Apache OpenOffice 4.1

Once the poster child of open source software, OpenOffice has fallen behind in recent times. It the latest release good enough for it to regain its lead?

OpenOffice's fall from prominence in the Linux world has been dramatic. A few years ago it was in the standard installation of almost every distro – but now it's almost nowhere to be seen. After the highly publicised split from LibreOffice and later move to the Apache Foundation, almost all Linux users went with the new suite. However, on other platforms, OpenOffice remains the dominant open source office suite. The project's SourceForge page is reporting over a million downloads per week, so while OpenOffice may not be in the Linux spotlight at the moment, it's still one of the most widely used open source projects.

Following its move to the Apache Foundation in 2011, and the release of versions 4.0 and 4.1, OpenOffice has moved to a 'release when it's ready' approach, so we don't know when 4.2 will be available.

The main feature of 4.0 (released in July 2013) was a re-worked sidebar. This came courtesy of IBM, which has taken an interest in keeping the project moving since it stopped developing Lotus

> ## "IBM has been taking an interest in the project since it stopped developing Lotus Symphony."
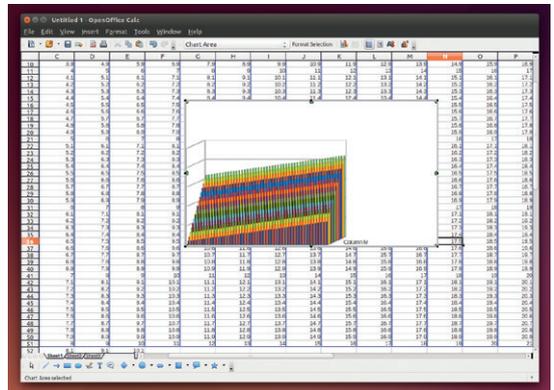
Symphony. The most hyped feature of 4.1 is improved accessibility for blind users. However, this is only available for Windows users. Of course, these haven't been the only changes.

The suite consists of six applications: Writer (word processor), Calc (spreadsheet), Impress (presentation tool), Draw (vector drawing), Base (graphical database) and Math (formula tool).

Writer and Calc have seen the most improvements. Almost all of these have been in the form of better

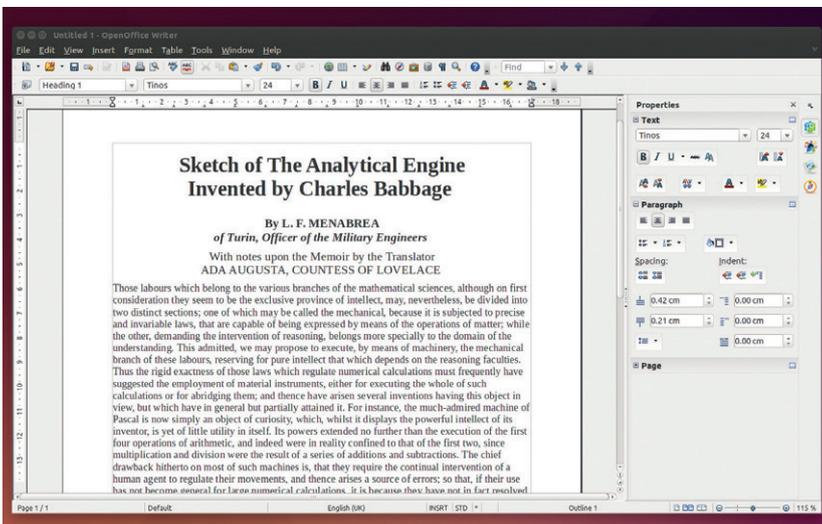We had no problems writing this review in OpenOffice, but that's a simple test.

3D charts now load quicker to help you confuse people faster with your pretty data.

support for Microsoft Office's document formats. Although this improves with each release, it is still not perfect. Draw and Impress have had some graphical tweaks to make them look better, while Base and Math remain much as they've always been.

Getting better all the time

Performance has been another area of focus, and if your abiding memory of OpenOffice is a splash screen that seemed to take forever to disappear, then you'll find the latest version a pleasant surprise. On our main test machine, it took a couple of seconds to open Writer and be able to edit the document. Calc, Impress, Math and Draw were similarly quick. Only Base left us waiting. This was tested on a spanking new machine with an i7 processor and an SSD, so to get a fairer picture, we fired up a six-year-old Centrino powered laptop. From a cold start, this opened Writer in about seven seconds. While this is still a little longer than we'd like, it's quite impressive for an old machine.

Apache OpenOffice is improving with each release, and it's a perfectly capable office suite. However, the improvements are quite small. Some other Linux office suites are improving at a faster rate, and OpenOffice is falling behind the competition. This is only the second release since the project's move from Oracle, so if OpenOffice is to remain competitive, the pace of improvements will have to increase. In Apache and IBM, it has the backing of two organisations with the capability to make this happen. LV

LINUX VOICE VERDICT

Better performance and support for Microsoft formats, but little else to get excited about in 4.1.

★★★☆☆