

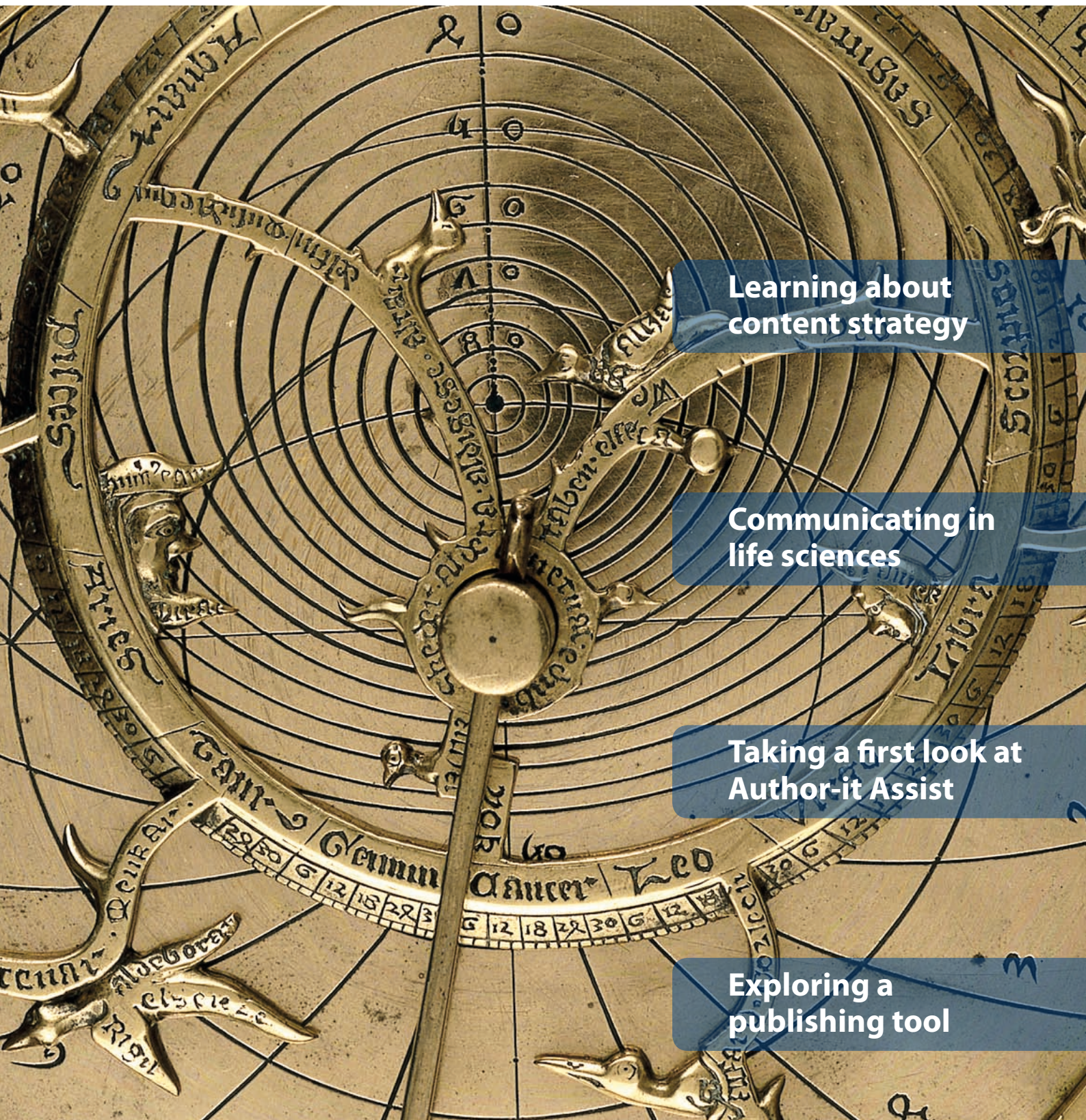
A 14th century must-have gadget

An instruction manual for an astrolabe by Chaucer



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Using Author-it Assist

David Jones reviews Author-it Assist a new software tool from ASC that allows you to add your own context-sensitive help links.

