

# Bumper bundle

The Office Suite 99 package has a **good range of apps** for Linux users. Chris Bidmead tries it out.

I mentioned last month that I was planning a lunch with Sir Clive Sinclair to put him in the picture about Linux. When Martin Huston (see the panel on p246) heard about this meeting he sent me a spare copy of Office Suite 99 for Linux to take over to Sir Clive to get him started. I've duly delivered the package but do not, as yet, have anything to report about Sir Clive's reaction to it. Here, however, is mine.

Like Star Office, the Office Suite 99 bundle is a great way to get started with Linux if you're one of those people who feels lost without a word processor, spreadsheet, graphics editor, presentation package and the like. The single disc version of SuSE 5.3 — the standard distribution is a five-CD set — is stripped of refinements like the 'live file system' CD and comes without full source code, although under the terms of the Linux licence this is still obtainable from [www.suse.com](http://www.suse.com). But it includes all the easy-install features which have deservedly turned the German company into a world-class Linux distributor.

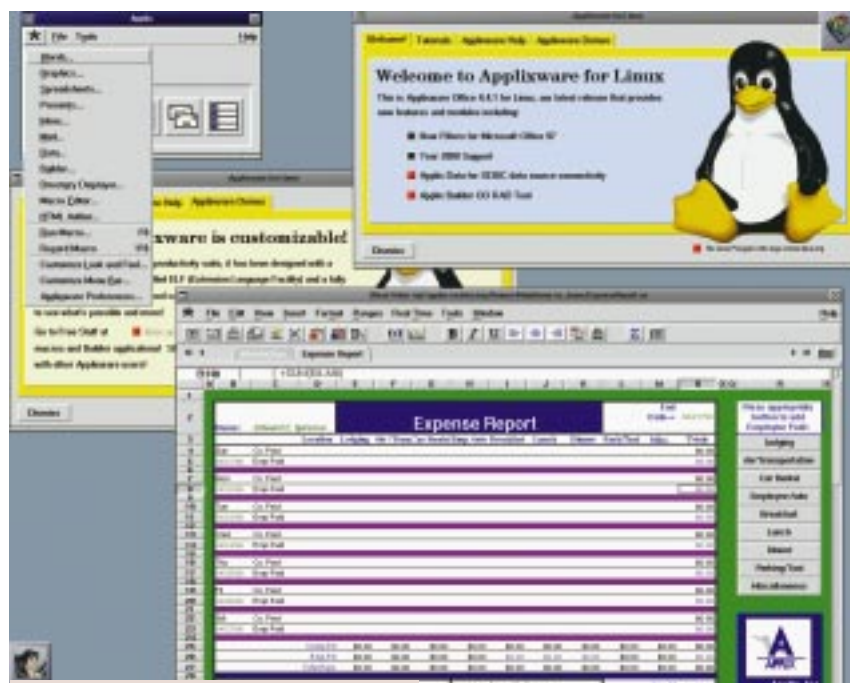
Included, too, is the excellent SuSE Linux manual, a chunky paperback of over 400 pages which steers you through the operating system installation, configuration and first steps in a sometimes quaint but seldom obscure translation from the original German.

**The office suite installation** of ApplixWare, installs as a set of RPMs. These are files created in accordance with the specification of the Red Hat Package

Manager which, despite its proprietary sounding name, has become a standard method of Linux software distribution <[www.rpm.org](http://www.rpm.org)>.

Automatic installation scripts inside the ApplixWare RPMs check on available system libraries, ensuring that the software installs equally on libc5 (e.g. SuSE) or libc6 (e.g. Red Hat) systems.

**The Office Suite 99 bundle is a great way to get started with Linux**



▲ **FIG 1** APPLIXWARE DOESN'T ATTEMPT TO BE A FEATURE-FOR-FEATURE MATCH FOR MICROSOFT OFFICE AND HAS MANY ADVANTAGES OF ITS OWN. BUT IT DOES PROVIDE A FAMILIAR-ENOUGH INTERFACE FOR WINDOWS USERS TO FEEL AT HOME

This makes Office 99 rather easier to install than either Star Office or WordPerfect, both of which come as tarballs, which may need a certain amount of manual jiggling.

Although I've been a professional writer for over 30 years and have used

computers for that purpose for over half that time, I'm probably the world's worst

judge of what makes a good word processor. Word processors seem to be mostly about fancy typesetting and page layout which are things I leave to the magazine and book people who print my stuff. What I'm interested in is getting text down on screen as fast as I can think, and editing it as fast as I can rethink. I need to be able to shift around through a

chunk of long prose, or from sentence to sentence, or paragraph to paragraph really quickly, preferably without having to reach for a mouse. Word processors, with their clutter of icons and their preoccupation with showing you how it's going to look in print — I hardly ever print anything — don't work like that. Give me EMACS every time.

**I'm using Applix Word** to write this [Fig 2] however, and for a word processor it really isn't too offensive. You can strip it down to a plain window with a status line at the bottom and a menu at the top, or you can run it with the full panoply of icons, supplemented with your own macros (thanks to the debugging macro editor). It seems to do most of the things I remember Microsoft Word being able to do and it can read and write Microsoft Word documents (it says here on the box).

