Lightweight Collaboration with Sironta

Teamwork

If you need a collaboration tool for your team that integrates tightly with OpenOffice.org, check out Sironta.

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What kind of solution would you need if you were looking for a collaboration tool for a small workgroup? Probably something that plays nicely with your productivity applications like OpenOffice.org or LibreOffice, easy to deploy, and not overloaded with features that you would never use. In other words, you would need something like Sironta [1].

This open source collaboration solution is a perfect fit for a small workgroup that uses either OpenOffice.org or LibreOffice as its tool of choice. Unlike other collaboration tools on the market, Sironta is not a web-based application or service. Instead it uses a peer-to-peer technology to keep multiple Sironta instances in sync. This approach has several advantages. For starters, you don't have to get your hands dirty installing, configuring, and maintaining software, and you don't need a dedicated server. It also means that you can use Sironta even offline: All changes will be automatically synchronized the next time you are connected to the Internet.

Getting Started with Sironta

Sironta is written in Java, so you need to install the Sun Java Runtime Environment on your machine before you proceed. Once you've done that, grab the latest version of Sironta from the project's website. The download file weighs a whopping 260.7MB, but there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for that: Sironta comes bundled with OpenOffice.org. So there is no need to install OpenOffice.org separately and waste time integrating it with Sironta. If you already have OpenOffice.org or LibreOffice on your machine, you can point Sironta to the existing installation – but more about that later. Unpack the downloaded archive in your home directory, open the terminal, switch to the resulting directory, and run the *.sh* launch script to launch Sironta.

Before you start using Sironta, you have to set up an account, which takes only a couple of minutes. By the way, the server software for managing Sironta accounts is also released under an open source license, so in theory, you can roll out your own solution that doesn't rely on a third-party service.

Once your account has been confirmed, log in to Sironta and you are ready to go. Workspaces in Sironta are called rooms, and the system automatically creates a default room when you install the application (Figure 1). You can, however, create as many additional rooms as you need. For example, you can create separate rooms for each project or for each workgroup. Each room can contain an unlimited number of users and documents. To create a room, choose the *Rooms | Add room* command, and hit the *Finish* button.

The next step is to populate the created room with users. To do this, press the *Invite new user* button (or choose *People | Invite User*). Sironta provides two ways to add users. If the user you want to invite is already registered with Sironta, you can search for him in the system using the built-in search feature. Enter a name, user name, or email address in the search field, hit the *Search* button, and Sironta displays a list of found matches. Select

the user you want, and press *Finish*. If the user is not in the system, you can use Sironta to send him an invitation via email. When the user installs Sironta and creates an account, your invitation appears in the *Invitations* section of his Sironta installation. If the user accepts the invitation, the system automatically adds him to your group.

Once the room has been populated with users, you can start adding documents to it. Again, there are two ways to do that: You can import existing documents into the room, or you can create new documents from scratch using the bundled copy of OpenOffice.org. To import an existing document, press the *Import* button in the main toolbar (or choose *Documents | Add Document*), select the file you want to import, and press *OK*. This adds the selected document to the *Documents* pane, and the document immediately becomes available to all users in the room (Figure 2). Creating a document from scratch is not particularly
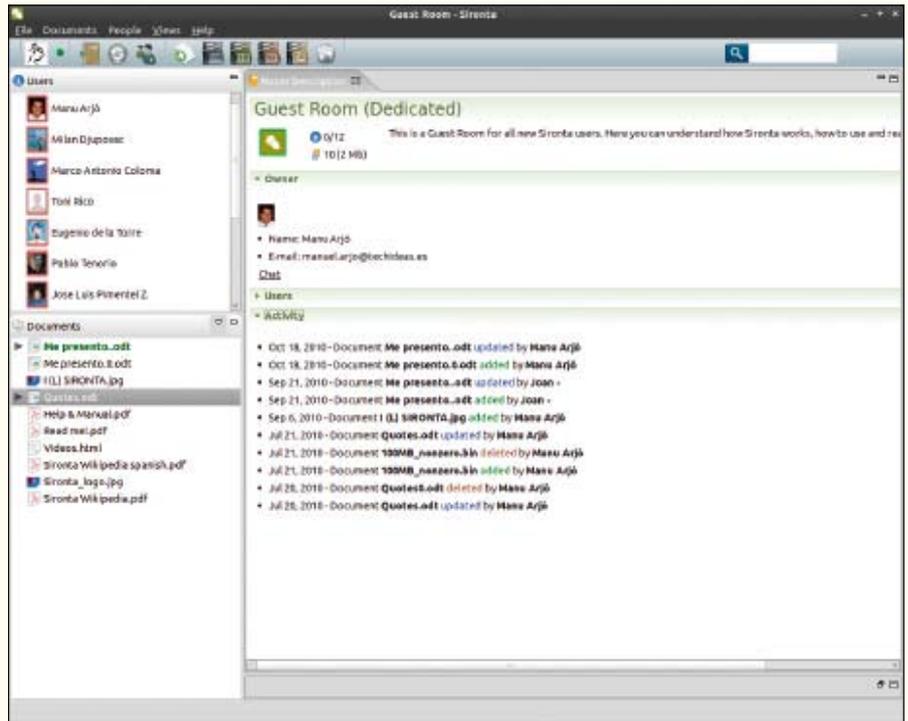

