In addition to its common features, the first update to Microsoft's Office in almost four years also brings a few key additions specific to its core Excel, PowerPoint, and Word programs, some of which seem to take cues directly from developments seen in Apple's iWork suite. We look at these in the second part of our Office 2008 preview.

Excel: charts and ledgers

While SmartArt is found across all the programs in Office outside of Entourage, its real advantage may reside in Excel. Building a chart or graph from Excel data has been at times infamously difficult for those without the time or experience to create a professional chart. In the 2008 upgrade, Microsoft uses the Elements Gallery to make at least the basics of chart creation a relatively simple process: selecting the relevant data in a spreadsheet and clicking a chart element automatically formats the data to fit the chosen chart style.

The system is not universally relevant -- it cannot always make bar chart information fit a radar layout, for example -- but, in most situations, it correctly fits information along the right axes, populates the legend, and applies the chosen art style with a minimum of effort. SmartArt is especially useful here as it effectively makes switching elements in a non-destructive fashion: as users change fonts, size, or choose to emphasize rows instead of columns, all information carries over and resizes without extra input. Anyone who has used iWork's Numbers program or even the chart creation tools in Keynote and Pages will find this familiar, though Microsoft's version to date has more chart styles and may be more powerful overall.
Microsoft has made a second welcome concession to Apple in the form of its templates for Excel's spreadsheets. For 2008, the program comes with a few dozen templates which, except for blank examples, already feature pre-made formulas. Users only need to type in their custom data; handily, Excel also includes a drop-down menu for header columns and rows that let users edit data without turning to the menu bar at the top of the screen.

Many of these are ledgers, Microsoft notes: in catering to the home market, which is least likely to have the time for creating ledgers by hand, several of the templates are made just to keep track of home budgets, expenses for home businesses, and personal stock portfolios. The goal, Microsoft says, is to all but eliminate the need for math for the Office users who might be too intimidated by Excel's formula system.
If the sudden competition with iWork proves useful for Excel, PowerPoint 2008 also shows signs of apparent inspiration. The most obvious may be alignment guides; like Keynote, lines appear onscreen when an object is aligned horizontally or vertically with the document or compared to other elements. These also surface in Word. The revision similarly adds live thumbnails that update as elements are changed to give a better view of how changes to one slide affect the flow of the presentation without first saving the document.
Perhaps the most important feature, however, is a new presenter tool. While the layout is different than for Keynote, the underlying principle is the same; choosing the view from the Slide Show menu switches to a full-screen mode that tracks much of the information a presenter needs. It shows both the current and upcoming slides as well as an overview that allows a quick jump to a slide out of order. A notes section also lets presenters add comments for themselves ahead of a meeting or after the fact, and separate clocks for real or elapsed guard against running past schedule.
In Word 2004, Microsoft introduced the concept of special layouts optimized for certain writing styles. At the time, the only addition was a notebook layout built for students taking notes. 2008 introduces a second mode known as the publishing layout.

The view is best described as a cross between PowerPoint and, again, Apple's Pages software. Instead of a conventional text-only view, images and text are created through text boxes; while it does not automatically wrap text in the way Pages does, it permits creating pages that are normally handled by dedicated publishing tools or which would be more unwieldy when using a traditional view. Switching to this view additionally replaces the normal text editing button set with controls for adding boxes, lines, and shapes.
Like so many aspects of Office, but unlike the earlier notebook layout, the publishing mode does not require that users remain in the same view for the entire editing process. While it will caution users before the switch, Word faithfully preserves the formatting for text and images created before the change and will flip back in a similar manner. This may become essential for writers who want to experiment or create mixed-format documents without creating separate files.

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