Author-it Software Corporation (ASC) are best known for their Author-it Enterprise Authoring Platform. Initially released in 1998 it has become a leader in its field. Author-it Assist, officially launched at the STC conference in May 2010, is a departure from their acknowledged strengths in authoring, and presumably opens new markets for them as they look to grow the company. Assist enables you to create and organise context-sensitive help links for any software application. This gives any organisation the ability to add their own help to any application they are using, despite not having access to the code. The applications of this are likely to be numerous and are particularly evident in large enterprise bespoke software implementations such as SAP where organisations often struggle to train and inform their staff.

You do not have to use Author-it's authoring platform to use Assist. Therefore, if you are using RoboHelp, Flare or any other authoring tool you can still use it to create help content that can then be used with Assist to create contextual links. These links could even be to lessons in a learning management system.

Assist comes as two modules, one for Windows-based applications and the other for browser-based applications, which are purchased separately. Both have the concept of the album, whereby you create an album of screens, and for each album, you add a link. Additionally, you can also add field-level help. You can also configure each album, such that, when they are distributed they can point to an online album that is constantly added to and if there is no web access a local album. Periodically, the local album can be synchronised with the online album.

The Trial editions I used are branded with Author-it's logo. I am told that if you do purchase the product they will add your own branding. In fact, they are keen to work closely with software vendors in order to develop the product further. If you are an independent software vendor, then licensing is fairly straightforward. If you want to add contextual links then you need to buy a licence for each person that does so. Distribution of the album and end-user components are royalty free.

Browser based

The browser-based module is two toolbars in Internet Explorer (other browsers are not currently supported), one for building the context links (Figure 2) and the other that shows the links to the user (Figure 1). Due to browser security the user toolbar cannot be automatically installed. However, you can add a script that will prompt the user to install it with a message such as 'For Premium Level Assistance Ins tall the Assist Plug-in.'

The context builder detects pages, frames and divs in the browser, basically anything that builds a web page. When you a visit page each distinct part is displayed in a drop down list on the toolbar and as you scroll through them each is highlighted in a different colour.

To add a link you choose an album or create one and then click the first camera icon. Advanced options enable you to more precisely define the section of the web page for which you want to add a link. You can add as many links to each screen as you like and once you have added a screen you can start adding field-level help. This is done by clicking the second camera icon. Field-level help can be added as a pop-up with either static text, added via a simple text editor, or a link. There are varieties of pop-up styles you can choose. Adding field-level help is easy, all you have to do is point your mouse at an item (for example a text box)