There's an HTML mode for reading and writing web pages, and converting them to and from Applix Word format. Unlike Microsoft Word, and Star Office for Linux for that matter, Applix Word is



▲ **FIG 2** APPLIXWORD'S VERSATILE DOCUMENT LAYOUT AND MANIPULATION FUNCTIONS

X compliant, so you can use it on one

machine on the network while actually running it on quite a different machine.

**An old-fashioned feature** of Applix Word is that it separates file opening and file saving from importing and exporting. Saving or opening a file in anything other than the 'native format' ought to be a transparent operation. Ideally there should be no 'native format' and you should be able to set the default to open or save in anything the word processor can handle. But I shouldn't carp, the luxury of being able to read and write Microsoft Word files is not a feature of EMACS. And, I understand that many of you out there really need to do this, even though I happily manage to avoid this necessity most of the time.

**Earlier versions** of the ApplixWare spreadsheet lacked the 'tabbed book' format which is a standard feature of Windows spreadsheets. That is now fixed in ApplixWare 4, in this respect bringing it up to par with Star Office. The spreadsheet will import and export Microsoft Excel and Lotus 1-2-3 sheets, in addition to

► **FIG 3** AS WELL AS STANDARD PRESENTATIONS, APPLIX GRAPHICS IS ADEPT AT HANDLING LARGE, COMPLEX DRAWINGS. THIS ONE, OF A PRINTED CIRCUIT BOARD, USING FULL COLOUR GRAPHICS COMES AS PART OF THE APPLIXWARE TUTORIAL MATERIAL

## CATCHING UP

In reply to the item Is it Linux or is it Windows in the February column, Tom Wright <tom@gem-net.demon.co.uk> thinks a column on KDE/Gnome would be 'a very good idea'. As far as Tom is concerned, the desktop is 'the basis upon which Linux will get accepted as a desktop operating system, or not.'

Er... I had to scratch my head about this one. Yes, I know there has been a lot of chat recently about precisely this question, but what I replied to Tom was: 'Frankly I'm not at all

'getting accepted'. Plenty of us accepted it ages ago.' On reflection, though, this reply was a bit brusque. Sorry, Tom. What I was trying to say was that as far as I am concerned Linux is Linux, and it's evolving in its own way. If people really think that Windows 95/98 is a better desktop operating system, then let them use that. What I don't want to see is Linux straining for some kind of Windows 'look and feel' just so it can 'get accepted'.

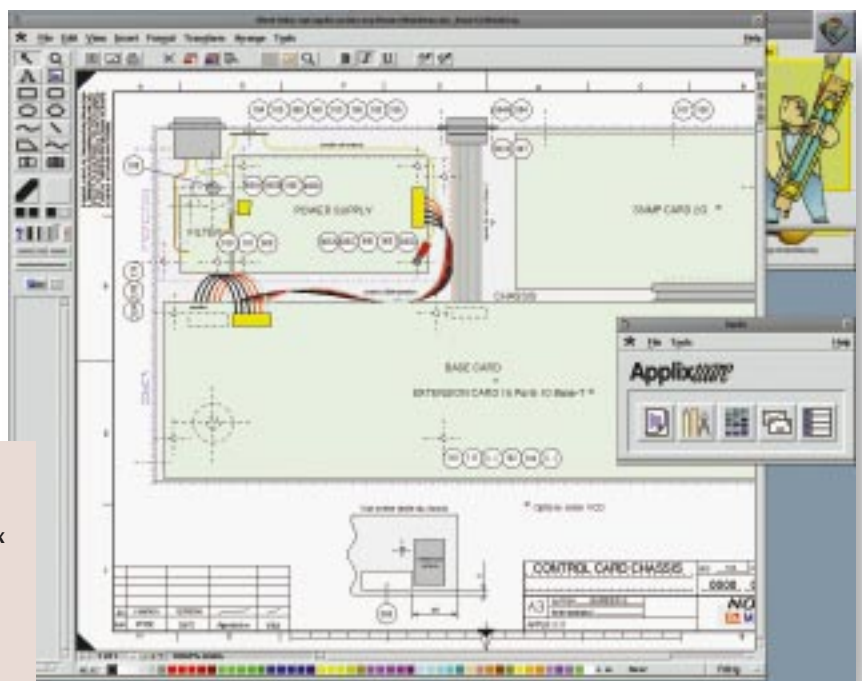
**SuSE Linux Office 99** Last month, I broke the bad news from Martin

Huston that he's pulling out of selling the SuSE Linux distribution by mail order from his web page at [www.deluxe-tech.co.uk](http://www.deluxe-tech.co.uk). Martin is still meeting bulk orders but tells me he can no longer spare the time to deal with single quantities. He has however, been shifting his stock of Linux Office Suite 99, which bundles ApplixWare version 4.41 (and some other useful applications like the Adabas relational database) with a no-frills edition of SuSE 5.3 in a two-CD set for around £60 (incl VAT).

the usual DIF, SYLK, CSV and plain ASCII formats.

