

# Review of Free Open Source Software

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## Introduction

*We compiled this review originally in the Summer of 2007. At that time we knew little (read anything!) about Open Source or the potential it offered as an alternative to expensive commercially available 'branded' software. The past 12 months has seen us 'discover' that there is a whole lot more free software available to groups and that much of it (such as Open Office) just gets better and better. With this in mind we felt the time was right to revisit our original review and add in information on some of the other software we have come across in the past year.*

As part of our 'IT is Empowerment' Big Lottery Fund Project we have been encouraging groups to begin to use Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to create their own promotional and marketing tools - from logo's to newsletters, flyers and posters. Many groups already have some or all of the necessary software to begin creating their own promotional tools. Yet many others do not have access to such software and feel they are prohibited from doing so as they cannot afford or justify the cost of buying often expensive software. This being especially true when there is little if any expertise amongst the group, and they worry about how much usage they will get from such an investment and whether it will prove to be value for money for them in the long term.

Part of our aims then has then been to either:

- a. Try to source discounted software for groups wherever possible. Or:
- b. Provide access to quality alternative free software to allow groups to experiment and try out ideas for themselves without making any hefty investments.

As part of this process we have been looking at a number of freely available *Open Source* software packages that provide software comparative in quality and features to commercially available programs.

The purpose of this review then is to make available to groups a summary of our research, and to provide access to such software for groups who wish to try out some of the programs available for themselves. We will update this document periodically as we come across more such software, that we believe will be of benefit to groups who are looking to develop high quality promotional items for themselves. We would like to point out that as an organisation we have no links to any of the software providers mentioned in this document. Likewise, the opinions held in this review are based solely upon our own experience of using the software which we believe would be a fair reflection of the experience most novices with little software awareness would experience encountering the software for the first time. We are not software evaluators nor do we claim to be.

## Software we have looked at

- **Open Office**



Available for download at: <http://www.openoffice.org/>.

Certainly one of the best Office software suite packages available, at any price! Open Office is either downloadable from the Internet for free or can usually be purchased from a variety of suppliers burnt onto a CDROM disc at a cost of around £2.99. This office package contains:

**A Word Processing Package (*Writer*)** – This program is directly comparable to Microsoft Word but is more flexible in certain key areas which make it far more usable for creating basic Desktop Publishing documents (such as newsletters and flyers). For example images are far easier to insert and can then be dragged around a document and placed in the optimum position you want. Better still with the click of a button any document can be converted into a PDF format file ready for uploading onto a website etc. The icing on the cake being that documents created in Writer can be saved as MS Word files, and can then be opened and revised by others using MS Word without losing any of the formatting or layout found in the original Open Office created document. Even better you can open MS Word documents and work on them in Writer without losing formatting etc.

**A Spreadsheet Package (*Calc*)** – Works very similar to MS Excel, but a few of the formulas may vary slightly from Excel. Still, very user friendly and contains many of the functions you can find in the Microsoft equivalent (such as creating charts etc). Again, files created in Calc can be saved as MS Excel files.

**A Presentation Package (*Impress*)** – Allows you to create presentation slide shows like MS PowerPoint. Easy to use (especially if you have worked with PowerPoint before) and a few of the features are superior to PowerPoint (such as creating 3D objects to insert onto slides. Its only real weakness (and this is really nitpicking considering this is a free package!) would be that fonts can appear a bit pixelated if they are very large.

Once again this program is interoperable with the equivalent MS product and you can open MS documents and work on them (and save Impress created slideshows as PowerPoint files.

**A Database Package (*Base*)**- Up to now we have been completely bowled over by the sheer quality of the Open Office software suite and to be fair the database element of the package is good, just not as good as the MS equivalent. If you have created databases using MS Access before it won't take you long to set up a simple database to input data into. Things get a little less user friendly though when it comes to laying out user friendly inputting screens or laying out reports for printing off.

To be fair this criticism could just relate to the early version of Base (version 2.2.0) that we tested out, and may well have been rectified with the release of the latest updated version. In any case if you just wanted to create a simple database to manage membership details and print off mailing labels etc this would be perfectly adequate.

**Drawing Package (*Draw*)** – This can be used to create such items as logo's or flow charts etc. It is more of an extra to the main software suite though and really should be seen as thus.

## Summary of Open Office Suite

A remarkably versatile package that gives many expensive Office Software Suites a run for their (and your) money! Unless you are into creating serious database systems this provides a really usable alternative to the commercially available packages. How highly do I rate it? Well, I spent a week creating assorted documents using Open Office and forwarding them to others as MS files. Not one person spotted the change... need I say more?

