KOffice User Interface Proposal

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Introduction

I think the most important thing in the interface of an office application is the document. The interface should be as minimal as possible, to not interfere with the document you're working on. I have tried to achieve this in my proposal.

In this document, I'll present my proposal for the new KOffice User Interface. I hope I made everything understandable, I'm not a native Englisch speaker so please forgive any spelling errors.

Please note that I have focussed mostly on KWord to explain everything, but the same concepts apply to other KOffice applications off course.

Main navigation: Panels

I got this idea from Microsoft Office for Mac (no, it's not another Office-clone, please bear with me). For formatting, they use a floating window (seperate from the document window) called a "panel".

A panel consists of a few categories, that can be opened or closed by clicking on the big "title button". When opening a category, the window's height expands. When closing, it decreases. Multiple categories can be opened at the same time.

In Office, there are other toolbars. But I think that in KOffice, toolbars should all be removed and everything placed on panels like these. There are many advantages to this:

- Since a panel is seperate from the document window, it can be placed wherever the user wishes.

- When opening multiple documents, the same panels can be used. This saves screen space, since the same toolbars don't have to be on screen multiple times.

- A user can show the features he uses most, and hide those he doesn't use that often. Again, this saves screen space and makes the interface less cluttered. Yet hidden features are easly accesable.

- No more toolbars leaves more room at the top of the window, so more document can be shown on screen.

- There is more space to put the controls than on a standard toolbar. This leaves space for labels or titles, to clarify certain functions. This is much more user-friendly than just having a toolbar full of non-descriptive icons.

- Everything is much easier to access than with a menu. Most of the features are just
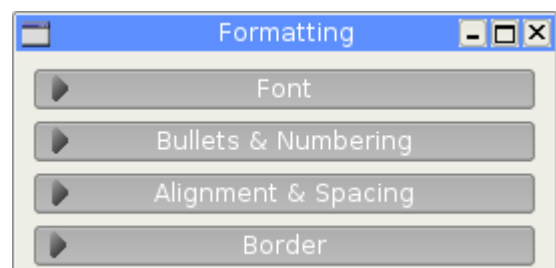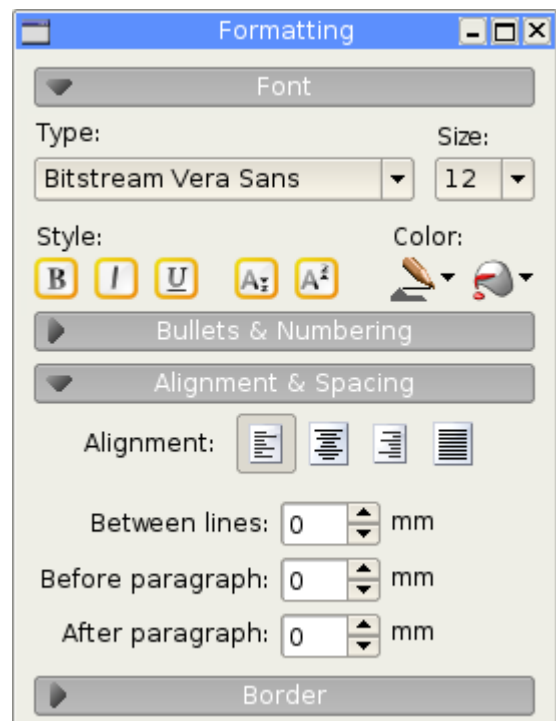
2 clicks away.

When using this approach, everything that is not really related to the document (toolbars, side-panels, menu bar, ...) should be removed from the window.

Panel-windows should have the following characteristics:

- They do not show up in the taskbar, or via any other window-switching method.

- Only 1 instance of the same panel, no matter how many documents are open.

- When the application loses focus, the palettes disappear.

- A palette window can not be covered by another window.

- Position and state (which categories are open/closed) is remembered accross application restarts.

Now, putting everything into 1 palette seems excessive, so I defined 2 palettes. In these examples, I'll talk mainly from the viewpoint of KWord, but the other applications use similar (or identical) palettes.

- **The document palette**: this is the "main" palette. On this palette, you can select the current paragraph- and character styles (more on that in a bit), insert objects (images, tables, ...), and perform actions like saving or printing a document.

