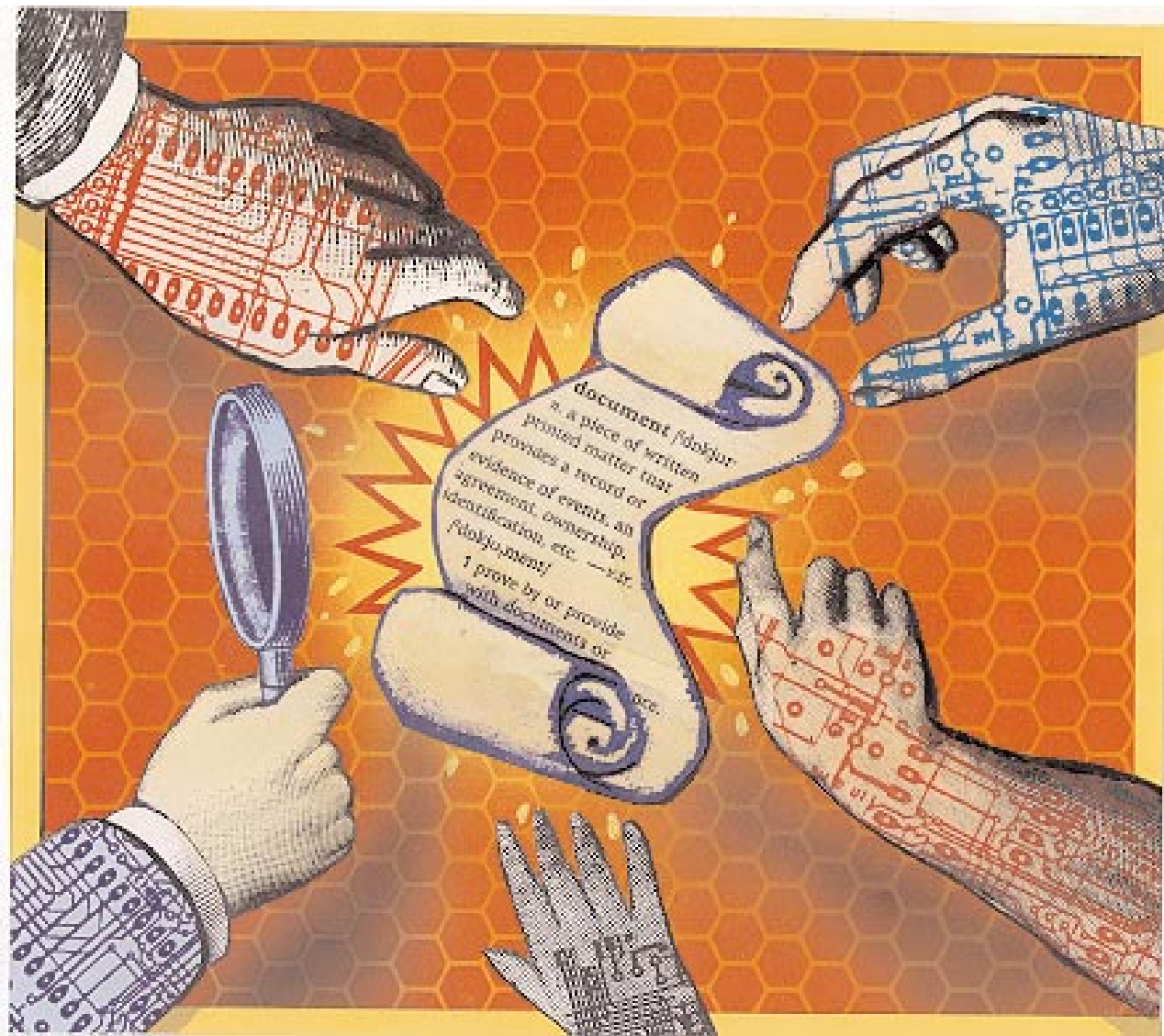


Illustration by Kevin Evans



Getting it together

TIM ANDERSON LOOKS AT OFFICE
2000 AND THE **COLLABORATIVE**
WORKING POSSIBILITIES IT ALLOWS.

If you already own an office suite, and the vast majority of users do, then why would you want a new one? Word processors and spreadsheets, still the core applications, are typically in their sixth or seventh versions and should be fully functioning and fully featured.