Figure 1: Sironta in action.

difficult either: Choose the desired document type from the *Documents | New* menu, and Sironta opens a blank document in the appropriate OpenOffice.org application.

The ability to store documents in a room and make them available to all room users is undeniably a useful feature, but Sironta has an even better trick up its sleeve. The application supports document versioning, which makes it a handy tool for tracking multiple editions of a particular document. If you modify and save a document in the room's repository, the system marks it as modified by adding the *M* flag next to the document in the *Documents* pane. And when you choose the *Documents | Synchronize with the repository* command, the system pushes the changes to other users and saves the previous version as a new edition.
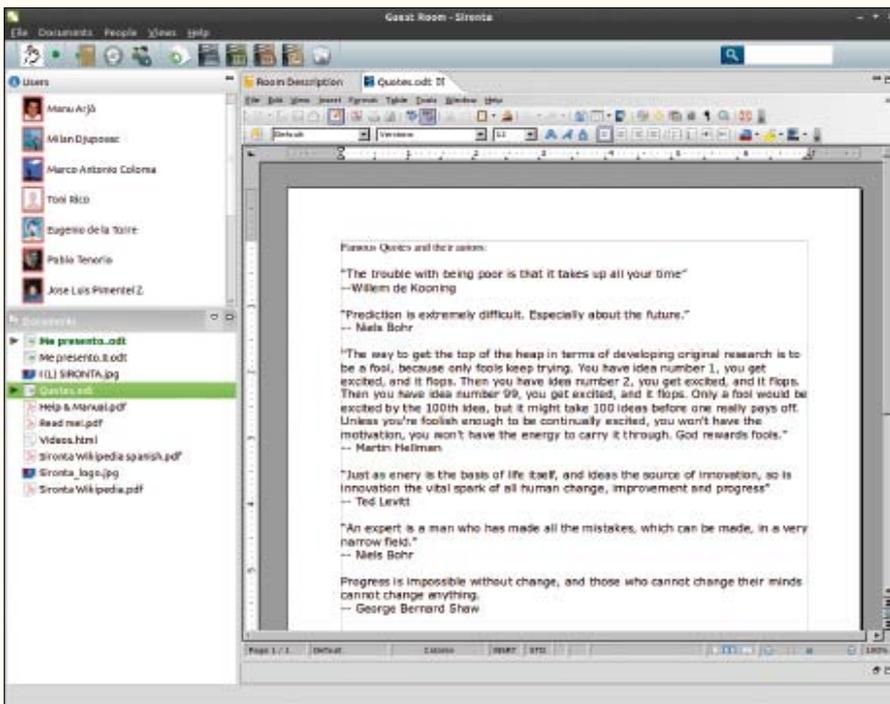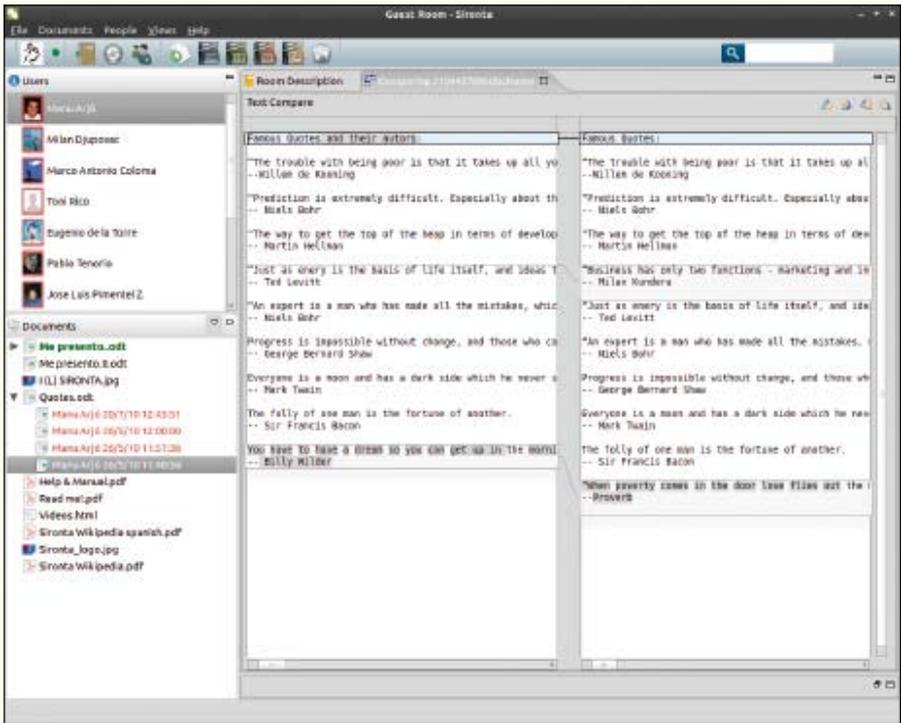