- **The formatting palette**: with this palette, you can alter the formatting of the objects on the document (font, alignment, border, ...).

The reason I seperated the document- and formatting-palette, is because I think it is important to encourage the semantic editing of documents. I don't want to repeat changing the formatting for each title in my document, I want to say "this is a title" and let the formatting be applied automatically. So I designed the interface so that it is easy to pick styles and define new ones. The rest of the formatting is moved to a second level (the formatting palette), which should only be visible when you want to change a style.

I will now describe each palette more in detail.

The Document palette

This palette will differ the most from application to application.

Paragraph & character styles

These 2 categories are practically the same UI-wise (so I only made 1 mockup). They both provide a list of styles. The difference is that "paragraph styles" are styles that apply to a whole paragraph, and "character styles" apply to a portion of text.

Some example paragraph styles would be headings, normal text, bulleted text, quotes, etc. Character styles would be things like emphasis or fixed font. Everything has a paragraph style and a character style (for example, 2 paragraphs with paragraph "normal text" which contain some words with character style "emphasis").

The style list gives the name and a preview of what
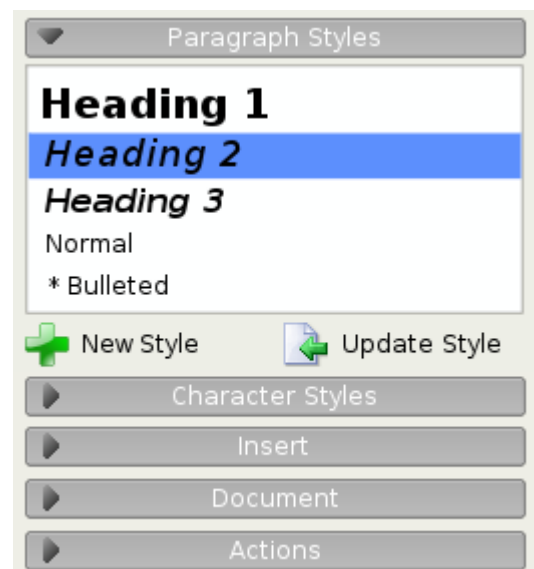
the style would look like. When clicked on a style, it is applied (to the current paragraph or to the current selection). The current style is highlighted.

When the formatting of the text is changed using the formatting palette, it is shown in the style list by showing a red X next to the style name. Also, the buttons "New style" and "Update style" becoma visible. With "New style", you can create a new style with the current formatting (the text style is then set to the newly created style). "Update style" updates the current style with the new formatting (which is then applied to all the text with the same style).

When the style isn't changed, the "Hightlight" button becoms visible instead of "New style" and "Update style". When clicked, all text with the currently selected style will be selected.

Insert

The insert-category contains of a set of tabs. On these tabs, there is a list of insertable objects. For example, on the "image" tab the list would contain various sources of images (a file, the web, a scanner, ...), on the "characters" tab the list would contain special characters, on the "table" tab the list would contain (previews of) various predefined templates of tables, etc.

This way, inserting things becomes realy easy. Instead of having to wander through sub-sub-menus, just a few clicks will do.

The list should contain icons with description, or previews of what's going to be inserted. The dimensions of this icon can vary according to the type of object (a character doesn't need a smuch space as a table preview). Inserting is done with a single click.