But software companies need to survive and selling upgrades helps them do so. They need to offer the user significant improvements, either in terms of new features or easier ways of working.

Office 2000 is the third version for 32-bit Windows. Although Office 95 was the natural choice for those moving to Windows 95, two and a half years ago Office 97 was a harder product to sell. One of its key selling points — that the new Office Assistant would reduce support calls and increase productivity — fell flat as the first question many users asked was, how to disable it. They also discovered that Office 97 was not more reliable and even incorporated new bugs like the images in Word which resized themselves when a document was saved. Worst of all, Word and Excel sported new file formats which could leave users looking at strange binary symbols if they had not upgraded.

So, the relentless upgrade cycle was hard to resist. Of course, it wasn't all bad. Developers were happy with the much-improved Visual Basic for Applications, and Outlook has proved a flexible, if quirky, groupware client.

Microsoft is not pretending that Office 2000 introduces dramatic improvements in word processing, spreadsheeting, creating presentations or managing databases. Each application has new features but most are minor changes, although there are important

improvements for those deploying and managing Office installations. Most file formats are the same as before, with Access being the only exception. However, the reason most users will want to upgrade to Office 2000 is a new way of working based on web-enabled collaboration.

The idea is that as paper-based document management is giving way to electronic communication, it's time for a new approach ➤

New look-and-feel

There are some things in Office 2000 that you will notice immediately. Personalised menus and toolbars adapt to your usage pattern, showing only the options you actually use. The full range expands on demand. Online help uses HTML and includes an answer wizard which responds to English language questions, with the usual mixed results. When you press F1 or click the help icon, the Office application in which you are working resizes itself so that the help window fits alongside rather than on top of your document. It sounds a good idea but in practice is distracting, unless you have a particularly large screen. If Word or Excel is not maximised, it leaps about unpredictably as you open and close the help window.

Office 2000 has generally abandoned the Multiple Document Interface used extensively in previous versions. **When you open a second document in Word, it opens in a separate window that looks for all the world like another instance of Word.** It has its own taskbar entry and appears on that alt-tab menu loved by serious Windows users.

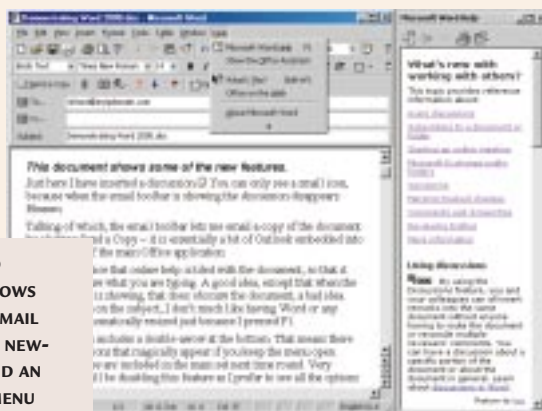
The odd thing, though, is that File / Exit closes all the Word documents, not just the current one. Another odd thing is that Excel is still Multiple Document Interface, although open Excel documents do appear on the taskbar and alt-tab menu. So, although it is easier to keep track of open documents, the new Office is not consistent.

Word 2000

Aside from its XML support, Word has some handy new features. Auto-correct now uses the main spelling dictionary as well as its own list. Click and type lets you double-click in any blank area of a document and have a new text or graphic appear exactly there, rather than automatically moving itself to the end of the previous line.

Collect and paste is a multiple clipboard, available throughout Office, which has 12 separate compartments rather than the stingy single area of the standard Windows item. Automatic language detection enables you to use spelling and grammar checkers on multiple languages in a single document.

► **THIS WORD DOCUMENT SHOWS THE INSTANT EMAIL TOOLBAR, THE NEW-STYLE HELP AND AN EXPANDABLE MENU**



Tables are improved, and you can now nest one table within another for more flexibility. There are many more HTML features within Word including frames, scripts, HTML source editing, picture bullets and web themes as used in FrontPage. The print dialogue lets you print multiple pages on a single sheet, and scale them to fit.

The new email button in Word is brilliant. Rather than opening a mail client, it simply lets you assign a recipient to the current document and send it straight away. The same address book and email options are available as in Outlook or Outlook Express. The one piece of bad news is that it uses HTML, even for contacts where you have specified plain text messages.

