

Bytes & Pieces

Newsletter of the Hobart Computer Users Group Inc.

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StarOffice 8 beta

Sun Microsystems have just released the beta version of StarOffice 8. Prices for StarOffice 8 have not been announced but it will be significantly cheaper than the market leader, while offering some features not found in that suite. As most of the new features will also be seen in the free OpenOffice.org 2, you may care to join the Sun beta test program and get a preview of a significantly improved office suite. However, be aware that this is a beta, not a release candidate. It may collapse without warning, or perform sluggishly – I've had it do both so far.

Don't let this put you off. Beta testing exposes the new version to as many different computers and real world tests as possible so that such faults can be found and fixed. When the beta software collapses, it generates a report. Add the exact steps you took leading up to the crash, send it off and you will have made a valuable contribution to the development and testing of the leading alternative to Microsoft Office.

Sun claims the new features give increased usability with new toolbar concept and design, new OASIS document format (a Worldwide Web Consortium – W3C – standard), enhanced PDF export, strict XHTML export, native desktop theme integration (matching the application's look to that of the operating system), digital signatures and improved auto-recovery of documents in the event of a crash.

With just a few clicks of the mouse, the PDF export filter allows StarOffice 8.0 users to produce documents that can be read with an Adobe Reader on almost any computer using any popular operating system – Unix, Linux, Windows, Mac OS etc. StarOffice 8's second export filter is designed to create webpage code that conforms strictly to the XHTML standard. XHTML is recommended by the Worldwide Web Consortium for the development of new webpages. It is backwardly compatible with HTML 4.0, but allows designers to take full advantage of new techniques.

Toolbars open with a minimum of tools displayed and then change to suit the work you are doing. When I first saw this in an early OpenOffice.org beta, I wasn't impressed because it didn't work smoothly. Now it does. The toolbar of drawing and other tools has been moved to a default position at the bottom of the workspace (when active) but can be moved back to the side of the workspace if you prefer. Depends, I guess, on whether you follow the Microsoft- or the StarOffice model.

Unlike Microsoft's latest Office release, StarOffice 8 will work with Windows 98, 98SE and ME, as well as 2000 and XP. Sun no longer supports OS/2, Windows 95 or Windows NT, however. StarOffice is cross-platform and works on Solaris and Linux, as well as the aforementioned Windows versions. Although there is currently no beta for Mac, it is likely that the release versions will include one for OS-X. Further details of minimum system requirements can be found on Sun's website.

The OASIS open document format is a worldwide standard supported by IBM, Microsoft, Sun, Novell, Fujitsu, Nokia, Hewlett Packard, Dell, Hitachi, AMD, Intel, Oracle, Adobe, AOL, Computer Associates, Verisign, US Defense Systems Agency, General Motors, Airbus, Boeing, Reuters America and many others. Some misguided individuals have tried to put bills through various parliaments designed to force government agencies to use open source software. That isn't necessary, but open document standards are. They guarantee that purchasers of any particular software have a choice in future, because the documents that have been produced can be processed with any software that conforms to the standards. That guarantees access to old documents, even if the producers of the software, that was originally used, have gone out of business. And, given the widespread support that OASIS has already attracted, adoption of it as part of the software specification required by governments won't disadvantage any of the major players in the marketplace.

A lot of work has gone into making StarOffice more compatible with Microsoft Office. This includes improved filters for importing and exporting Microsoft documents in Microsoft proprietary formats, redesign of Impress (StarOffice's equivalent of Powerpoint), increasing the size of the Calc spreadsheet, import of password protected documents, the addition of autosshapes, and the adoption of "industry-standard" terminology. A number of bugs in earlier versions have been fixed. For example, the PDF export filter in StarOffice 7 couldn't handle shadowed outline text correctly. The new export PDF filter can.

For more information and to download a copy of the beta software:

<http://www.sun.com/software/star/staroffice/beta>

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Active links in PDF version

As mentioned above, one of the improvements to StarOffice 8 is the PDF export. In previous versions when you used PDF export to create a PDF document, any contents and Internet links in the document were rendered inactive – that is, you could not click on them to go to the target of the link. Email addresses were also rendered inactive. That has been fixed in StarOffice 8. The exported document retains all links, including email.

When I was using Windows XP I had access to Acrobat and was able to reprocess the exported document to reactivate the links. However, Acrobat does not run with my present Linux-based system and so the links have been inactive in recent PDF versions of the newsletter. As it was primarily intended for those who wished to print and file the newsletter, this didn't matter greatly. Now the reprocessing step is no longer needed and I will probably put the PDF version on the website as the "read online" version. For now, at least, the HTML email version will continue, although I've yet to find the "perfect" way of converting the StarOffice/OpenOffice.org file to an HTML email. I'm working on it, though.

