

Random Thoughts

from William Blinn Communications

March
2009

TECHNOLOGY • MARKETING • COMMUNICATIONS

Microsoft Remodels the Mac Office

You would be forgiven for thinking that Office 2008 was a step ahead of Office 2007, but you would be wrong. Office 2008 is essentially Office 2007, except it's the Mac version. I've been spending some time with Office 2008 recently and it's as much of an improvement for the Mac as Office 2007 was for Windows machines. Depending on your point of view, that might be a lot or a little.

There's some controversy about that point because some people are adamantly opposed to change and some welcome it. Those who welcome change, and even some of those who don't, will find that Office 2008's interface is a big improvement. Yes, you'll spend a little time figuring out where items that used to be on complicated menus are now located on the ribbon. Power users who have modified the interface may be in for the greatest shock, but even they will probably realize that the new interface is a step in the right direction.

Mac users may be less shocked by the new interface than Windows users were because the new interface has a more Mac-like look. The ribbon shown above is from Entourage.

There is still no database application, and it's unlikely that one will ever be included. The Windows version has Access, but the Mac version has never had a database component. Everything else you need is there: word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, e-mail, and a calendar.

Power users who depended on Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) made so much noise about its being dropped from Office 2008 that Microsoft's Mac business unit announced in May VBA will be back in the next version. If you're still using a G3 Mac, Office 2008 is not for you. You need at least a G4 processor and OS X 10.5; the more powerful the machine, the better.



Microsoft Mac business unit news release: "The Mac BU also announced it is bringing VBA-language support back to the next version of Office for Mac. Sharing information with customers as early as possible continues to be a priority for the Mac BU to allow customers to plan for their software needs. Although the Mac BU increased support in Office 2008 with alternate scripting tools such as Automator and AppleScript—and also worked with MacTech Magazine to create a reference guide, available at <http://www.mactech.com/vba-transition-guide>—the team recognizes that VBA-language support is important to a select group of customers who rely on sharing macros across platforms. The Mac BU is always working to meet customers' needs and already is hard at work on the next version of Office for Mac."

Art That's Smart

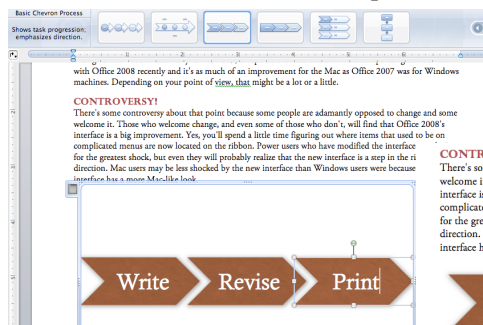
SmartArt, which is available in all of the applications except Entourage, tries to help users create business graphics and illustrations quickly and easily. For the most part, the cookie-cutter approach works.

You won't design anything astonishingly good with SmartArt, but the feature does allow non-designers to create lists, flow diagrams, relationship illustrations and the like. There's still the danger that people

will use inappropriate illustrations that don't advance comprehension just because they think the illustration makes the document "pretty". But that's always a danger.

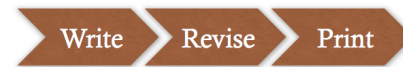
Above (left), I'm creating a process diagram. On the right is the finished diagram after I resized the containing box.

The Formatting Palette is greatly improved and now includes a "Document Theme" section that allows users to apply full-document designs with a single click. The designs include typefaces that work together and colors



CONTROVERSY!
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ANOTHER SUBHEAD
My only significant complaint about Office 2008 about a year after its initial release is that there's no database application. The Windows version has Access, but the Mac version has never had a database component. Perhaps it never will have. But everything else you need is there: word processing, spreadsheet,

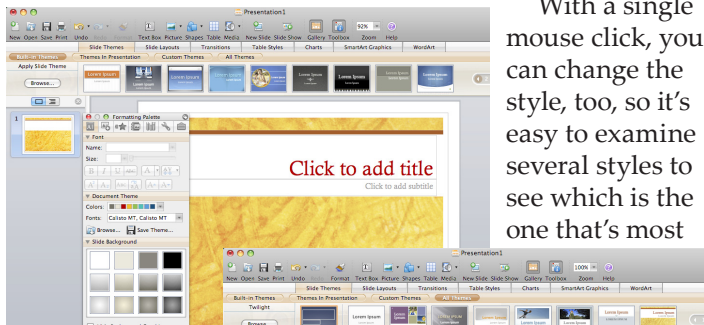


that don't clash. It's another way to keep users from creating something unspeakably ugly.