Excel 2000

Rumour has it that when Microsoft updates Office, not all the applications get major changes. Some simply receive cosmetic changes to tide them over until next time. Excel is in the 'little changed' camp on this occasion. Like Word, it has HTML support which works like a native file

format. It works fairly well, although a 200K Excel workbook changed itself into over 1Mb of web files in our tests. **The result displayed fine in Internet Explorer but not in Netscape Navigator, although smaller worksheets could be viewed in either browser.** There is also an Excel Web Component which enables you to embed a spreadsheet in a web page. Like Word, Excel benefits from instant email capacity and the new multiple clipboard.

Other new features are thin on the ground unless you are interested



▲ **NEW PIVOT CHARTS COMBINE CHARTING WITH PIVOT TABLES**

in multi-dimensional data. Here, there are numerous

enhancements. Pivot charts are graphical views on pivot tables, with the same interactive features for changing your mind about how to analyse data. In both cases, there are new drop-down lists that let you filter the data displayed. There are also links to OLAP (Online Analytical Processing) data sources, a feature aimed particularly at the OLAP services in SQL Server 7.0.

Finally, Euroconvert is a natty new function which automatically converts between the currencies of any Eurozone member. The UK is listed as a possible future addition.

which exploits what an online document can do. The innovation in Office 2000 is not in how documents are created, but how they are shared and used.

The best way to explain this is from the end-user's perspective. Typically, a user today would save their work either directly to their PC's hard disk or to a public folder on a file server. In Office 2000, a third option is to save to a web folder such as that on a company intranet, which appears in the Save dialogue as just another location. Documents saved in this way can be opened by other Office 2000 users or, if saved in HTML, viewed by anyone able to point their web browser at that site.

Furthermore, others can comment on your document by creating or contributing to a discussion which can be stuck in the middle of the text like a sticky note, or linked to the whole document. The folder can be searched using a web-style search page, by word or by document properties such as author and category. You can also set up a subscription to receive automatic emails informing you of new documents, or changes to existing ones. In this model, the document is no longer an item that has to be physically sent or even emailed to its recipients. Instead, it is published to an intranet site where it becomes a focus for collaboration. The model also extends to databases via a new feature of Access, Data Access Pages, which enables you to publish a database form while maintaining live links to the source data.

Many of the same benefits are available through a simple publicly shared folder, but the Office 2000 approach adds ease of use along with benefits like discussions and Data Access Pages. There is also a psychological difference. Saving a file to a network share does not seem like publishing a document, but in the new model this is clearly what is happening and fits with the current interest in knowledge management.

Casting a glance sideways, Lotus SmartSuite and Corel WordPerfect Office also provide web features. SmartSuite Millennium has Net-it Now, a third-party product which converts documents to Java, along with FastSite, a tool for quickly publishing SmartSuite documents on the web by converting them to HTML or Java.

Corel's WordPerfect Office has 'NetDocs' (this name may change) which works like a printer driver, converting documents to HTML, Adobe PDF or Java, for web publishing. You can set this to automatically update a web copy when the source document changes. Corel Paradox also has a built-in web server for publishing live data.

The key difference is that only Microsoft Office 2000 lets you seamlessly load and save HTML so that the web document can be the

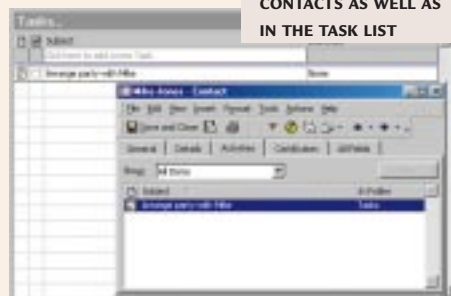
Outlook 2000

The problem with Outlook 2000

is that most of its new features are already in Outlook 98, which was a free upgrade to Office 97. There are a few points of interest, though. First, you can now link items such as tasks, appointments and messages with one or more contacts. These then show up in a new Activities tab in the contact details. Since this is an essential feature of a contact manager, it's strange it wasn't there before. Secondly, Outlook can now handle resources such as meeting rooms and equipment in its meeting planner. Essentially, these are

treated in the same way as people, with an email account and free/busy records, and Exchange automatically accepts and rejects meeting invitations. But unfortunately, Exchange is required before this will work.

