Thursday, 14 October, 2004
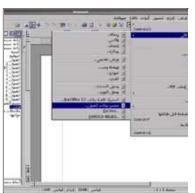
Happy birthday Open Office

by Maddy Reddy

Exactly four years ago, Sun Microsystems donated the Star Office source code to the open-source community to create Open Office (OO), a free full-blown office suite besides being translated into 60 plus languages including Arabic early this year.

With more than 31 million downloads and that is not counting the millions registered by Red Hat, SuSE, Mandrake or Debian, among others, which include OpenOffice.org in their Linux distributions, OO uptake globally is gaining momentum.

"We starting Arabising the Open Office interface in March this year. It's 100% completed now. Everything from the fonts, right to left text functionality, basic documentation is all Arabised now and can be downloaded free of cost," says Ossama Khayat, Arabic project lead of Open Office's Native Language Confederation.

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The Arabic Open Office 1.1.3.

While OO is only four years old, its roots are much older. Star Division, the original author of the Star Office suite of software, was founded in Germany in the mid-1980s. It was acquired by Sun Microsystems in early 1999 and Star Office 5.2 was released in June of 2000. Future versions of Star Office software, beginning with 6.0, have been built using the OpenOffice.org source, APIs, file formats and reference implementation.

OO 1.1.3 runs on Windows as well as GNU/Linux, Sun Solaris, Apple's Mac OS X. The multi-platform office productivity suite is very similar to the commercial office suites in terms of functionality and interface but absolutely free. Comparing this with say MS Office 2003 Professional edition one user license which retails for US$449 or IBM's Lotus Smart Suite, OO offers a deal hard to match.
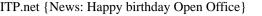
Users can create dynamic documents (Writer), analyse data, presentations, illustrations, and run databases with c. Users can also publish work in Portable Document Format (.pdf), and release your graphics in Flash (.swf) format, without needing any additional software licenses or third party plug-ins from Adobe or Macromedia.
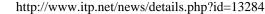
OO has also inspired a wave of freeware office suites such as SOT Office, Pladao, 602 PRO PC Suite, Easy Office and K-Office and scores of free office applications.

Since the Star Office 7 office Suite is based on Open Office both application suites are API and file format compatible besides support for Microsoft Office file formats such as .Doc (MS Word), Xls (MS Excel) and .Ppt (Power Point).

Despite the rich functionality and free price, Khayat admits the uptake of Arabic OO has been limited partly because of lack of resources.

"We have just 15 people working voluntarily on a part time basis in the ArabEyes.org project. We are trying to create awareness in the

region but we do not have all the resources unlike the other vendors or even enough support from them — this is one reason we are yet to provide the full documentation in Arabic and other features such as spell check," he says.