Figure 1. Assist end user toolbar

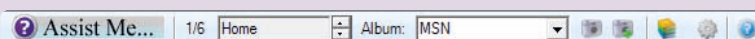


Figure 2. Browser context builder

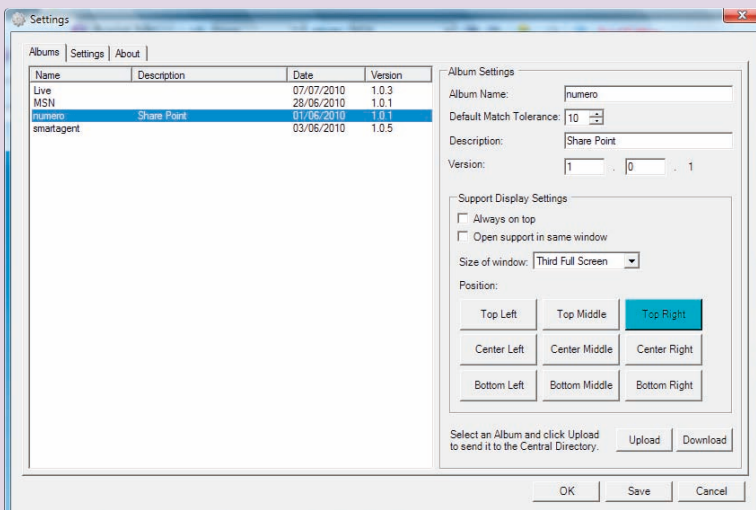


Figure 3. Browser album management



Figure 4. Windows context builder

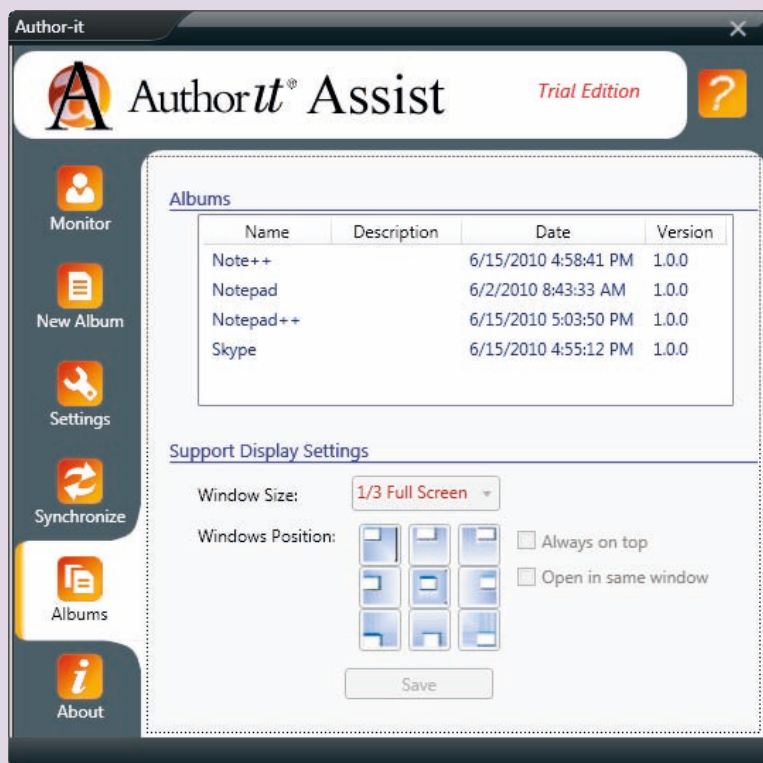


Figure 5. Windows album management

if the application detects it and can add help it is underlined in green, if it can't it is underlined in red.

Fine control of the application and the album is provided by clicking the Settings (see Figure 3) and the Album icons and you can finely control the look and feel of the help and links.

In all cases you are not restricted to a help file. You can also link to other web pages such as Wikipedia or even PDF documents. This means that for online applications a support desk could quite quickly, having identified an issue on a page, post a link to a document with the work around or a new link to a page of the help system, without the need to republish the help system. All the support desk would need to do is to update the album and upload it to an online location.

Tighter integration with their other products mean that Author-it have made the whole process of creating and adding content on the fly very easy. Therefore, from a link in a help system created with Author-it, you can open and edit the content directly, if you have permission.

Windows based

The Windows-based module does the same thing but it is for Windows applications (see Figure 4). As it is not a plug-in for a browser, it is far more like a traditional Windows application. When I demonstrated this at the ISTC North West Area Group meeting people thought that this looked a more accomplished piece of software. However, this is probably down to familiarity with using Windows applications as opposed to browser plug-ins.

Functionality between the two modules is identical but achieved in slightly different ways. In the Windows module, you drag and drop the camera icons on to the applications to create the links. It is easy and intuitive to use. The rest of the settings are very similar to those found in the browser module; such as screen position and album management (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).

Distribution

The final product is distributed with your application. When help is present the Assist Me icon is displayed. Click on the icon and a list of help topics. Field-level help is identified by an underline for the browser module, click the line and field-level help is opened. The Windows module field-level help is displayed by hovering over a field. If help is present, a box is displayed, which when clicked field-level help is opened (see Figure 6).

