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Office 2010 boasts new features, Web-based apps

REVIEW: Microsoft's flagship desktop suite comes with enhancements to core Office capabilities and breaks new ground by pushing Office apps beyond the bounds of the Windows desktop into rich, Web-based versions.

By Jason Brooks

After an Office 2007 release packed with file format and interface overhauls that many users and organizations found challenging to digest, Microsoft returns to a smaller and more familiar-size release with Office 2010. It became available last month for volume license customers, and is set to hit retail this week.

As with most other Office releases, the 2010 version introduces plenty of enticements for upgraders: new features for producing slick-looking documents, spreadsheets and presentations; interface tweaks for surfacing and, in some places, tamping down the slicker output features from previous releases; and more hooks into SharePoint Server 2010 (which shipped alongside Office 2010) to more tightly knit together knowledge workers.

Modest enhancements and interface tweaks aside, Office 2010 is a major release—if not for the way it churns up existing components,



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then for the way it expands Office to new platforms and devices. Office 2010 marks the debut of a slate of

Web-based Office applications that are available in hosted, on-premises

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or free ad-supported forms. What's more, these applications boast uncharacteristically broad support for non-Microsoft products: The apps support Mozilla's Firefox, Apple's Safari and Google's Chrome Web browsers nearly as well as Microsoft's own Internet Explorer.

As they stand now, the Web apps are much thinner in terms of features and extensibility than the better-established Web app offerings from Google and Zoho. But at sites that store documents on a SharePoint 2010 server, I can imagine the Office Web Apps seeing frequent use for previewing documents and carrying out minor edits.

I'm interested in seeing how Microsoft moves forward, adding new features and improvements to its Web Apps. In particular, I'll pay attention to how well it handles the challenge of rolling out improvements—not only on the Web Apps instances Microsoft hosts itself, but also on the on-premises installations of Office and SharePoint customers.

Office 2010 will be available at retail in a number of different editions, including Home and Student, Home and Business, and Professional editions, priced at between \$150 and \$500. Microsoft has done away with upgrade pricing discounts.

For volume license customers, Office 2010 is available in Standard and Professional Plus editions. The Standard edition includes Word, Excel, Outlook, PowerPoint, OneNote and Publisher, as well as access to Office Web Apps. The Professional

Plus edition adds SharePoint Workspace (formerly known as Groove), InfoPath and Microsoft Communicator. For more information on Office 2010 editions and pricing, go to tinyurl.com/2uuc9t8.

I conducted most of my Office 2010 tests on virtual machines with between 1GB and 2GB of RAM running the 64-bit version of Windows 7 or the 32-bit version of Windows XP SP3. Office 2010 ran happily on every configuration I tested.

video to shrink the size of my video for different types of distribution.

Word 2010 sports nice enhancements to its sidebar interface, starting with the application's Navigation Pane, which replaces Word 2007's Document Map feature. I used the Navigation Pane to traverse Word documents by jumping from heading to heading. I liked the way I could reorganize topics within a document by dragging the headings around within the pane.

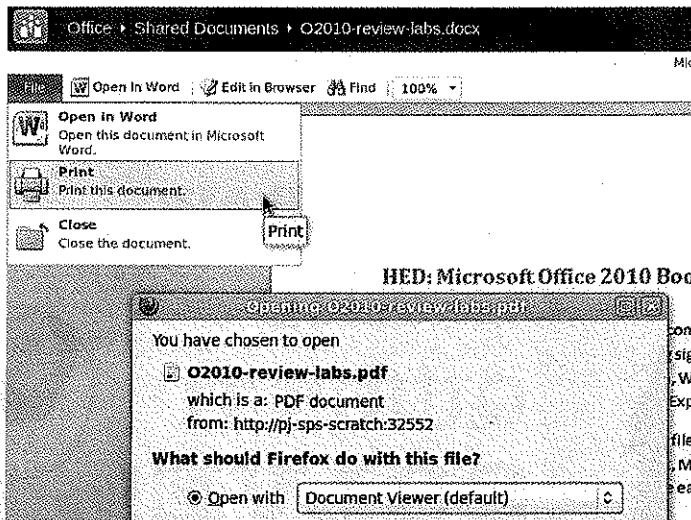
Also situated in this side pane is a useful search feature. I typed the words I sought in my document, and the search pane filled in the results and a bit of context. By default, the search pane tool looks for text, but I could also seek out graphics, tables, equations, footnotes and comments by selecting from a drop-down menu.

Another useful set of enhancements revolves around cutting and pasting. In response to research that indicated the most common action that users take after pasting content into an Office document

is hitting the undo button, the team added new pre- and post-paste features, housed in context-sensitive Smart Tags, reducing the need to hit undo.

