▶ Windows office suite applications

Office 97's Word, Excel keep their top spots, add Web applications

Word boosts graphics, tables

By John Lombardi

ONCE AGAIN it's time to plumb what Microsoft Corp. has done to the leading PC word processor. Does Microsoft Word 97 finally include the kitchen sink? Not yet, but it's getting close. Even without the big hardware, it's filled with new features and enhancements, as you'd expect, that help Word maintain its position at the top.

I looked at the Technical Beta of Word 97, the cornerstone of Office 97, which should ship to the general public in January 1997. In this version, Microsoft pushes the suite products closer together and implements more shared components and a stronger document-based approach to office work.
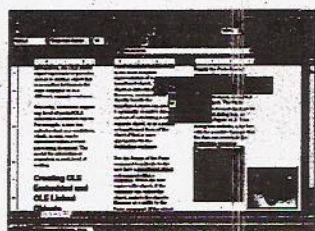
Word 97 has an endless array of tools and features, but this power comes at the considerable price of great complexity and potential confusion. Some of the most useful features of Word 97 come from the wizards, assistants, and help hints that pop up throughout the operation of the program. These automated help agents guide users through the multilayered features of this very powerful program.

Almost every feature in Word 97 has a better user interface, works more smoothly, and provides better interaction with other programs. This is especially the case

with graphics features such as boxes, drawings, lines, call-outs, text art, page and paragraph borders, and shading and 3-D effects. Word 97 now manages these easily and effectively, having greatly improved the dialog boxes and the on-screen help and having added capabilities to each. Things that previously took careful man-

A FLOATING PALETTE *provides a helpful graphics command center, allowing powerful control over inserted graphics objects. This feature is much improved from previous versions of Word.*

agement, such as rotating objects or changing the orientation of text in a text box, I can now accomplish effortlessly.

Tables, notoriously difficult to use in Word 95, are much improved in Word 97. You can manage cell boundaries in a free-form mode to make the table appear exactly as you want in the finished document. All the shading and 3-D effects also apply. Word 97 will link text boxes; this process creates the functional equivalent of story lines in a page-layout program, so that text in one box can continue into another box on another page.

One advantage of suite products comes from their capability to link documents to multiple users. Word 97 has a wide range of version and editorial management tools that let multiple editors deal with a single document. You can leave sticky notes for others to see and highlight each editor's changes with a different color. All versions stay with the document — so the final editor can produce a definitive version from the previous ones.

Office 97 and Word 97 can employ Microsoft's new IntelliMouse — a special mouse with a third button/finger-wheel. (See Product Reviews,

Sept. 23, page 139.) Word 97 also converts all previous Word Basic macros to operate with Visual Basic for Applications. A useful addition is the natural-language grammar checker, which does a good job of helping unscramble tortured syntax. The grammar checker, like the spelling checker, works as you type

and places wavy lines under questionable sentences.

Word 97 enables its users to create Web-compatible documents and integrate them into Web-based information systems, so you can automatically convert any Word document to its Web equivalent in HTML. You can also insert links to

other documents or locations, and you can use Word 97 as your e-mail editor. Word 97 even has a set of Internet Explorer icons on its toolbar.

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Excel gains groupware tools

By Kelly Conatser

MICROSOFT Excel 97 promises remarkable improvements to a program that was pretty slick to begin with and effectively addresses some of the few areas, such as groupware, in which it was inferior to the current version of rival Lotus Development Corp.'s Lotus 1-2-3.

The new Excel beta version, which will be available by January 1997, is not just better, it's bigger — and that's not just the code base. Users who feel cramped by Excel 95's physical dimensions will have more room to maneuver in the new version, whose 65,536 rows per worksheet are quadruple the number in the current version. Cell and chart constraints have been loosened as well: You can now fit more than 32,000 characters in each cell, increased from 255, and 32,000 points per data series in a two-dimensional chart, increased from 4,000.

Surprisingly, however, Excel 97's new file format doesn't address some of the weaknesses of the 3-D workbooks introduced in Excel 5. You can't extract records in a list from one sheet to another, for example, and scenarios that span more than one sheet are still off-limits.
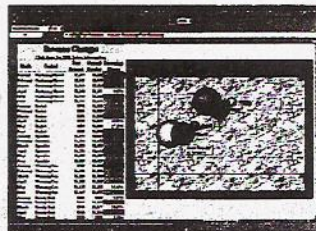
Developers comfortable with Excel 95's somewhat arcane Visual Basic for Applications programming tools may be dismayed to find that the old development interface, with its hodgepodge of dialog sheets and modules, has been abandoned in favor of the Visual Basic development environment. Overall, though, the change is positive; the event model is more robust, and it's easier to organize a development project.

Excel 97 offers a wide range of easy to implement formatting improvements. You can now merge blocks of

cells so that the data-input section of a worksheet acts more like a sophisticated forms designer, unaffected by the dimensions of the columns and rows that surround it. The new conditional formatting command lets Excel 97 change the formatting of cells automatically, depending on the values in those cells. For example, a column of sales figures could be formatted so that values that did not meet projections are automatically displayed in boldface red text.

Excel 97's improved pivot tables now actually retain their formatting when you change them — what a concept. Other pivot table improvements include the ability to create calculated fields within a pivot table that are based solely on other pivot table fields and the option to re-query a data source for the relevant data each time the user changes a table's page view. This greatly reduces the

EXCEL 97'S *new 3-D bubble charts are among its most visible new features. Several more useful functions, such as the conditional formatting applied to the table at left, lie just beneath the surface.*

amount of data that must be cached in the workbook.

But enough serious talk; for more fun, click a chart. That's right — just click once. There's no more of the single-click-for-this, double-click-for-that nonsense that has so many intelligent people tied in knots in the current version. New chart types include fabulously attractive 3-D bubble and pyramid charts. The chart wizard, a major source of complaints among current users, has been redesigned so that you can choose more chart attributes, such as grid lines, when you create the chart, rather than afterward. Workgroup users now enjoy full simultaneous access to the same workbook, and each participant can create a personal view. You can also set a timer that automatically refreshes your view of the file with other participants' changes at a specified interval.

Last but not least, there is Excel 97's range of Web tools: A single command creates a hyperlink in any workbook cell or graphic object. You can also publish a file, along with the Excel 97 viewer, on a typical Web server so that anyone on the World Wide Web can not only view it but also copy and filter data within it.

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