



## First Look at OpenOffice.org 3.0

# NEW OFFICE

The previous major releases of OpenOffice.org didn't disappoint, so hopes are high for the upcoming version 3.0 of one of the most important open source applications around. We look at what mouth-watering goodies the new version has to offer. **BY DMITRI POPOV**

If you want to try the latest beta release of OpenOffice.org 3.0, or you don't want to wait until the final version is included in your favorite Linux distribution, you can install the new version of the productivity suite yourself. The good news is that it won't interfere with your current OpenOffice.org 2.x.x installation, so you can run both versions side-by-side.

### Getting Started

To start, download OpenOffice.org [1]. If you are running Ubuntu, you need to get the deb version of the software. After downloading the package, unpack it and launch the terminal, switch to the resulting directory, and use the `dpkg -i` command to install all `.deb` files in the `DEBS` folder:

```
sudo dpkg -i DEBS/*.deb
```

That's it. Using the following command, you can launch OpenOffice.org 3.0:

```
/opt/openoffice.org3/Z  
program/soffice
```

### Keeping Up Appearances

The first thing you'll notice when OpenOffice.org 3.0 launches is that you are no longer greeted with an empty gray screen; instead, a brand new welcome screen – called Start Center – lets you quickly create new documents, open existing files, and navigate to the template and extension repositories.

Another thing you might notice are the slight aesthetics tweaks – OpenOffice.org 3.0 sports a new default icon theme called Galaxy. The change is not particularly radical, but it does provide a much-needed refresh of the graphical interface. However, you might not see the new interface because many Linux distribution providers add their own themes that fit the look of the distribution. In most cases, you can switch to the Galaxy theme by choosing `Tools | Options | OpenOffice.org | View` and choosing the

Galaxy theme from the `Icon size and style` drop-down menu.

### Format Support

Similar to the previous version of OpenOffice.org, the latest release uses ODF as its default format. However, OpenOffice.org 3.0 uses the newer 1.2 version of ODF, which includes a powerful formula language as well as a sophisticated metadata model based on the W3C standards RDF and OWL. The switch to ODF 1.2 means that older versions of the productivity suite might have trouble handling documents created with OpenOffice.org 3.0. You can, however, set OpenOffice.org 3.0 to save documents in ODF 1.0 by default, which provides a temporary solution.

When it comes to format support, the new version of OpenOffice.org includes the Microsoft Office 2007 Import filter. This means that now you can open `.docx`, `.xlsx`, and `.pptx` documents in OpenOffice.org, although you can't save Writer, Calc, and Impress documents in the Microsoft Office 2007 formats.

### Writer, Calc, and Impress

The Notes feature in previous versions of OpenOffice.org was woefully inadequate



Figure 1: OpenOffice.org 3.0 features a new Start Center.

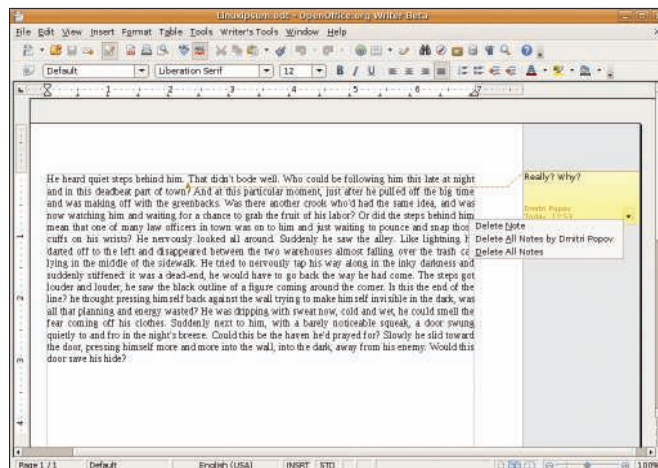


Figure 2: New Notes feature.

and not very user-friendly (Figure 3). In-line notes in a text document were displayed as tiny yellow rectangles, which were difficult to use and easy to miss.

If you use notes to comment and collaborate on Writer documents, you'll be pleased to learn that OpenOffice.org 3.0 comes with a completely redesigned Notes feature (Figure 2). Notes are now displayed on a side of the document, and each note has an arrow that points to the exact insertion point in the text. Notes created by different users are displayed in different colors, and each note contains a time stamp as well as the name of the user who added the note. All this makes it easier to keep tabs on notes and use them as an efficient tool for document collaboration.