▼ **THE NEW OUTLOOK DISPLAYS A TASK IN THE ACTIVITIES TAB OF RELATED CONTACTS AS WELL AS IN THE TASK LIST**

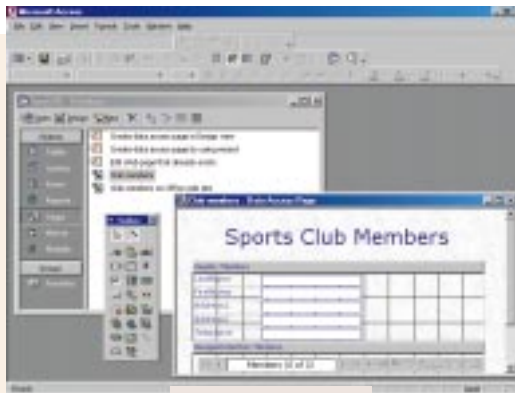


Access 2000

There are major

changes in Access 2000. First, there are Data Access Pages which behave much like old-style forms except they are really web pages and are saved as external files. Other Office 2000 users can browse to the page and view the data. One likely destination is an Office web site, which provides an easy way to publish dynamic data on an intranet. You can also email a page, in which case you are sending a live link to the source data.

There are two snags with Data Access Pages. Firstly, they only work on PCs with Office 2000 installed, which breaks the seamless compatibility that good intranets offer. Secondly, there is a difficult interaction between Data Access Pages and Access security. Although in theory you can happily publish and email Data Access Pages all over the network, all the Access security features still apply



▲ DESIGNING A DATA ACCESS PAGE IN ACCESS 2000

so the client needs to be able to find not only the data but also the workgroup information file which stores the security details. In testing, there were also problems with browser security, with mysterious warnings concerning the access of data across domains, even on a single, small intranet. **You can expect configuration issues, but this is still a great way to publish data.**

Also new is a type of file called an Access Project. This looks much like an MDB, but links to an SQL Server database. A cut-down SQL Server is bundled with Office, so client-server computing is now part of the package.

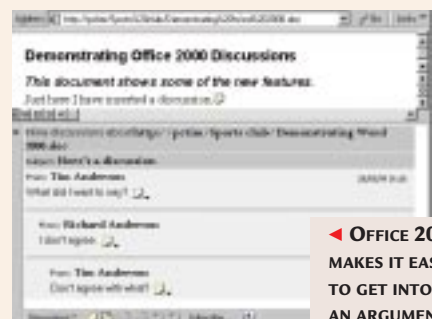
Managing Office 2000

Office 2000 is good news for network administrators. Install On Demand, which automatically installs optional product features on first use, makes it easy to customise your applications or find new import filters. Detect And Repair claims to fix problems like missing or corrupted files or registry entries. There are also some excellent new features for developing custom solutions, particularly COM add-ins, a new way to extend Office applications with Visual Basic code. Outlook now supports the full Visual Basic for Applications.

▼ THE OFFICE WEB IS A NEW WAY TO PUBLISH, SEARCH AND DISCUSS OFFICE DOCUMENTS



Administrators also face the task of installing the Office Server Extensions if people want to use an Office web. The extensions run on Windows NT 4.0 or the forthcoming Windows 2000 with either Internet Information Server or the Personal Web Server. They include the FrontPage 2000 extensions, and SQL Server is used to store web discussions. User permissions are managed via the NT 'user manager' and NTFS (NT File System) security. Administrators can also view and edit active discussions and document subscriptions.



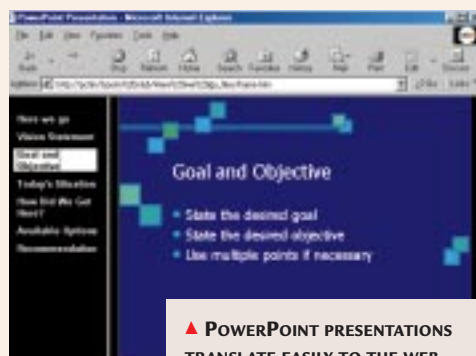
◀ OFFICE 2000 MAKES IT EASY TO GET INTO AN ARGUMENT

PowerPoint 2000

You won't find major innovations in PowerPoint 2000. The new web features are particularly useful in PowerPoint, though, and there is a dual output option which provides support for Netscape, as well as Internet Explorer, by publishing two versions with a script that detects the browser and acts accordingly. Unfortunately, it looked far better in Explorer. **New editing features include native table tools and graphical bullets, ideal for web sites.** And, you can embed scripts within presentations.

