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RoboHelp X3 seeks to be “single-source” workhorse

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With its new RoboHelp X3, ehel corporation promises a “radical leap forward for creating multiple Help systems in various online formats, plus print-quality documentation at the click of a button.” Those of us who have used this Help authoring tool for years have heard this claim before. In fact, at least two previous releases promised instantaneous print documentation, yet hours of reformatting and glitch clean-up remained. So the \$64 question: Did e-help really deliver the goods this time?

To find out, I spent a few quality hours with the new RoboHTML version, creating a sample Help file from parts of a recent client project. I began by using the HTML Help Studio to decompile the completed *.chm file. Then I added the files to my project and created books and pages as usual. All of the links made the jump to the new project perfectly. Impressive! I used to fear decompiling.

In terms of cranking out slightly different types of Help—such as WebHelp in addition to HTML Help—the new release works just as well as RoboHTML 2000, once you figure out how to do it. In the previous release, you simply chose Generate, and then WebHelp. In X3, you select a “primary layout” upon creating your new project file. In order to generate a secondary layout, you must go to the Project tab, click Single Source Layouts and then click the other format (I chose WebHelp). Then you follow a wizard to generate your secondary output styles.. If you’d like, you can choose a “skin” to customize your WebHelp output to match your Web-based application with custom graphics, fonts, etc.

Speaking of the help file...if you happen to be online when you open it, it dials up ehel corporation and works as an Internet-based help file. This gives you access to additional information on their Web site, but with a dial-up modem it’s frustratingly slow, especially with all the little graphics they put in to their browser “skin.” However, if you’re offline, the installed HTML Help boots up instead.

Apparently this functionality has a new name—“airplane help.” According to e-help: “The Visual C++ and Visual Basic versions of the RoboHelp context-sensitive API allow you to use ‘airplane Help.’ With airplane Help, your application will use an up-to-date Web-based Help system when an Internet connection is available, but will fall back on a local Help system if that connection fails or is not available (such as on an airplane). I think it should be called “slow/no modem” help myself.

A really nice feature in X3 is the addition of conditional text fields. First you create a conditional text “tag” for the type of text. I used “trial” so that I might tag text to be included only in the Help file created for users of the product’s trial version. Then I was able to simply highlight the topic text that applied only to the trial version and right-click to apply the conditional tag. When it’s time to generate your output, you simply select which conditional tags are to be applied. Unfortunately, if you make a mistake, it appears to be impossible to remove the tag from the text. At least I couldn’t get it to work by following the Help instructions. Also, I couldn’t figure out how to set an entire topic to appear only in the “trial” (or other special) version of the Help, but I believe this is possible. I know I’d like to do it.

Finally, to answer the \$64 question...is the print documentation really one-click? Well...first of all, your Help file must be set up in a very linear manner to allow this to work, but the conditional text feature also helps here since certain items can be tagged to appear only in the “print” or “online” versions. Of course, you will need to manually set your own page breaks (or have each topic print as a separate page). But the “create print documentation” feature really is much, much better in X3. The automatic TOC seems to be far less buggy. Choosing a different template is a more reliable process, with no apparent problems with changes to font sizes or problems with the autonumbering that were evident in earlier RoboHelp editions.

To top it off, you can even generate your print documentation, WebHelp and HTML help formats all at the same time via “batch processing.”

In summary, X3 comes as close to delivering on the “one-click” printed documentation promise as anyone is ever going to get. The conditional text feature needs some work but it’s definitely a step in the right direction for those seeking to implement some form of “single source” documentation processes.