Off course, the tabs would vary according to the application. In KPresenter for example, one would have an extra tab with slide designs to insert a new slide.
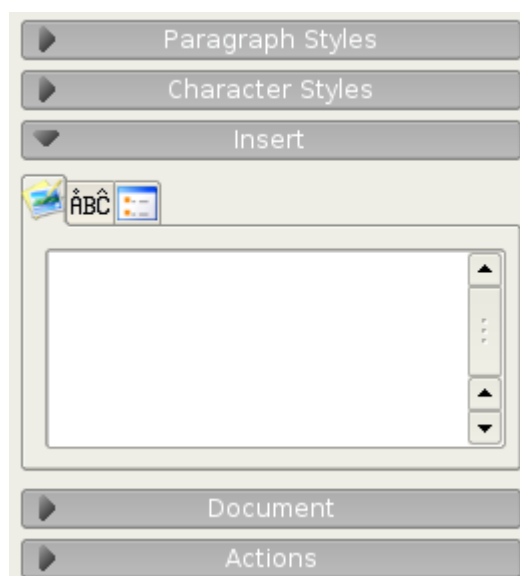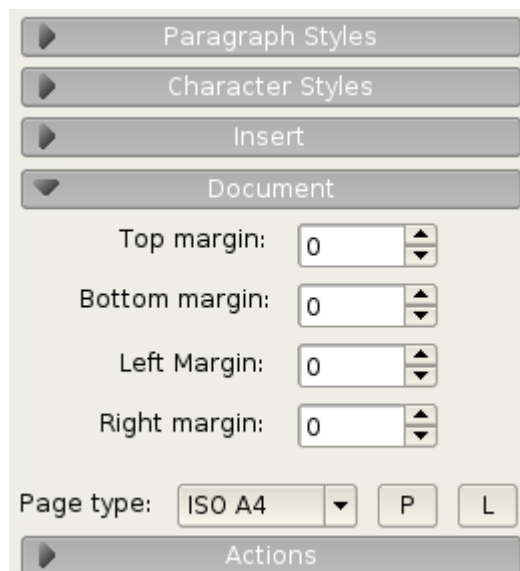
Document

In this category, the layout of the page is defined: margins, page type, portrait/landscape, and so on.

Actions

This category contains all the actions a user can take with the document: save, print, spellcheck, copy/paste, etc.

The Formatting palette

This palette contains all the formatting options. This palette is normally hidden, but can be displayed by

clicking on the button in the "actions"-category of the Document palette, or with a keystroke. The state of the palette (which categories are open, the position it had on the screen, ...) before it was hidden should be restored after showing it again.

These categories can be expanded when selecting an object that requires extra formatting options, for example a picture (dimensions, cropping, ...) or a table (number of rows, ...). When selecting such an object, the palette must be shown if it was hidden (and disappear again when this object becomes deselected).

This palette will be (mostly) the same for each application. For KSpread it should have a "Value" category (to change the vaue type and formatting of a cell) but that's about it.

I think the categories speak for themselves, so I'm not going to review them all.
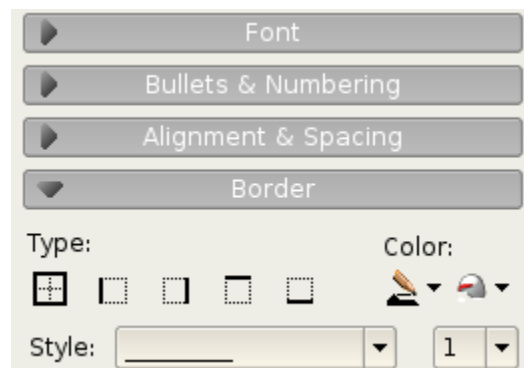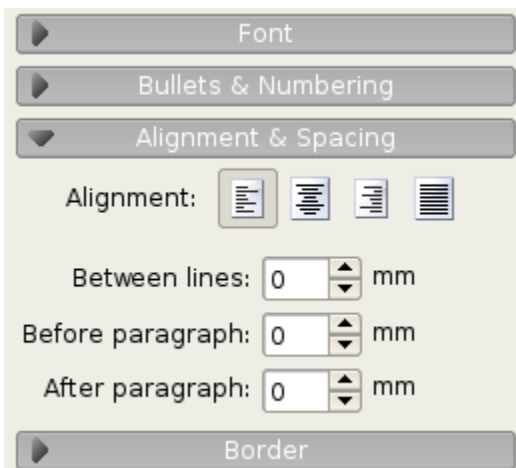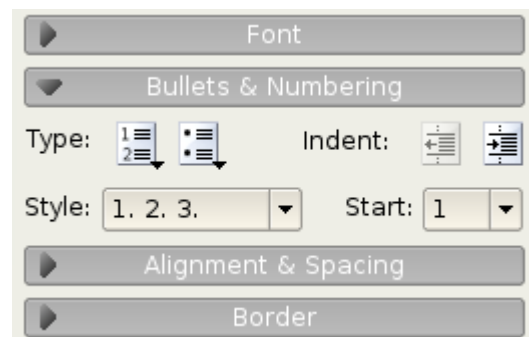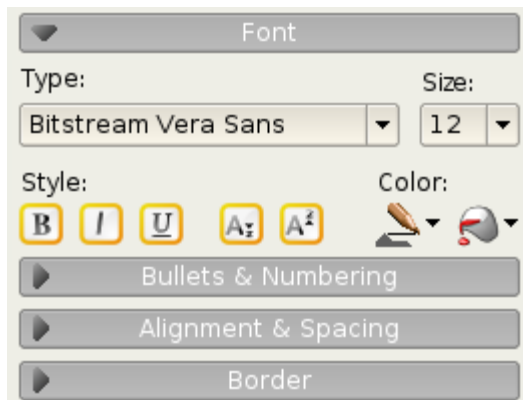
The New Document window

