

Three Essential Open Source Tools for Presenters (2006)

By Rob Reilly

While If you are a die-hard PowerPoint, Visio and Photoshop pro you may not even be aware that open source software tools exist for presenters. But they do.

Open source software, especially Linux and OpenOffice.org have come into the spotlight in recent years, as competition for products offered by Microsoft and Apple. They can be freely downloaded from the Internet, are stable, and are resistant to proprietary vendor lock-in. This article will give you a quick overview of these programs, what they are used for, and how you can get them.

Presenters face a specialized software need, because they have to be able to create slide shows and work with bit-mapped, as well as vector graphics files.

I'm happy to report that open source software is available to meet these needs in the form of OpenOffice.org and The Gimp. Both are available in versions for Windows and Linux.

This article will give you a quick overview of these programs, what they are used for, and how you can get them.

The OpenOffice.org Suite

The OpenOffice.org suite is made up of four different applications:

- Impress - the presentation program similar to MS PowerPoint.
- Draw - the vector graphics drawing editor similar to Photoshop.
- Writer - the full-featured document editor similar to MS Word.
- Calc - the spreadsheet program similar to MS Excel.

Presenters, of course, will be most interested in Impress and Draw.

Impress

Our first essential open source presenter tool is Impress. Impress is an easy to use presentation manager.

If you are familiar with MS PowerPoint you'll be right at home with Impress. As a matter of fact, you can even import and export PowerPoint files. The big difference between the two programs really only amounts to the user interface. Buttons and icons are in different places in the menus, but normally serve the same purposes.

Getting started with Impress is easy. You have a choice of creating your slide show by importing another presentation (such as PowerPoint), doing everything manually or using the Autopilot. Building a new slide show using the Autopilot, is by far the easiest.

The Autopilot will lead you through such things as setting a background, selecting transitions and choosing the layout to use for a slide template. It's only a few short steps to a basic presentation. Once you've developed a prototype, it's a simple matter to go through and add graphics, change transitions, add sounds, etc.

Running the slideshow is easy, too. Move to slide number one, click the "slide show" icon and page through the slides using the mouse or pg-up/pg-dn buttons.

You may be interested in a couple of interesting features in Impress.

The program allows presenters to make a graphical image follow a line. The line can be straight

or curved and it can travel at various speeds. Perhaps you'd want to shoot some stars across your slide? Or, how about having an image of your CEO traveling around to all the the branch offices on a slide? It's right there and very easy. Lay down a line, specify what object you want to use and then tell the object to follow the line, with the "assign object to a line" menu item. Even works with text.

Impress can also export HTML, Flash and PDF files.

The HTML export is nice because it actually creates a little web slide show with buttons to control moving forward and backward through the presentation. It's all done using a wizard that lets you select the button styles, screen resolution, etc.

Flash and PDF formats are popular these days and are produced with similar automated tools.

If you're familiar with PowerPoint, you'll be right at home with Impress.

Draw

Draw is our second essential presenter's tool. Draw is a vector based graphics editor, similar to Visio. It differs from bit-map editors in that it deals with graphical objects rather than painting pixels. Photoshop is a bit-mapped editor.

Vector graphics are great for the presenter because they can be copied, moved, re-sized and changed with minimum fuss.

I've used Draw to create logos, system design charts and various business graphics. Draw can also export different types of files, including pdf, bmp, jpeg, png, and tiff formats.

OpenOffice.org version 2.0 (which will be out soon) has a new open standards XML file format, that will ensure that you will be able access your content from a variety of programs and not be locked into any one particular vendor's proprietary format.

Draw is easy to use and can be started by simply opening a new "drawing" file under the main OpenOffice.org menu.

The Gimp

Complimenting Draw is the equally capable "The Gimp" editor. This strangely named program (it stands for GNU Image Manipulation Program) is a bit-map graphics editor. It is almost a mirror image to Photoshop. It's been the only major program of it's type, in the open source world, for a number of years. So, The Gimp has had a lot of time to grow and mature.

The Gimp let's you push pixels around. It has all of the features and tools needed for editing photos and pictures, like masking, layers, transparency and color manipulation. It also has some wild filters, that can create effects like an embossed outline of a picture or a making large text look like shiny metal.

The Gimp can work with all types of bit-mapped file formats including jpg, png, tiff, bmp and many others.

Download The Gimp from the Web, give it a try and I think you'll like it. And, you sure won't be able to beat the price.

Conclusion

Through the magic of open source software, today's busy presenter has a host of tools available to help them do their jobs. We've looked at OpenOffice.org Impress, that can be used to create slide shows. We've looked at the Impress' cousin, Draw that let's you do vector graphics. The oddly named, The Gimp is there to help you with your bit-mapped graphics chores. All three

compliment each other and are essential to a presenter's tool box. Give them a try and you may just start questioning why you've been so attached to PowerPoint, Visio and Photoshop, all this time.

The OpenOffice.org Office Suite is available at <http://www.openoffice.org>.

The Gimp is available at <http://www.gimp.org>.

Rob Reilly is an internationally known freelance technology writer whose articles appear in LinuxToday.com, Linux Journal Magazine, NewsForge.com and /PC Update/ Magazine. He offers professional writing, seminar and consulting services on Linux desktop applications, conversions to Linux/OSS, portable computing and presentation technology.

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