain out of working with larger spreadsheets. One example is the OpenOffice detective, which can mark all the lines affected by the formula in a specific cell. Any modern spread-

GLOSSARY

Toolkit: *A collection of tools and program libraries used to code applications or simplify the process of doing so. In the case of interfaces, toolkits typically contain templates for normal windows, buttons, or lists, and thus greatly influence the look and feel of an application.*

Goal seeker: *Goal seeking is an approximation method. If a cell governed with a formula depends on other cells, you can specify a target value (goal), and PlanMaker will use approximation techniques to discover appropriate values for one of the other cells that will produce the result in the target field.*
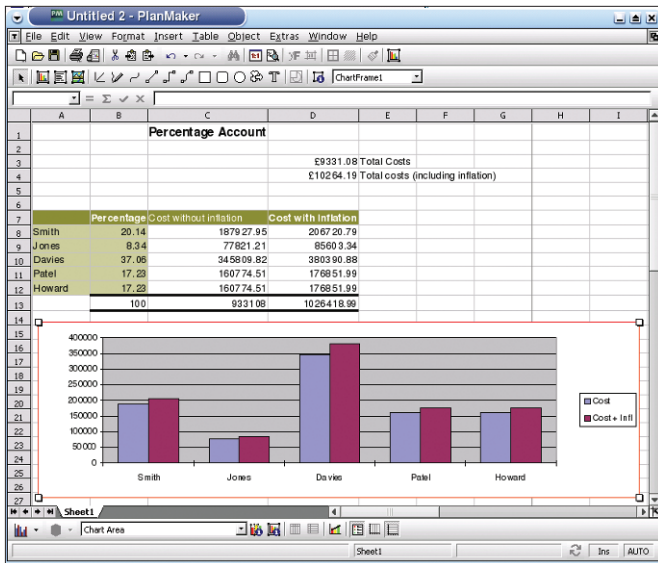
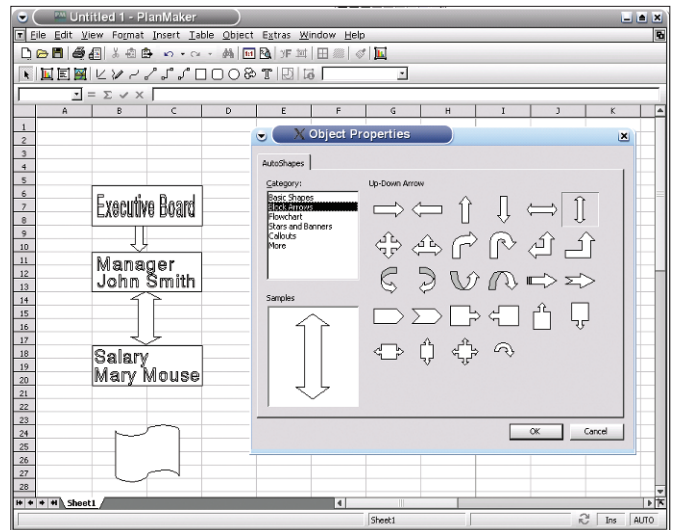Figure 1: The PlanMaker interface. All kinds of diagram types are available.

Figure 2: In contrast to more commonly used symbols, you need to access a dialog box to select flowchart elements.

sheet application should have this extremely useful function.

Details

The devil is in the details. The background spellchecker not only underlines misspelled words, but interrupts the user by continually popping up windows. Also, Excel users might miss input aids such as automatic word extension.

PlanMaker's selection of pre-defined cell formats shows the program in a more positive light. There are even templates for ISBN codes. The spreadsheet can transpose matrices, that is swap the lines and columns. Where OpenOffice invites users to take a detour via the clipboard, PlanMaker has an item in the main menu.

Import

There were mixed feelings again when we attempted to import Excel documents. Although PlanMaker happily converted the data, many embedded graphics disappeared (see Figure 3). As the program does not support macros or scripts, it discards both. We were quite pleased to see that the program supported StarCalc files, but not for long. In fact, PlanMaker can

only handle obsolete version 1.0 and 2.0 files. This problem is aggravated by the fact that the current versions of Open/StarOffice no longer have export filters for these formats.

Conclusion

Working with PlanMaker is fun. The program is small, lean, and seriously quick. What's more, it is available for various operating system platforms, including mobile devices like the PocketPC, besides the typical Windows support. Our only disappointments were the lack of functionality, an important point if you intend to use the program for daily office work. And users could do with some more help for larger spreadsheets. PlanMaker is recommended for home

use, or for older machines lacking in CPU power.

That leaves us with the price. The program is well worth the $ 49.90 it costs. You can get a discount if you opt for the package deal that includes TextMaker for just $ 69.90. However, OpenOffice offers more, and it is free, provided you have the extra processing power it needs.

If you want to give PlanMaker a trial run, the Suse Linux 9.1 Professional Package has an unlimited "Free Edition" based on a beta version. Alternatively, check out SoftMaker's homepage at [2] for a 30-day trial version download. ■
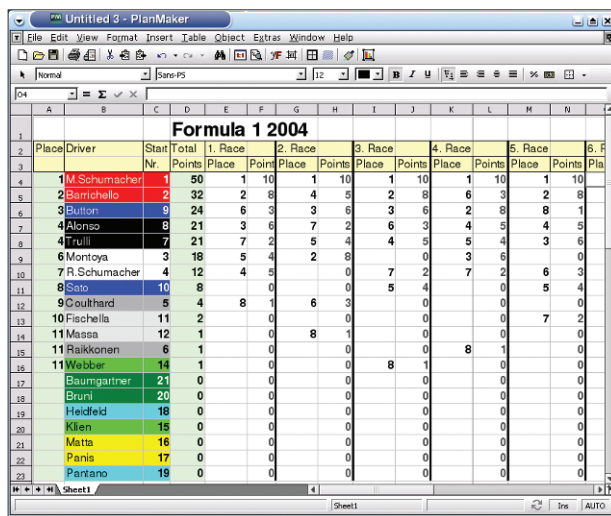

Figure 3: An imported Excel file. What you don't see, is that the program has trashed a picture that was in the background.
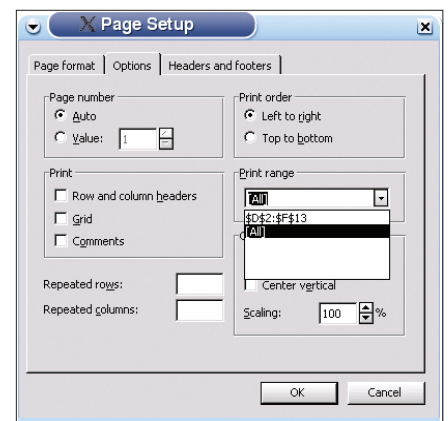

Figure 4: Setting the page margins to define the printing area, a roundabout method.

INFO

[1] SoftMaker: http://www.softmaker.de/index_en.htm

[2] PlanMaker Trial version: http://www.softmaker.de/pmltrialreg_en.htm