Figure 2: Sironta integrates tightly with OpenOffice.org.

Figure 3: Using Sironta, you can keep track of document editions and compare them side by side.
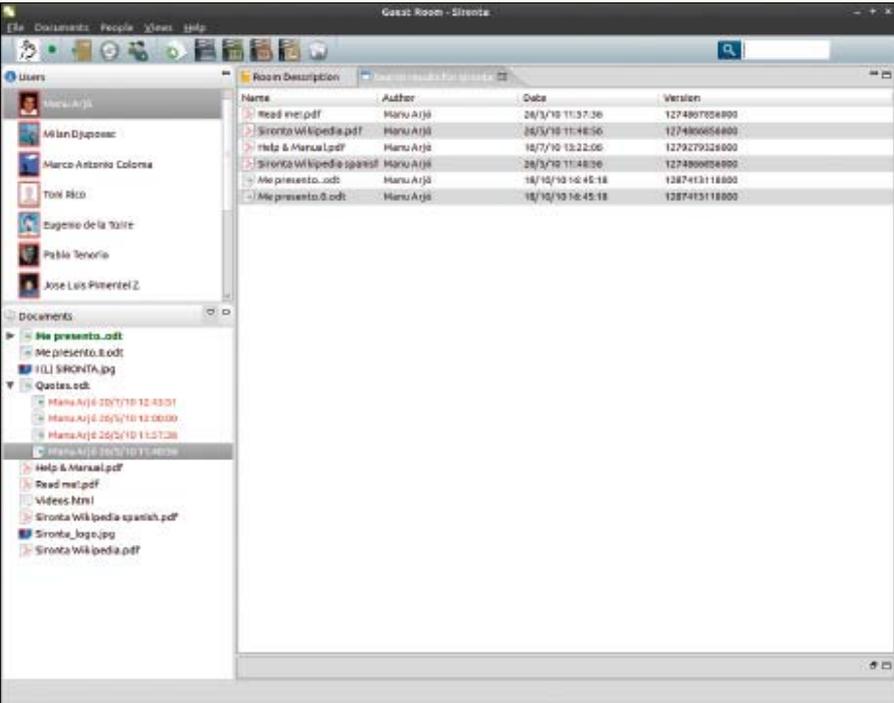
In addition to that, the system logs the action in the *Activity* section of the main working pane, so other users can stay abreast of activities in the room. You can view all versions of a specific document by clicking on the triangle next to it (the triangle appears only if the document contains at least one version). You can open any previous version of the document for viewing by double-clicking on it. Better yet, you can compare any of the previous editions with the current version of the document. To do this, right-click on the previous version you want and choose the *Compare with current* menu item. This opens both versions of the document side by side in a separate window with all modifications marked for your convenience (Figure 3).

You can use the *Next/Previous Difference* and *Next/Previous Change* buttons to navigate quickly through changes in the document. The current version of Sironta doesn't allow you to revert the document to any of its previous versions, however. Although Sironta's compare feature is not on par with the track changes feature of OpenOffice.org, it can come in handy when dealing with documents in other formats.

To make it easier to find specific documents quickly in the room, Sironta supports a search feature (Figure 4). To use it, type the search criteria in the *Search* field and hit Enter. You should then see a list of matching documents under the *Search results* tab.