A *reference tools* section includes the expected thesaurus and dictionary, but there's also an included Encarta Encyclopedia lookup within Office 2008. Several bilingual dictionaries are included for translation help (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and Simplified and Traditional Chinese), and a translation service that requires an Internet connection.

Powerpoint

Powerpoint also comes with a variety of template styles. This isn't a new concept, but the styles have been refined over the years. You won't go too far wrong if you use one of the built-in styles and choose one that's appropriate to your topic.



With a single mouse click, you can change the style, too, so it's easy to examine several styles to see which is the one that's most

appropriate for your message.

Word Art continues to be a part of the suite in Word, Excel, and Powerpoint. This gives users the opportunity to create something really atrocious.

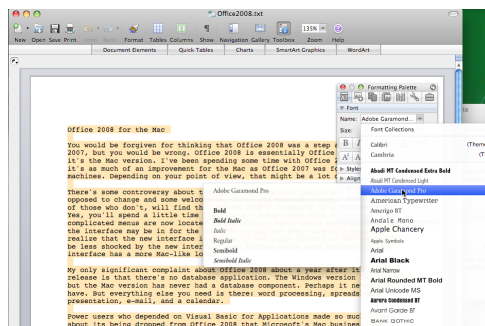
That said, it's important to point out that by default the Word Art styles at least use colors that are appropriate to the theme and they're far less garish than in the past. Still, it's probably better to avoid Word Art in most cases. The exception might be for a single slide or two in a presentation where the effect might add to the message. In any case, Word Art should never be applied to bulleted text as I have done here.

Word

Word is the application I'm most likely to use on either a Mac or Windows machine.

Designing headlines and subheads is one of the more vexing tasks for most people and that's one of the reasons that document styles are so welcome.

They have been designed with appropriate typefaces and



colors, so there's no longer an excuse for "ransom-note publishing".

And speaking of publishing, Word has a "publish" view. Some people are highly critical of Microsoft for extending applications into areas where they should not go. This, they say, is one of those areas. A word processor should be used for word processing tasks, not for formatting newsletters and such. Although I agree entirely with this point of view, I also know that people will use a word processor for formatting newsletters, flyers, booklets, and even books. Microsoft has a choice: Do what the purists would have them do or do what their customer want them to do. Microsoft has rightly chosen the latter course.

Entourage

Outlook by any other name would still be Outlook. Entourage combines e-mail, contact management, a calendar, and a task manager. A new "My Day" quickly lets you see what's on your calendar and to-do list. Unfortunately, one feature that I enjoy on Windows machines isn't yet available on the Mac: The Outlook calendar can be synchronized with the Google calendar and this makes keeping calendars on multiple machines in sync easy. This isn't available to Entourage users, but this is not a Microsoft failing. Google needs to develop the tool.

Multiple tabs and various display options make the application easy to use.

Excel

It's a spreadsheet and a darned good one. It does everything you'd expect a spreadsheet application to do, and then some. Oddly, though, I found that what should be a simple, slam-dunk operation didn't work: A Windows Excel sheet with conditional formatting came to the Mac with all the colors scrambled.

The larger area in the image below is from Excel 2008 on the Mac. The inset image is from Excel 2007 on a Windows machine. Boxes that should be green are gray on the Mac. Pink boxes turned yellow. And Office 2008 on the Mac converted Office 2007 boxes from light blue to garish green.

That's a minor problem, though, and if that's all I can find to complain about, the application must be doing a lot of things right.

Bottom Line: Office reinvented for the Mac. Most of the changes are good, but you'll need a powerful machine to run the application.

The "Home and Student Edition" of Office 2008 (about \$150) includes license keys for 3 computers. If you're running a desktop at home, carry a Mac notebook with you, and the kids use another Mac for homework, a single license covers everyone. For such a powerful application, that's a decent price. **B**