## Online Tutorials and learning packages for Open Office

There are available a number of tutorials to help new users get to grips with Open Office. Here are some links to help you get started with the software:

<http://www.tutorialsforopenoffice.org/>.

<http://inpics.net/>.

<http://www.getopenoffice.org/bookexcerpts/aboutooo.pdf>.

<http://www.openoffice-support.net/>.

<http://www.learnopenoffice.org/tutorials.htm>.

- **Graphics Image Manipulation Package (GIMP)**



Available for download at: <http://www.gimp.org/downloads/>.

Another completely free software package and would provide a great starting point for groups who wanted to have a go at creating really professional promotional items that included creating your own images for use in flyers, newsletters etc. So what can you use this software for? It is very similar in concept to professional image editing software such as Adobe Photoshop or Macromedia Fireworks. If you have used either of these packages before then getting to grips with this software won't be very hard as the user interface looks very similar to both. Like the professional packages you can:

- Resize and/or crop images.
- Remove 'redeye'.
- Change colour images to greyscale or sepia toned.
- Remove areas of images.
- Repair damaged photos (by scanning original and 'repairing' the scanned original).
- Blend images to create new compositions (such as placing a picture of yourself walking on the moon!).

These are just a few of the things you can do with the software with a bit of practice and some help from the tutorials. The main difference here - and this might really catch your attention that a professional image manipulation package could easily set your group back several hundred pounds where this package is entirely free! Is it as good as the professional equivalent? The honest answer is probably not, but it will certainly provide an opportunity to experiment with and learn such software and would easily meet the requirements of most groups without having to commit a large chunk of cash in the process.

### Online Tutorials and learning packages for GIMP

<http://www.gimp.org/tutorials/>.

<http://gimp-savvy.com/>.

<http://news.softpedia.com/news/Learning-GIMP-Part-1-49639.shtml>.

<http://news.softpedia.com/news/Learning-GIMP-Part-2-49872.shtml>.

<http://library.n0i.net/linux-unix/applications/graphics/gimp/teach%20yourself%20gimp%20in%2024%20hours/>.

<http://www.tutorialstoday.com/Graphics/GIMP.aspx>.

<http://docs.gimp.org/en.pdf>.

- **Serif Page Plus SE 1.0**



Available for download at: <http://www.freeserifsoftware.com/software/PagePlus/default.asp>

Serif PagePlus is a commercially available Desktop Publishing package. There are two versions of the software available at the website. Pageplus SE can be downloaded for free but is for **personal use only**. On the Serif website it states

**“Please note** - this free download is for **personal use only** and comes with a license that allows you to install the software on only one PC. If you'd like to install Serif software in a multi-user or network situation - for example at a school or a large organization, then please contact [edusales@serif.com](mailto:edusales@serif.com) for details of our affordable license arrangements.”

As a desktop publishing package it works very well. If you are more used to using MS Publisher you will notice there are some differences when it comes to things like switching between the pages of a tri-fold leaflet for example, but adapting to the software isn't difficult. There are also free template downloads for page layouts etc to make the design element of your document easier for those who aren't so confident.

This software also comes complete with a range of tutorials that are included with the installation package.

- **Scribus**



Available from: <http://www.scribus.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=Downloads&file=index>

This is another Open Source software program, which means it is freely available and can be distributed and passed onto others. It is a dedicated Desktop Publishing (DTP) package that it would be fair to say has been developed with the primary intention of being a viable alternative to expensive specialist software such as Quark Express. This means it comes with lots of features that would enable professional printing companies to run off designs and layouts of your own making very easily. The downside to this is that the software itself is not very user friendly for beginners or even novices. If you are not familiar and competent with specialist software packages such as Quark Express (or at a minimum Adobe InDesign) then this probably isn't the alternative software for your groups DTP needs.

However, as it is free there is no reason to take our word for it! Why not download the latest version and try it out for yourselves.

Online Tutorials and learning packages for Scribus:

<http://docs.scribus.net/index.php?lang=en&page=intro>

<http://www.open-of-course.org/scribus-tutorial-2.html>

[http://wiki.scribus.net/index.php/Get\\_Started\\_With\\_Scribus:1](http://wiki.scribus.net/index.php/Get_Started_With_Scribus:1)

- **PDF Creator**



A fantastic little program, PDF Creator allows you to simply convert your documents into PDF files quickly and easily. Better still – it allows you to convert documents to a variety of other file formats too, such as TIFF etc. You also have the option of adding hidden information (metadata) into your PDF files such as author details and keywords – which can help search engine crawlers to compile your PDF files for the web. This adds a layer of sophistication not yet available in converting documents to PDF files using Open Office.

