New Trends in Online Help

What we’ll cover in this presentation

- Six new trends within the user assistance community
- The context and reasons for each of these trends
- Issues and challenges to consider
- Advice on how to decide whether each trend is right for you
Trend 1: Tri-pane-based to embedded

Origins of the tri-pane model

- WinHelp 4 (Windows 95)
  - Separate windows for content and navigation
Origins of the tri-pane model

- HTML Help 1.0 (Windows 98)
  - Navigation moved into left-hand pane within main Help window

1: Toolbar
2: Navigation pane
3: Content pane

The tri-pane gains momentum...

- All the following Help formats have adopted the tri-pane model:
  - WebHelp (eHelp, now Adobe)
  - WebWorks Help (Quadralay)
  - JavaHelp (Sun Microsystems)
  - Oracle Help for Java (Oracle)
  - Microsoft Help 2
  - FlashHelp (eHelp, now Adobe)
  - WinHelp 2000 (eHelp, now Adobe)
### Advantages of the tri-pane model

- Great for reference information
- Comfortable and familiar for author (and user?)
- Enables Help authors to work independently from software developers
- Many authoring tool options

### Disadvantage of the tri-pane model

- Help is a separate world that users have to choose to enter
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So what’s the solution?

- Break down the barrier between application (task) and Help
- Richer links:
  - From application to Help
  - From Help to application
- Help becomes part of the application UI

“Embedded User Assistance”

Better access to Help: Embedded links from application UI

- Search in Office 2003
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Links to procedural Help topics

Links to definitions and explanations of terms
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Embedded user assistance content

- Static snippets of user assistance throughout the UI
- Dedicated user assistance pane

Notes

- Both of the above need to be designed in from the start
- A user assistance specialist must be involved in the UI design/creation process

User assistance as part of UI

Embedded user assistance - or simply part of the UI?
An alternative approach: Balloon Help

- Help balloons overlaid on application
- “Proactive” – does not require the user to request Help
- If possible: adapts to user’s experience and behaviour

Notes
- Less need for the Help author to be involved in the design of the UI
- However, may require significant planning and coding from developers

Example of Balloon Help

Balloon may include link to tri-pane Help
### Trend 2: HTML-based to XML-based

**Reasons for trend towards XML-based publishing**

- Increasing demand for single-sourcing and information re-use
- Availability of tools, technologies and standards - many of them free
  - Authoring tools
  - Transformation engines
  - DITA
  - DocBook
- Microsoft’s new Vista Help technologies
Remember:
**XML is not a display format**

- XML is used for rich and semantic mark-up of source content
- Think of it as a way of storing information in a database
- For some authoring tools (such as Help & Manual or Flare) you need not be aware of the XML code
- XML is transformed (usually to HTML or PDF) for delivery to end-users

### XML Transformation process

- **XML Document**
- **XSLT Processor**
  - **XSL-FO doc**
  - **XML with inline formatting**
  - **Style sheet for printed output**
- **XSL-FO Formatter**
- **PDF Doc**
- **HTML Pages**
- **CSS**
  - **XSLT doc**
  - **Style sheet for online output**
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Reasons to move to XML publishing

- Requirement for multiple deliverables from a single source
- Requirement to localize for multiple languages
- Desire to use open (non-proprietary) tools, technologies and standards

Issues with XML

- Migrating to XML often requires a significant up-front investment
- Using your own custom Schema/DTD requires considerable XML and XSLT expertise
- XML-based Help authoring tools are less mature than HTML-based tools
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Trend 3: Client-based to server-based

Typical characteristics of server-based Help

- Single point of delivery
- Updated as needed (continuous publishing)
- Usage tracking and reporting
- Offline version installed to user’s own hard disk (airplane Help)
**Case study: Microsoft Office 2003**

- Microsoft’s mantra: “Better when connected”
- When connected to the Internet: Help queries default to server-based content
- When not connected: Help queries are diverted to local CHM
- Server based content also available through Office Online website
- User feedback: “Content Watson”

**Comparison of online and offline content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online (server-based)</th>
<th>Offline (CHM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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Office Online website