OpenOffice.org 2.4 introduced the ability to apply different language settings to text segments in a document easily – a feature that comes in particularly handy when dealing with multilingual documents. OpenOffice.org 3.0 adds a small but important improvement to this feature. Spelling dictionaries in OpenOffice.org 3.0 are treated as extensions, and the *Tools | Language | More Dictionaries Online* command points you to the spell-checking extensions in OpenOffice.org's extension repository. Here, you can download the spell-checking dictionaries you want and install them using the Extension Manager.

The Extension Manager module has also been thoroughly reworked to make it more user-friendly. The new manager offers a better overview of the installed extensions and displays detailed information about the extension (provided that the extension's developer has in-

cluded the info in the package). Extension developers will also appreciate the ability to integrate the extension's help into the On-line Help module.

The Writer application sports another minor yet useful improvement: You can use the slider at the bottom toolbar to zoom in and out of the document as well as switch between different viewing modes. This feature provides a more efficient way to view and browse long documents than the *Preview* button in version 2.x.x (Figure 4). The Calc spreadsheet application has a few new features, too (Figure 5). The most notable one is the Solver component, which is designed to solve optimization problems in which the optimum value of a particular cell is calculated based on constraints provided in other cells.

Another new – and less esoteric – feature is the ability to share spreadsheets with other users. In the current version of OpenOffice.org, when the user opens a Writer, Calc, or Impress document, the system locks it so other users can't modify it. The Share feature in Calc gives other users access to the document and provides a simple conflict-resolution

mechanism. When you enable the sharing feature using the *Tools | Share Document* command, other users can open and edit the shared spreadsheet. The changes to the spreadsheet are merged when the

users save them. When they do that, the system notifies you about the modifications and highlights them in the shared spreadsheet. If two users modify the same cell, the system displays the Resolve Conflicts dialog box, which provides different options for solving the listed conflicts.

The Charts module in the new version of OpenOffice.org introduces support for error bars and regression equations. Now it's possible to draw error bars based on error ranges provided in spreadsheet cells. Additionally, it is possible to display regression equations as well as correlation coefficients.

The Impress presentation application now comes with native support for inserting tables into presentations (Figure 6). In the previous versions of OpenOffice.org, you could insert tables only as embedded Calc objects, which was both cumbersome and limiting.

The new version of Impress sports native support for tables, and the application provides all the essential tools for manipulating and formatting tables. When you insert a table using the *Insert | Table* command, you can use the Table

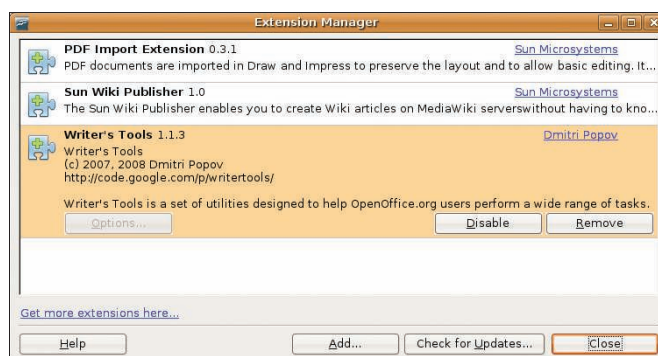


Figure 3: Redesigned Extension Manager.

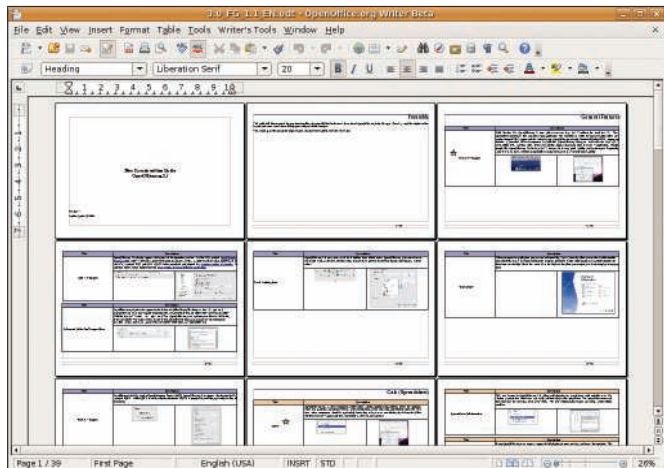


Figure 4: Page Preview feature in OpenOffice.org.