Sironta allows you not only to collaborate with other users, but also communicate with them in real time using the application's chat feature. If you want to talk to a certain user directly, click on the *Chat* link next to the user's name. This opens the *Chat* pane, where you can exchange instant messages with the user. Sironta also lets

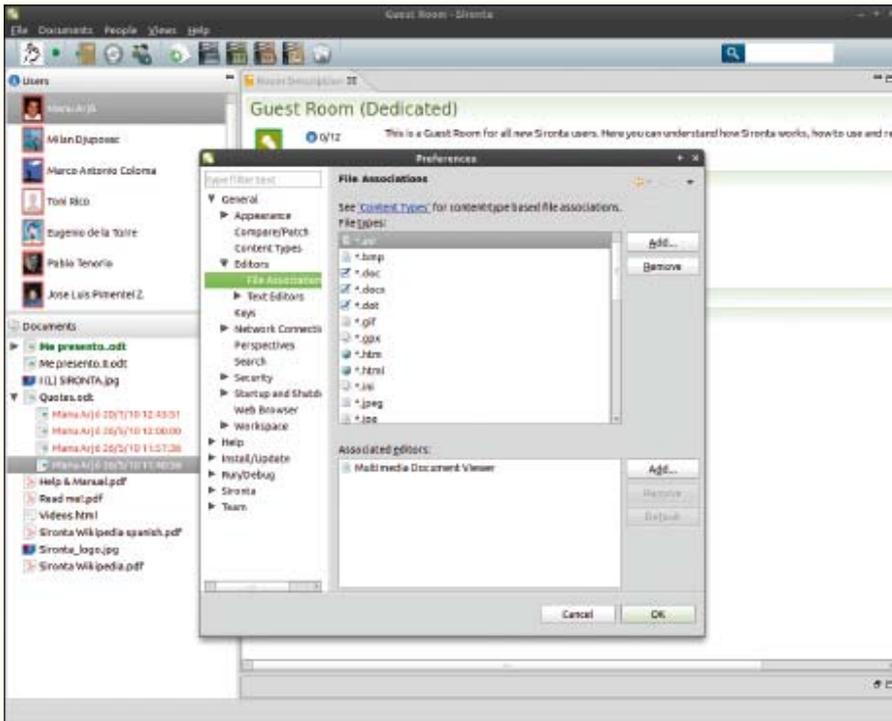**Figure 4:** Sironta sports a simple yet efficient search feature.

Figure 5: Tweaking file associations.

you initiate multi-chat sessions for all users in the current room. To start a multi-chat session, choose *People | Multi-chat*.

Tweaking Sironta

Although Sironta works fine as is, you might want to adjust a few settings to get the most out of the application. To tweak Sironta, choose *File | Sironta Preferences*.

Sironta comes bundled with OpenOffice.org, but you can configure the application to use your existing OpenOffice.org installation. For example, you might want to use LibreOffice with Sironta or a newer version of OpenOffice.org. The bundled version of the productivity suite doesn't include the JRE (and it won't play nicely with the JRE installed on your machine). This means, among other things, that you can't install certain extensions like Writer's Tools on the bundled version of OpenOffice.org.

Fortunately, integrating Sironta with your version of OpenOffice.org or LibreOffice is not difficult. In *Preferences*, switch to *Sironta | OpenOffice.org Integration Preferences* and specify the path to your OpenOffice.org or LibreOffice installation. Press the *Apply* button to save the settings. Now when you open a document in Sironta, the application automatically integrates your external version into the system.

Sironta comes with a few built-in editors for handling documents in different formats. For example, the application has its own text editor for working with text files and a browser for viewing HTML pages. However, you can configure Sironta to open specific file types in external applications, so you can edit text files in your preferred text editor and view web pages in the default browser on your machine.

To do that, you have to tweak the file associations settings (Figure 5). In the *Preferences* window, switch to the *Editors | File Associations* section. Then select the desired file extension in the *File types* list and press the *Add* button in the *Associated editors* pane. Select the *External programs* option and use the *Browse* button to select the desired program binary (e.g., `/usr/bin/leafpad` to select the Leafpad text editor). Press *OK* to save the settings and close the window.

Final Word

The Sironta application has a lot going for it. It is easy to install and deploy; it provides integration with the popular open source productivity suite, and it sports a user-friendly interface. So, if you are looking for a tool that can help you to collaborate on documents with other users, Sironta is just the ticket. ■■■

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[1] Sironta: *www.sironta.com*