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Internode's new plans announced

Internode have revamped their broadband plans with many changes. Existing users may continue on their existing plans, but, in most cases, they will get better value by changing to one of the new plans. In my case I can save \$10.00 per month by accepting a 1 GB reduction in my download quota. As I have never used more than half my quota, that reduction is

insignificant and I have elected to move to the new plan. Had I switched to Curl Internet's Tasmania Special, I could have saved a further \$10.00 per month and gained 9 GB of quota instead of the reduction. However, it would be several months before the savings would have offset the upfront fee.

Internode are now offering many more unmetered radio stations. Unmetered means that they do not affect your download quota, even if you listen to them 24 hours a day, every day of the week. 1500/256 speed is now available from \$59.95 per month (5 GB) and so is 512/512 – useful for gaming, file sharing or for hosting your own website. Their \$29.95 500 MB 256/64 starter plan remains unchanged and is the only 256/64 home user plan they now offer, all other plans being 512/128 or faster.

In limited areas, principally in South Australia, Victoria and NSW, Internode is rolling out its own DSLAM equipment and offering high-speed ADSL2 services. Other providers are also installing their own DSLAMs and it must only be a matter of time before Telstra follows suit. ADSL2 and ADSL2+ can provide speeds of 12000/1000 and more.

Undergoing trials at the moment in Australia is technology that can provide high-speed broadband via the powerline network. While there is still concern over the potential interference that broadband delivered this way may cause, this is another development that is worth watching. All in all, the delivery and pricing of broadband is improving all the time and 700,000 customers have signed up since Telstra slashed prices, half going to non-Telstra providers. Keep watching developments. There could be a (better) broadband deal in your future.

<http://www.internode.on.net>
<http://whirlpool.net.au/article.cfm/950>

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IBM and Lenovo

As reported previously, IBM is to sell its PC manufacturing to Chinese company Lenovo. However, although first reports may have created the impression that IBM was getting out of the PC business, such is not the case with IBM to take a reported 18% stake in Lenovo and to market the Lenovo products for at least the next five years. However, the deal is now being subjected to increasing scrutiny with concerns expressed about national security. Who would have thought the humble PC could trigger such paranoia?

http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/regulation/2005-01-27-ibm-usat_x.htm

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Make Windows XP start faster

If you're not in the habit of having a cuppa while waiting for Windows XP to boot, you may care to try speeding up the process. The best advice we've seen on how to do this can be found at:

<http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,1759,1768298,00.asp>

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Eudora and graphics

Some email messages contain graphics downloaded from webpages. By making the graphic invisible, spam senders are able to count the downloads of the hidden graphic and discover how many people have read or previewed their spam message. The last thing you want to do is encourage spammers in any way at all, so some email clients will either not download graphics from a website, can be set not to, or will warn you when such a graphic is encountered. If you find that Eudora is blocking or not displaying a graphic you do want to see, it could be because that graphic is not embedded in the message and has to be downloaded from elsewhere. Rather than change the default Eudora settings to accommodate an isolated message, just right click on the message and choose Send to Browser. Eudora will transfer the message to your default Internet browser – usually Internet Explorer – and display it in all its glory.



Near this paragraph you may see the logo from our website or you may see a space reserved for it. If you are reading the HTML version of this newsletter, you can try the above technique to display the logo if you only see a space with a small indicator graphic in the top left corner.

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What's the forecast?

Peter Williams writes:

I thought that I would let you know about a good program ... It is a program called "Weather Stats" which talks to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, and obtains weather info from an Australian weather station of your choosing and displays the info, such as temperature, etc in the system tray. You can also open up weather forecasts and other statistical info. I think that the info is updated via the internet every half hour.

Here is a link for the weather checking program from birdcagesoft:

<http://www.birdcagesoft.com.au>

Then click on the link "Weather software" on the left.

Thanks, Peter. Here's what the makers have to say about their program:

Australian Weather Stats is a small freeware application that polls real time weather statistics from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology and displays them in a number of ways on your computer Desktop. It is only applicable to Australian Observations not other countries. There was a lack of good live Australian regional weather statistics / observations in other weather applications that this is designed to provide.

*Australia is roughly the geographical size of the USA with only a small number of capital cities (7), thus capital city or major airport based observations are of little use as the stations are often some distance from the users in Australia. This application gets **observations from 497 Australian Bureau of Meteorology (B.O.M.) weather stations** plus 4 day forecasts and rain images and more ...*

As it's free, what are you waiting for? Go get it and always know what the weather might do!

Note: Non-XP users should be careful to follow the installation instructions and install the runtime package first.

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Beware

Finally, a word of caution from Paul Horne. Paul bought some cleaning fluid for LCD monitors. On the package it said it was also suitable for cleaning CRT monitors so he applied it to his Sony monitor which had an anti-glare coating. The cleaning fluid ate into the coating leaving what he describes as "a patchwork quilt" appearance. He had previously cleaned it with glasses cleaner without apparent damage. The moral of the story is: Be careful what you clean your monitor with, especially if it has an anti-glare coating.

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