This window is shown when starting an application from the KOffice suite, or when chosing "New" from the Document palette. It allows to select a theme to use for your new document (or to open an existing file).

In the top bar, the user chooses which kind of document he wants to create (the icons only show the installed KOffice applications). The categories on the left contain a number of "themes" for the new document. The themes are shown in the area on the right, with a large preview page. The user then selects a theme and clicks "create" to create the new document using this theme.

With the "from the web" category, a user browse themes that are published ont the web

(using the KHotNewStuff framework). When a document is created using a theme from the web, it is automatically placed in the right offline category.
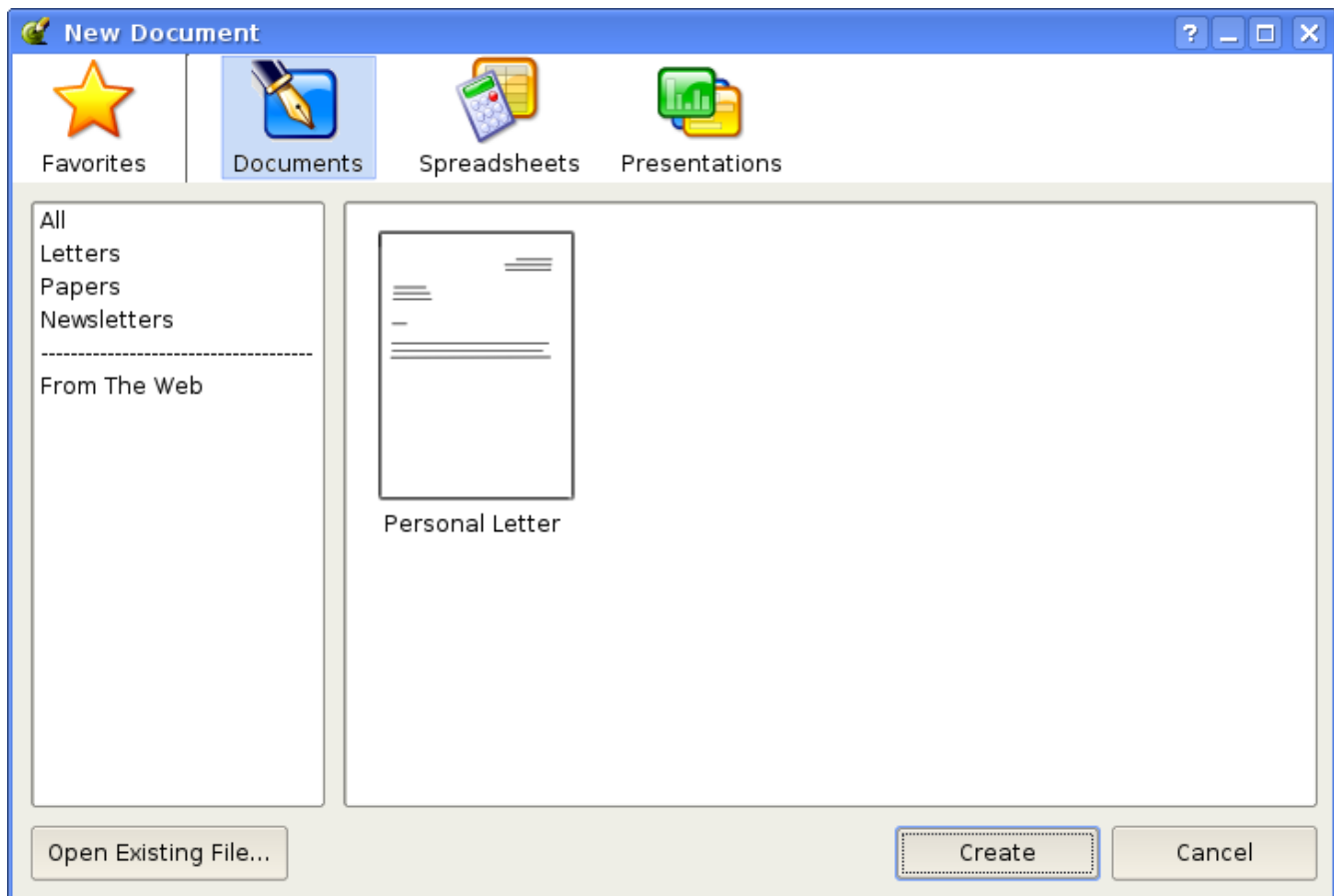
Under "Favorites", the user can put his favorite themes (using drag & &drop). This should be the default page when starting a KOffice application, selecting the first theme for the application that was started (so for example, when opening KWord it should select the first text document theme it encounters). When clicking and holding the "New" button on the Document palette, a menu shows up with the items from this category.