Competition


So, what about the competition? Well there is not really much out there and what there is I have not used so it is difficult to make any comparisons. RoboHelp Linker was a short-lived product that was released by eHelp several years ago but was quietly withdrawn. There is Affixion's LinKit that has been around for some time now. This has evolved over the years into a tool that now has similar aspirations to that of Assist, namely elearning and linking corporate

knowledge bases to business applications. There are also some other applications, which I believe ASC see as competition, that have aspirations around this area, such as RWD uPerform and Oracle On Demand, but these seem to have a narrower focus.

Conclusion

Is Assist a useful tool? Well it is a useful two tools; both do identical things but for completely different types of application, browser based and traditional Windows based. Both are relatively easy to use and you can quite rapidly build your context-sensitive links. The attractions here are the cost savings in not involving, or depending, on developers to add the links. Customers will also benefit, as they will get up-to-date user assistance down to field level.

I can see a multitude of applications for it far beyond that of the traditional context-sensitive help links in a Windows application. This departure from the traditional will be particularly evident with the browser module, where I can see it being used widely for internal training on organisation intranets and additional support for enterprise-level software.

I do have reservations with the current release though. The initial release has no Windows 7 support or support for non-Microsoft browsers. You will have to wait a couple of months for Windows 7 support and until early 2011 for non-Microsoft browsers. So many organisations will not have a use for it, just yet. However, when the support is available for the product, I for one am looking forward to using it. 

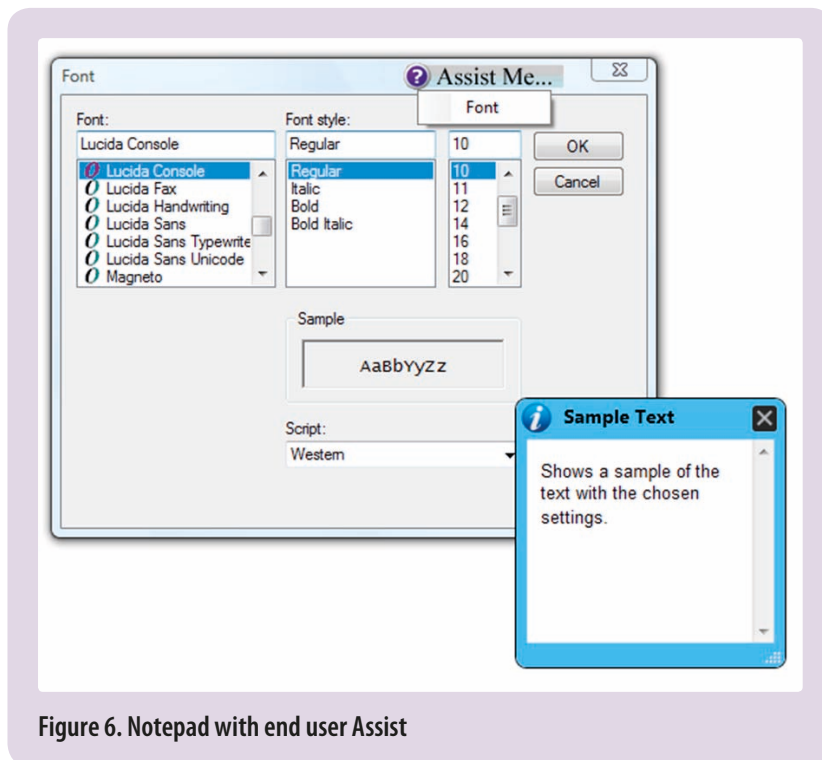


Figure 6. Notepad with end user Assist

David Jones MISTC is a technical author at numero and has used the Author-it authoring platform extensively for the last four years. As an experienced documentation manager he has been responsible for the creation of context-sensitive help from products as diverse as mass spectrometers to CRM billing software. E: david.jones@thisisnumero.com W: www.thisisnumero.com

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