The software itself is easy to use though I have (very) occasionally found it to be a bit glitchy – i.e. when I have tried to convert a file to PDF it has insisted on printing a copy of the document rather than converting it! Bar this irritation I have found it a very effective tool – to the extent that this latest update of our Software Review will have been created by converting an Open Office document into a PDF using this software.

Available at: <http://www.pdfforge.org/products/pdfcreator>

## CLAMWIN – Anti-Virus Software



This is a completely free Open Source virus protection program. It can be linked in to work with Microsoft Outlook to scan incoming emails and its virus definition library is regularly updated. It won't however scan your files automatically so if you insert a CD, data stick or an old floppy disc you are going to have to run a manual scan to ensure the files are virus free. Likewise do remember this is an anti-virus program and in its current form it won't protect you from spy or malware!

With there literally being 1,000's of viruses floating around the Internet, if you are running a PC on the web without any form of protection you are almost certainly going to catch something. Don't get caught out and learn the hard way – in truth I can't really say if this software can match up to the cutting edge commercial packages – it certainly doesn't have any where near the range of features or protection coverage (e.g. no spyware protection). What is certain though is that it is going to be a whole lot better than using a PC on the Internet with no protection at all! Why not take a look at their website and make up your own minds!

Available at: <http://www.clamwin.com/>

## Winpooch



“Winpooch is a Windows watchdog, free and open source. Anti spyware and anti trojan, it gives a full protection against local or external attacks by scanning the activity of programs in real time. Associated with ClamWin antivirus, Winpooch keeps safe your computer against virus.”

At least that's what it says on their website! I haven't yet had a chance to get to grips and have a go with this but have included it here as it has been developed specifically in tandem with Winclam.

Again – this is entirely free and if you have no anti-spyware protection currently this must be worth looking at!

Available at: [http://sourceforge.net/project/showfiles.php?group\\_id=122629](http://sourceforge.net/project/showfiles.php?group_id=122629)

## Spyware Blaster



If you are going to use the Clamwin anti-virus system you will also need to install a program to take care of any unwanted spyware type programs that try to instill themselves onto your PC. Spyware Blaster is another completely free program that you can run in tandem with Clamwin to help ensure your computer stays healthy and infection free.

The same firm that brings you this free software is working on a new anti-spyware program called spywareguard. It is not finished yet and is only available in a test form (known as a beta). For now the advice is install the tried and tested option of Spyware Blaster but keep an eye on their website for how development of their new software is coming along.

Spyware Blaster is Available at: <http://www.javacoolsoftware.com/spywareblaster.html>

## Inkscape



If you have used a commercial drawing package such as Adobe Illustrator or Coreldraw you will know already just how versatile and fun they are to us. The drawback is that both packages fall into the range of professional quality software that has been designed for use in the commercial graphics industry – so neither option could be called exactly a bargain buy for the talented amateur, and even less so for anyone who just fancies having a go for themselves at creating ‘art’ using a computer.

Without going all technical here, Inkscape will allow you to produce high quality graphics for the web or print formats and allows you to create *high quality scaleable vector graphics*. Or put in real language will allow you to create pictures that when you resize the stay nice and sharp – for example the curve of a circle will be a curve rather than a series of very short connected straight lines. A crude description maybe - but it gets the point across!

The inkscape website also provides free tutorials to get you started and links to other online help resources for the software.

Again Inkspace is an Open Source software program so is available completely free. Download it and have a go for yourselves from: <http://www.inkscape.org/>

SourceForge.net is not a piece of software but a gateway to finding more Open Source software for yourselves. It is a vast library of knowledge, links and downloads but you may find it off putting if you are not very tecchie minded yourself. Much of the language used is full of jargon and assumptions are often made around prior knowledge. The other off putting factor can be that there are literally thousands of projects in development at any one time and on an ongoing basis. Finding what you want can be a case of wading your way through a lot of stuff you aren't really interested in.

However, if you want to learn more about Open Source this must be one of the most complete resources out there on the web... and if you do manage to get to grips with all the tecchie language could you please write a dictionary for the rest of us!

Find out more at: <http://sourceforge.net/>