I think it is very, very important to have lots of great themes with KOffice. Not only the sharing of themes is important, also the amount of default themes. The KDE community has lots of great graphic artists, have them create great looking themes to be shipped as default. Maybe organize a competition of some sort.

Also, not only KPresenter should have great looking themes, each application should have some of those. A theme for a text document should have several pages defined in it, that can be used for example as a front page or title pages. The "insert" category on the palette could have an extra tab to insert these pages.

Note that there is no "recently openend files"-section anywhere. I think this should be part of the future KDE open dialog (using the desktop search framework), not of each individual application.

The Main window

Like I said earlier, the main window should not have too many UI elements. It should focus on the document itself.

Notes

When collaborating on a document, you want to communicate your thoughts efficiently with your co-workers. So, it's important you can add clear notes to a document.

Notes can be added to the document as little "floating windows", like stickies. They can be placed anywhere on the document and can't be covered by something else on the document. They can be easly be switched on/off with a toggle button.

A note can (but doesn't have to) be attached to another object (a piece of text, an image, …), to help clarify what piece of the document it's about. To do this, just select some text or another object and click the "add note"-button (not selecting anything before clicking the button just adds a note that isn't connected to anything).

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By: Jeroen Vaes

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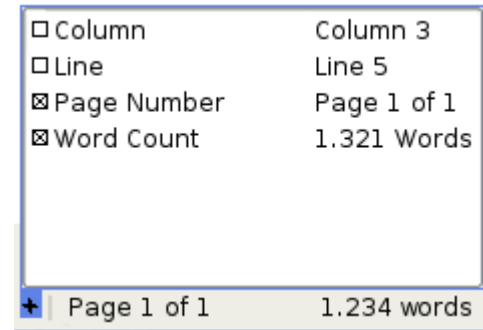
The status bar

I actually stole this from (the previews of) Office 12. Hey, I think it's a great feature, so why not :-)

The status bar has become mostly useless. Most of it is empty, it doesn't show a lot of info, etc. So, let's try to make the toolbar useful again.

On the left of the toolbar, it can show all kinds of information. In KWord, it can show things like the page number or word count of the document (basically everything that is now on the "statistics"-window). In KSpread, it can show calculations like sum or average from the (selected) cells, etc.

However, not all of this is relevant to everyone. So, I added a little icon to the bar, to enable or disable these "labels". When clicking this icon, a menu is shown where the user can select the labels he wants to see on the status bar. To the right of the options, the current value is shown so it can be used to check the value of something quickly without adding it to the status bar permanently.

In Office 12, the user has to add things to the status bar using a context menu. However I think my way is better, because the menu disappears when you click 1 item which isn't very useful if you want to add or remove several items.

On the right of the bar, we can have a few controls that affect the view of the window. It shows icons to switch between various display modes (page, preview, ...) and a slider to zoom in or out.

Conclusion

So, this ends my proposal. I hope it was clear enough. If there are any questions, you can contact me on jeroen.vaes@telenet.be, or via jabber at jeroenv@jabberweb.be.

OpenOffice crashed 3 times during the editing of this document. I hope KOffice 2 will be replacing it soon :-)