Content Watson

- An extension of “Crash Watson”
- Feedback stored in SQL Server database and tagged with an Asset ID
- Daily asset-level summaries
- Authors read comments and make changes
- Also: fine-tuning of search results is possible
Trend 4: Increased competition for RoboHelp

RoboHelp release history

- In 11 years from 1992 to 2003, 13 major versions:
  - 1 to 7
  - 2000
  - 9
  - 2002
  - X3 to X5
- In three years since 2003, no major new versions
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Since 2003…

- 2003: eHelp acquired by Macromedia
- 2004: Development of X6 well underway
- 2005 Q1: RoboHelp unofficially “sunset”
- 2005 Q4: Macromedia merged with Adobe
- 2006 (April): Adobe announces there will be a new version of RoboHelp in 2007
- 2006 (October): Beta program for RoboHelp X6 starts

In the same period:

- MadCap Software forms and releases versions 1 and 2 of Flare (dubbed as an XML-based “RoboHelp replacement”)
- Quadralay releases XML-based WebWorks ePublisher Pro
- EC Software releases XML-based Help and Manual v4
- ComponentOne releases Doc-to-Help Enterprise 2006 (with support for HTML source content)
- Innovasys releases XML-based HelpStudio 2
RoboHelp’s current strengths

- RoboHelp has many strengths, including:
  - Market share (de facto industry standard)
  - Stability and robustness
  - Ease of use for creating standard tri-pane Help
  - Indexing
  - Conditional text support
  - Headers and footers
  - Etc.

RoboHelp’s current key weaknesses

- WebHelp’s cross-browser support
  - WebHelp pre-dates Win XP SP2, Firefox, Internet Explorer 7, and other recent browser releases
- Print output
  - Hyperlinks are not converted to cross-references
  - Limited control over page layout from within RoboHelp UI
  - Difficulties in controlling numbered and bulleted lists
RoboHelp’s current key weaknesses

- Limited possibilities for information reuse
  - Popups
  - Glossary Hotspot Wizard
- HTML source code
  - Kadov tags
  - HTML Help controls
  - No semantic mark-up

Source code example

```
<OBJECT CLASSID="clsid:ADB880A6-D8FF-11CF-9377-00AA003B7A11"
ID="SeeAlso" TYPE="application/x-oleobject">
<PARAM NAME="Command" VALUE="ALink,MENU">
<PARAM NAME="Button" VALUE="Text:See Also">
<PARAM NAME="Font" VALUE="Arial,8,0,,">
<PARAM NAME="Frame" VALUE="">
<PARAM NAME="Item1" VALUE="">
<PARAM NAME="Item2" VALUE="Accounts">
<param name="_ID" value="SeeAlso" />
<param name="_Name" value="See Also" />
<param name="_CURRENTFILEPATH" value="C:\RoboHTML\Training\Locator\Welcome.htm" />
</OBJECT>
```
Trend 5: Single author to collaborative authoring

Popularity of user forums and communities
Can we extend this principle to documentation and online Help?

- What if...
  - Readers “subscribed” to the text?
  - Readers reviewed the text?
  - Readers edited the text and corrected errors?
  - Readers collaboratively wrote the text?

- Possible using Wikis


![Wiki Example](image-url)
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Facts about Wikipedia

- 70 articles per hour added
- 3.8 million entries, 100 languages
- Budget of $800,000
- 1 employee (but 48,000 contributors)
- Shown to be almost as accurate and reliable as Encyclopaedia Britannica, and...
- Constantly revised and updated

Example 1 of Wiki for documentation
Example 2 of Wiki for documentation

Wiki issues

- Content needs editing for consistency and flow
- Potential accuracy problem
- Accountability
- Safety/security issues
- Litigation
- Difficult to make context-sensitive
Trend 6: Multimedia and “show me” demos

Reasons for trend towards rich media

- Rise of broadband Internet access
- World-wide ubiquity of Flash Player (installed on 97.3% of Internet-enabled desktops)
- Maturity of simulation tools such as TechSmith’s Camtasia and Adobe’s Captivate
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Issues with simulation tools

- Simulations are high-maintenance
  - UI changes force re-recording
  - Localisation issues
- Users do no real work

An alternative approach – Guided Interaction

- Third-party tools (such as ActiveHelp) are becoming available
- Also: Active Content Wizard in Windows Vista