A small but important point for laptop users is that

PowerPoint automatically disables power-saving during a



▲ POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS TRANSLATE EASILY TO THE WEB, AS LONG AS YOU USE INTERNET EXPLORER

slide show, preventing those embarrassing blank screens in the middle of your most important point of the presentation.

Publisher 2000



Apart from the basic Standard edition, Publisher 2000 is part of all the new Office 2000 bundles. It is aimed at those home or small business users who need to produce decent-looking cards, leaflets or advertisements without possessing the necessary design skills. You can create web sites, too, although HTML round-tripping, as found in Word and Excel, is not supported. Publisher is not suitable for professional designers and neither is it good for book publications, as it lacks any index, contents, footnote or cross-referencing facilities. There is no way to achieve automatic vertical justification in columns of text.

On the plus side, it is a pleasure to use and has impressive wizardry. Publications begin with a catalogue wizard, where you select from a huge range of instant designs. You can then customise this with a design wizard and see your publication change dynamically. Separations are supported for full-colour commercial printing. And, a new option to mail-merge from Outlook contacts makes good sense for Office users.

▲ **WIZARD, ANYONE? THE NEW PUBLISHER HAS MORE THAN EVER**

actual one, not a converted copy of another in native format. This is achieved via XML (eXtensible Markup Language), which is why Internet Explorer 5.0, with strong XML support, is needed for best results. Another difference is that web folders make publishing to an intranet as easy as saving a file. Properly used, these features could prove extremely valuable. The downside is that undisciplined use could result in over-laden, disorganised, unmanageable intranet sites full of files that do not need to be there. Internal newsgroups are a cheap and effective alternative and make it easier for users to find current discussion topics.

➤ **Is it a hit or a miss?** The technology is great, and for seamless intranet connectivity, Office 2000 cannot be faulted. Even non-Microsoft browsers are partially supported. Whether this proves valuable to end-users will depend on how organisations manage the new features. They may choose not to deploy web folders, in which case this is just another version of Office. Rightly managed, though, Office 2000 could introduce new and interesting ways of collaborative working. □

PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

Price Not yet available. (Review based on Release Candidate 1.)

Contact Microsoft 0345 002000
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Bundles *Standard:* Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook. *Small Business:* Word, Excel, Outlook, Publisher. *Professional:* Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook, Publisher, Access. *Premium:* Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Outlook, Publisher, Access, FrontPage, Photodraw. *Developer:* as Premium but adds runtime Access and developer tools.

System Requirements

Office 2000: Win95, 98, NT 4.0 or higher, 75MHz Pentium, 190Mb hard-disk space. 16Mb memory (Win95/98) or 32Mb (NT) plus 4Mb for each application running simultaneously, or 8Mb for Outlook. RAM in addition.

Office Server Extensions: NT 4.0 or higher, 300MHz Pentium, 64Mb RAM, 120Mb hard-disk space.

Good Points XML support. Office Web. Install on demand. Improved Access. FrontPage.

Bad Points Intrusive help. Office Web needs careful management.

Conclusion A good upgrade, but whether you need it depends on how you use Office. Access and FrontPage users shouldn't hesitate, while others may wonder what the fuss is about, particularly if you don't require Office Web.

FrontPage 2000

The best aspect of FrontPage 2000 is that it generates better HTML and does a much better job of preserving the HTML tags and code in imported web pages. The next best feature is that you no longer need a running web server to work on a FrontPage web page — an ordinary hard disk will do. Since these were flaws in previous versions, you might regard this as the first fixed FrontPage release.

It has always been a slick web page editor, though, and more so in the new version with support for cascading style sheets, data access pages, layers and absolute or relative positioning, to mention just a few new features. A neat Reveal Tags option shows tags as icons within the normal page view. FrontPage users should upgrade without a second thought.

► **THE NEW REVEAL TAGS VIEW IN FRONTPAGE 2000**