It can't handle dBase files, which is where Star Office has the advantage, but a big plus is the Applix Data application, a database access tool

which allows you to query SQL databases and update database information. There are links for various SQL database flavours — Oracle, Sybase, Ingres and Informix — as well as a generic ODBC interface that you could use for



linking into dBase, for instance. It is ODBC that you use to connect to the Personal Edition of Adabas D which comes bundled with the SuSE Linux Office Suite but this is not something I had time to explore.

I did let myself get caught up in Applix Presents, the kind of presentation package with which corporate executives

***If you're going to invest in an office suite, ApplixWare seems a good bet.***

spend far too much time messing about. It seems to offer all the usual slide creation and transition features you'd expect, and can even import and export Microsoft PowerPoint 97 files.

**ApplixWare** has a built-in email handler, which you may or may not regard as a plus. Linux users already have a wide choice of email clients, and as a proprietary addition to the repertoire Applix Mail doesn't seem to offer much over, say, the excellent free open source xfmil written by Gennady B. Sorokopud — see [Burka.NetVision.net.il/xfmil](http://Burka.NetVision.net.il/xfmil). But the key to an Office Suite, I suppose, is the integration of the various elements.

The Linux Office Suite 99 comes with a module called Builder, a rapid application development environment for creating customised object-oriented applications using the various Applix functions. Builder isn't documented in the Applix manual supplied with the office suite but two of the several Applix online books supplied with the CD-ROM are dedicated to Builder, so there's no shortage of information on the subject.

Personally I'm as enthusiastic about 'Office Suites' in general as I am about word processors. But if you're going to invest in one, financially and time-wise, ApplixWare seems a good bet. It runs across a whole range of different hardware and software platforms and there's even a version written in Java.

**Here's an endorsement** for ApplixWare from reader Neil Homer, at [neil.h@dial.pipex.com](mailto:neil.h@dial.pipex.com), which I printed in this column last year. Neil installed Red Hat 5.0 and added what was then the current version of ApplixWare. He came to the conclusion that 'if you can do it using Windows then you can do it using

## THE AUTOPILOT COMMAND

A helpful introduction to operating system basics for beginners is 'Unix is a Four Letter Word' put together by Chris Taylor [taylor@linuxbox.com](mailto:taylor@linuxbox.com). You need to keep your wits about you, though. For instance, here's a sample from the manual pages that I thought might be appropriate this month.

'The ap (auto pilot) command has a deceptive name. It doesn't actually place the computer on autopilot. The ap command reads your mind and attempts to perform the commands you want done. For example, thinking "I really wish I had a backup copy of the tanana image" will cause ap to input `cp tanana.* tanana_bak.*` to the Unix shell. Preceding a thought with "ignore" will cause ap to ignore your next thought. Although, with enough practice, the ap command can be a significant time saver, there are a few unresolved problems with this command.

1. I often change my

mind while in the thinking process. In the previous example I may have decided later that I wanted to call the backup copy something else. No big deal here, ap just changes the filename but it isn't the most efficient use of computer resources.

2. All of the commands are echoed to the screen so that you know exactly what is going on. This is great as long as you remember to think "ignore" before you read each command. If you forget, the command will be executed again. This will continue until you remember to include the "ignore" flag or you think, "What is going on here?" which will cause the man pages for the particular command you are repeating to be displayed.
3. The ap command reads the strongest mind waves (known as grey waves) that it finds. If you have weak grey waves or your monitor is closer to someone else in your office, ap may listen to someone else's mind instead of yours. Also, walls do not

provide insulation from grey waves, so if your monitor is near a wall, be prepared for some grey waves from minds on the other side of the wall to occasionally sneak in.

4. As you probably know, humans (you included) don't use their brains to their highest potential. In fact, many believe that we use as little as five percent of our brain's capacity. The problem here is that ap is only able to read around 80 percent of your mind. Unfortunately, many people use the five percent of their mind that ap can't read. When ap is called it scans your mind for activity, if none is found it prints the following cryptic error message: `ap: Command not found.` This indicates that it couldn't find a command in your head. Don't worry, this doesn't mean that you aren't thinking, it just means that you use the part of your brain that ap can't access.'

• The above extract is from 'UNIX is a Four Letter Word' at [www.linuxbox.com/~taylor/](http://www.linuxbox.com/~taylor/).

Linux. I can't believe that I can do whatever I want with Linux and ApplixWare for about £140 that would cost me three or four times as much to do with Windows 95 and Office, never mind the rest of the server products that come with Linux.'

Oh, and Neil isn't just some myopic UNIX geek (like me). His job is administering Windows NT networks so he knows what he's talking about. You'll have noticed that the price he quotes is well out of date now. Today you can get

the ApplixWare/Linux bundle for less than half that. See [definite.ukpost.com/applixware.html](http://definite.ukpost.com/applixware.html) for the UK price and full product details. The international ApplixWare for Linux site is at [linux.applixware.com](http://linux.applixware.com).

## PCW CONTACTS

Chris Bidmead can be contacted via the PCW editorial office (address, p14) or email [unix@pcw.co.uk](mailto:unix@pcw.co.uk)