For instance, in Excel, I entered the number 1 in the first cell of a spreadsheet column, grabbed the corner of the cell with my mouse and dragged down 30 or so rows. Excel filled each cell in the set with a 1, and spawned a Smart Tag to ask if I'd intended to fill the cells with a series of numbers.

Also new in Excel 2010 are



The Word, Excel and PowerPoint documents I tested rendered well in my test browsers, offering the best route I've seen for viewing an Office document as intended without having a copy of Office installed. In addition, the print function in the Web Apps does an excellent job converting Office documents to PDF format.

Core enhancements

The biggest interface tweak in Office 2010 is probably the addition of a "backstage area" to replace what had been the "File" menu drop-down. In each application, these backstage areas house "meta document" options, such as those for saving, opening, printing or exporting.

In Outlook, the backstage area contains account and folder settings, alongside import and export options. In PowerPoint, I visited the backstage area of a presentation with embedded

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enhancements to the application's data visualization capabilities, such as in its PivotTable and PivotChart features. I could, for instance, narrow down an unwieldy chart full of NBA stats by sorting and filtering from a menu beside my chart. I expect that these new options for manipulating charts will help flatten out the learning curve for users who aren't comfortable with these Excel features.

Microsoft has enhanced the conditional formatting capabilities of Excel with easy-to-apply visuals such as in-cell data bars. With my basketball stats, I was able to highlight a stat column, apply a data bar conditional formatting element and watch as a bar appeared in each of the column's cells, representing the size of the cell's value relative to the rest of the values in my selection.

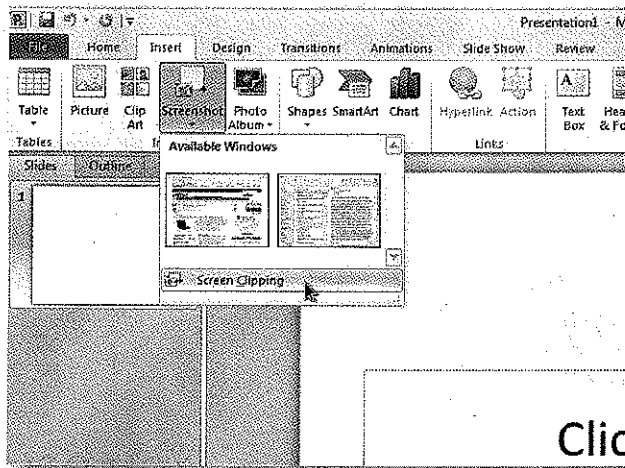
I also imported the statistics for a single player across a 10-year span and illustrated the rise and fall of that player's stats in a compact single-cell chart called a sparkline. I could add details to my sparkline charts, such as highlighting the high and low points on the curve.

Office Web Apps

After testing Office Web Apps in its in-development and final versions, I'd say that while it is off to a solid start in the areas of usefulness and cross-platform support, there's still plenty of work to be done before it catches up to the better-established office Web applications from Google and Zoho. Features such as a word count function in Word are missing, and the Office Web Apps offer a

much narrower range of file-format options than Google, Zoho or the full-size Office applications.

Office Web Apps does shine for its handling of Office's default OOXML formats. The Word, Excel and PowerPoint documents I tested rendered well in my test browsers, offering the best route I've seen for viewing an Office document as intended without having a copy of Office installed. In addition, the print function in the Web Apps does an excellent job converting Office documents to PDF format.



PowerPoint and Word both have an option embedded in their Ribbons for inserting screenshots of active windows into documents or presentations. Choosing this option spawned a dialog with thumbnails of all the open windows on my test machine.

I tested the Office Web Apps on a SharePoint Server 2010 instance running in our lab, and from a test version of Microsoft's Windows Live service. From Windows Live, I found new options for creating, editing and viewing Office documents using Office Web Apps.

I could start by uploading an existing document or starting a new one. On our SharePoint, I couldn't figure out how to create a new document from scratch—the New Document options I found in SharePoint directed me only to a file upload function.

I uploaded a Word document stored in the binary .DOC format to our SharePoint instance and could readily view it from my browser. When I opted to "edit in browser," the server alerted me that it would have to convert my document to the newer .DOCX format.

The same held true for PowerPoint and Excel documents stored in the earlier format. I uploaded a different document stored in the OpenDocument Format—the default format for OpenOffice.org, which Office 2010

does support—but found that there was no way to view, edit or convert the ODF document from Office Web Apps.

My test document rendered nicely in both Firefox and IE. I was able to scroll through my documents with ease, with new pages loading promptly. Links embedded in my test document worked as expected, and I could zoom in and out of the document in more or less the same way as with the desktop-based version of Word. I was pleased to see that the Web version of Word mimics well the sidebar-based document search

feature that's new to Word 2010.

My experiences testing the Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote Web Apps were similar to what I found with Word: I could view binary-formatted Office documents with good fidelity, but I had to convert to the newer XML-based formats for editing. ☺

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