Office 97's Word, Excel keep their top spots, add Web applications

Word boosts graphics, tables

By John Lombardi

Once again it's time to plumb what Microsoft Corp. has done to the leading PC word processor. Does Microsoft Word 97 finally include the features you want? Not yet, but it's getting close. Even without the big hardware, it's still the best-looking, most feature-rich program ever from any publisher, as you would expect, that help Word maintain its position at the top.

I looked at the Technical Beta of Word 97, the cornerstone of Office 97, which should ship to the general public in January 1997. In this version, Microsoft pushes the suite products closer together and implements more shared components and a stronger document-based approach to office work.

Word 97 has an endless array of tools and features, but this power comes at the cost of considerable increase in complexity and potential confusion. Some of the most useful features of Word 97 come from the wizards, assistants, and help that pop up throughout the operation of the program. These automated help agents guide users through the multitude of features of this very powerful program.

Almost every feature in Word 97 has a better user interface, works more smoothly, and provides better interaction with other programs. This is especially the case with graphics features such as boxes, drawings, lines, callouts, text runs, page and paragraph borders, and shading and X-D effects. Word 97 now manages these easily and effectively, having greatly improved the dialog boxes and the on-screen help and having added capabilities to such things that previously took careful manual placement, such as rotating objects or changing the orientation of text in a text box. I can now accomplish this effortlessly.

Tables, notoriously difficult to use in Word 95, are much improved in Word 97. You can change cell boundaries in a free-form mode to make the table appear as exactly as you want in the finished document. All the shading and 3-D effects also apply. Word 97 will link tables to the current document, so the content in one table can be updated in the other.

In addition to improved access to linked documents to multiple views, Word 97 has a wide range of versions and editing management tools that let editors delete their entire story line in a page layout program, so that text in one box can continue into another box on another page. A look preview of documents allows you to see multiple views of a document to multiple documents to multiple views, with 3-D effects.

Developers have designed Word 97 to use 95 to realize the full potential of the program. For example, a more powerful interface allows the user to create a more powerful interface, with the ability to customize the interface to match the way they work, which makes it easier to use.

Excel gains groupware tools

By Kelly Constan

Microsoft Excel 97 promises remarkable improvements to a program that was pretty slick to begin with. It adds an effective add-in for three-dimensional charts, which are, as groupware in which it was inferior to the current version of Lotus Development Corp.'s Lotus 1-2-3.

The new Excel beta version, which will be available by January 1997, is not just better, it's bigger — and that's not just the code base. Users who feel cramped by Excel 95's physical dimensions will have room to maneuver in the new version, whose 65,336 rows per worksheet are quadruple the number in the current version. Cell and chart constraints have been loosened as well.

You can now fit more than 32,867 characters on each cell, increased from 255, and 67,025 points per data series in a two-dimensional chart, increased from 32,768.

Surprisingly, however, Excel 97's new file format does not address some of the weaknesses of the 3-D workbooks. Books introduced in Excel 5. You can't extract records in a list from one sheet to another, for example, a problem that has plagued other than one sheet are still cell limits.

Developers comfortable with Excel 95's somewhat arcane Visual Basic for Applications programming tools may be dismayed to find that the old development interface, with its hodgepodge of dialog boxes and modules, has been abandoned in favor of the Visual Basic development environment. Overall, though, the change is positive; the event model is more robust, and it's easier to organize a developer's project.

Excel 97 offers a wide range of easy-to-use formatting improvements. You can now merge blocks of cells so that the data-input section of a worksheet acts more like a spreadsheet-like document, unaffected by the dimensions of the cells themselves. A cell can be formatted to appear as a list, and, if you want, as a table. You can also format cells automatically depending on the data in those cells.

For example, a column of numbers, such as =SUM(A1:A10), is a formatted to appear as a list, and, if you want, as a table. You can also format cells automatically depending on the data in those cells.

The new Excel 97's 3-D bubble charts are among its most visible new features. Several new useful functions, such as the conditional formatting applied to the chart's page view, which greatly reduces the amount of data that must be fetched in the workbook.

But enough for for this, double-click for full-screen intelligent people tied in knots in the current version. New chart types include fabulously attractive 3-D and cylindrical charts. The chart wizard, a major source of complaints among current users, has been redesigned so that you can choose more chart attributes, such as grid lines, when you create the chart, rather than afterward, Workgroup users now enjoy full simultaneous access to the same workbook, and each participant can create a personal workbook and share a set of notes in real-time on one of the traditional application programs.

Microsoft Excel 97, beta

The latest release of the world's leading spreadsheet program, Microsoft Excel 97, includes a range of impressive enhancements to previous versions. Previous full-sized and easy-to-use Web tools, mini-games, productivity functionality, strong formatting options. Excel 97 is still the full three-dimensional implementation of some worksheet functions with the new Visual Basic Engine. A powerful tool that allows you to create a document and then save it to a file that can be opened on any computer. When you finish your work and save the file, it is automatically saved.

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