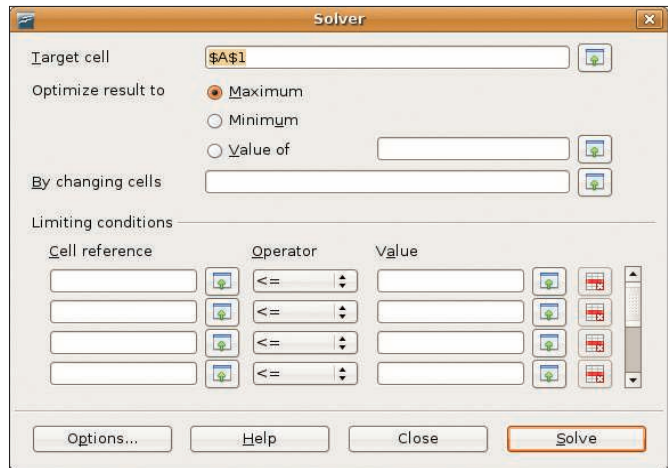


Figure 5: Calc now comes with the Solver component.

toolbar to add and remove rows and columns, merge and split cells, and tweak the table's properties. The Table Design tab in the Tasks pane also provides a few predefined table styles that you can use to spice up the overall look of the table.

**Extensions**

With a robust extension architecture in place, integrating features directly into OpenOffice.org is no longer the only way to add functionality to the suite, as the Sun Report Builder extension [2] shows. Instead of replacing the outdated report feature in OpenOffice.org Base, Sun released a new reporting engine as an extension. This trend continues with OpenOffice.org 3.0, in which several new "features" are released as separate extensions. The most notable examples are the Sun PDF Import [3] and Sun Presenter Console [4] extensions. As the names suggest, the former allows you to import PDF files into OpenOffice.org, whereas the latter provides more control over a slide show presentation.

Sun PDF Import is a boon for users who need a light-weight tool for editing and commenting PDF documents. The extension allows you to import a PDF file into the Draw application, and you can use all the available tools to tweak and comment the document. Then, you can then save the

modified file back to the PDF format using the *File | Export as PDF* command.

Although PDF Import does a good job of opening PDF files, it won't replace a dedicated PDF editor because of several important limitations. For example, the extension imports each line of text from the PDF file as a separate text block. This means that you can't copy a text fragment and paste it as text into a Writer document, which limits the ability to extract text from PDF files. Also, exporting the edited file as PDF doesn't preserve the existing bookmarks of the original PDF file. Thus, the PDF Import feature is useful for occasional light-weight editing, but it won't replace a dedicated PDF editing application. That said, you should keep in mind that the PDF Import extension is not designed to be a full-blown PDF editing tool.

Giving presentations created with Impress is now much easier, thanks to the Sun Presenter Console. This extension lets you see the upcoming slide, the slide notes, and a presentation timer. This information is available only to you and

the presenter, whereas the audience sees only the current slide.

Although the idea of extending functionality via extensions makes a lot of sense – after all, Firefox has been doing this for ages – there are a few downsides to this approach. For example, this means that after you've installed version 3.0, you still have to download and install several extensions to add some of the most interesting and useful – and some would say essential – features. Also, some users might find it slightly confusing that the PDF export feature is built into OpenOffice.org, but if you want to be able to import PDF files, you need to install an additional component.

**Final Word**

Steady improvement and a rather conservative approach to adding new features have always been the major traits of the OpenOffice.org project, and the upcoming version of the productivity suite is no exception. OpenOffice.org 3.0 is by no means a revolutionary release, but it does offer enough improvements and a few new features to make it a solid and desirable upgrade for most users. ■

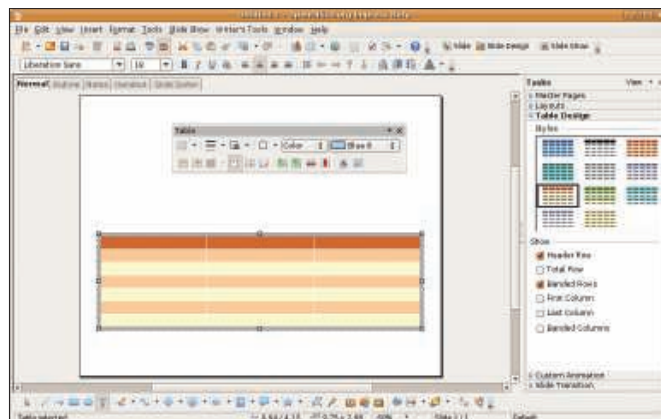


Figure 6: Impress supports native tables.

**INFO**

- [1] OpenOffice.org 3.0 Beta download: [download.openoffice.org/3.0beta/](http://download.openoffice.org/3.0beta/)
- [2] Sun Report Builder: [extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/reportdesign](http://extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/reportdesign)
- [3] Sun PDF Import: [extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/pdfimport](http://extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/pdfimport)
- [4] Sun Presenter Console: [extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/presenter-screen](http://extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/presenter-screen)