DITA to AIR Help

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Introduction

- Scott Prentice, President of Leximation, Inc.
- Specializing in FrameMaker plugin development as well as structured FrameMaker conversions, consulting, and development. FrameMaker user/developer since 1991.
- Developed DITA-FMx, a FrameMaker plugin for efficient DITA authoring and publishing.
- Developer of custom Help systems and creative/functional web applications.
- Coined the term "AIR Help" in 2007 after learning about Adobe's new AIR technology.
- Interested in creating innovative ways to provide user assistance that is actually used.

What is AIR?

- Adobe® AIR™ (Adobe Integrated Runtime) is a cross-platform development environment that lets developers create native desktop applications using web technologies like HTML and Flash.
- Installation of an AIR application requires the prior installation of the AIR runtime.
- The same ".air" file can be installed on Windows, Mac, and Linux systems.
- AIR is based on Open Source technologies - Flex (ActionScript, MXML), WebKit, SQLite, Flash.
- Everything that you need to develop and create an AIR application is available as a free download from adobe.com (Flex and AIR SDKs).
- AIR supports the following 16 languages: Chinese (Traditional and Simplified), Czech, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish.

What is AIR Help?

- "AIR Help" is a term that describes a user assistance application that has been developed using the Adobe AIR development platform.
- Because the AIR technology is so flexible, Help systems developed using AIR may provide very different features.
- Two commercially available tools for exporting an AIR Help file, both allow importing and scripted publishing of DITA content:
  - Adobe's *RoboHelp 8* – Adobe AIR-based Help
  - MadCap Software's *Flare 4* or *Flare 5* – WebHelp AIR
- Design and develop your own AIR Help system using HTML/Ajax/JavaScript or Flex/Flash technologies. Complexity ranges from "wrapped" HTML-based Help system to a highly dynamic and configurable user assistance application.
- Sample AIR Help source files are available from Leximation. A prototype AIR Help plugin for the DITA Open Toolkit is currently available.

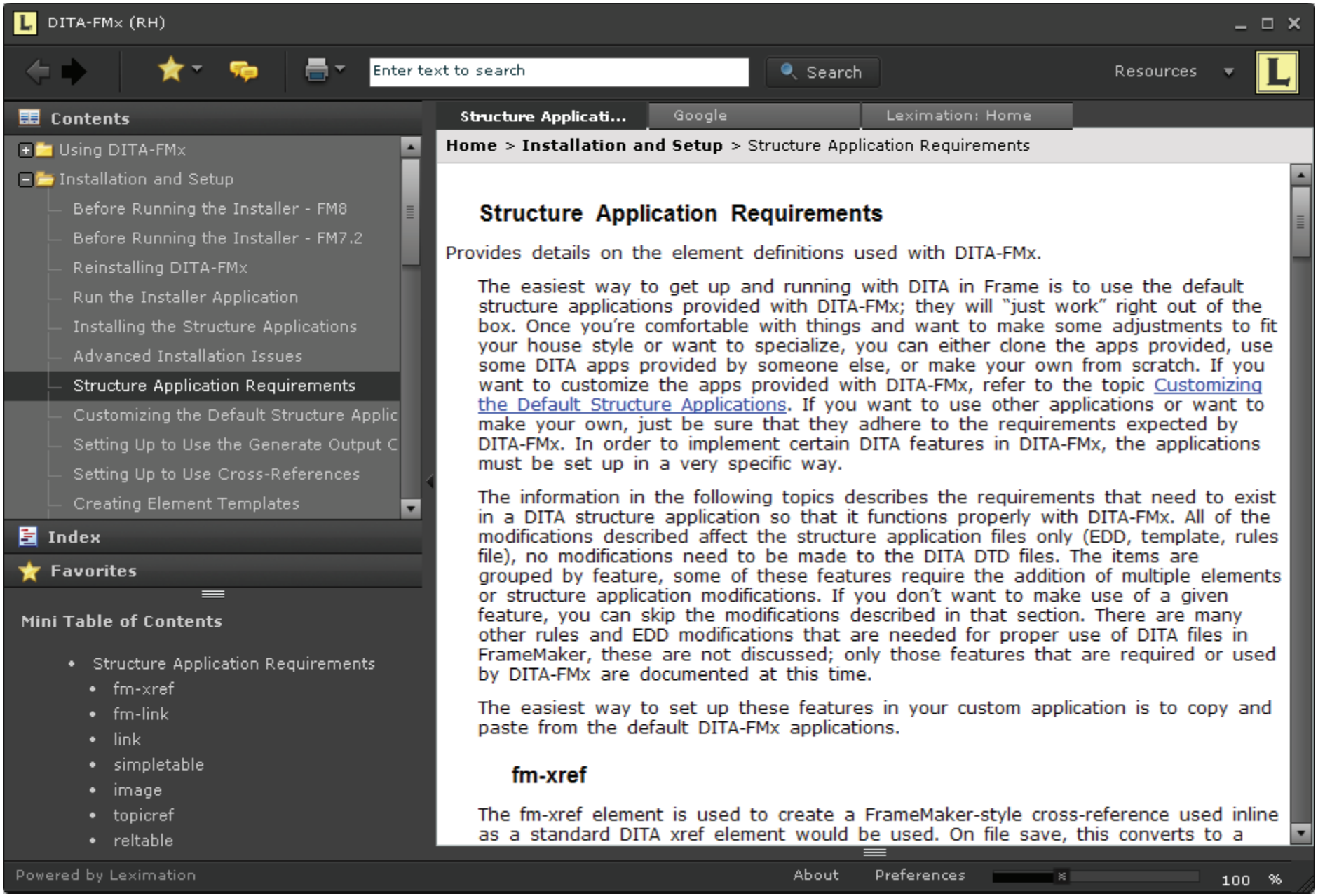
Benefits of AIR Help

- Cross-platform
- Single deliverable for a Help system (like a CHM file)
- Embedded browser component eliminates the need to design for multiple browsers
- Highly customizable, limited only by your imagination
- Strong connection to the web, easy integration of web and local content
- Easily embed Flash and PDF content
- Can read/write data to the local file system
- Security, each AIR file must be digitally signed by the publisher
- Open source development technologies

Adobe RoboHelp AIR Output

- Provides typical Help system features such as Contents, Index, Search, Glossary, Favorites, Print, and Forward/Back.
- Supports context sensitive help calls.
- Variety of skins/themes to customize the look and feel
- Comments added to topics can be shared between users (a great way to perform reviews of online content)
- Mini TOC links to sub heads in each topic
- Include context with search results (like Google)
- Auto-update for online updates of Help system
- Include additional web-based content on Resource tabs and via RSS
- Install a single file help package (as opposed to loose HTML files)
- The *RoboHelp Packager for AIR* reads RoboHelp 6 or 7 WebHelp files and transforms them into an Adobe AIR-based Help application.

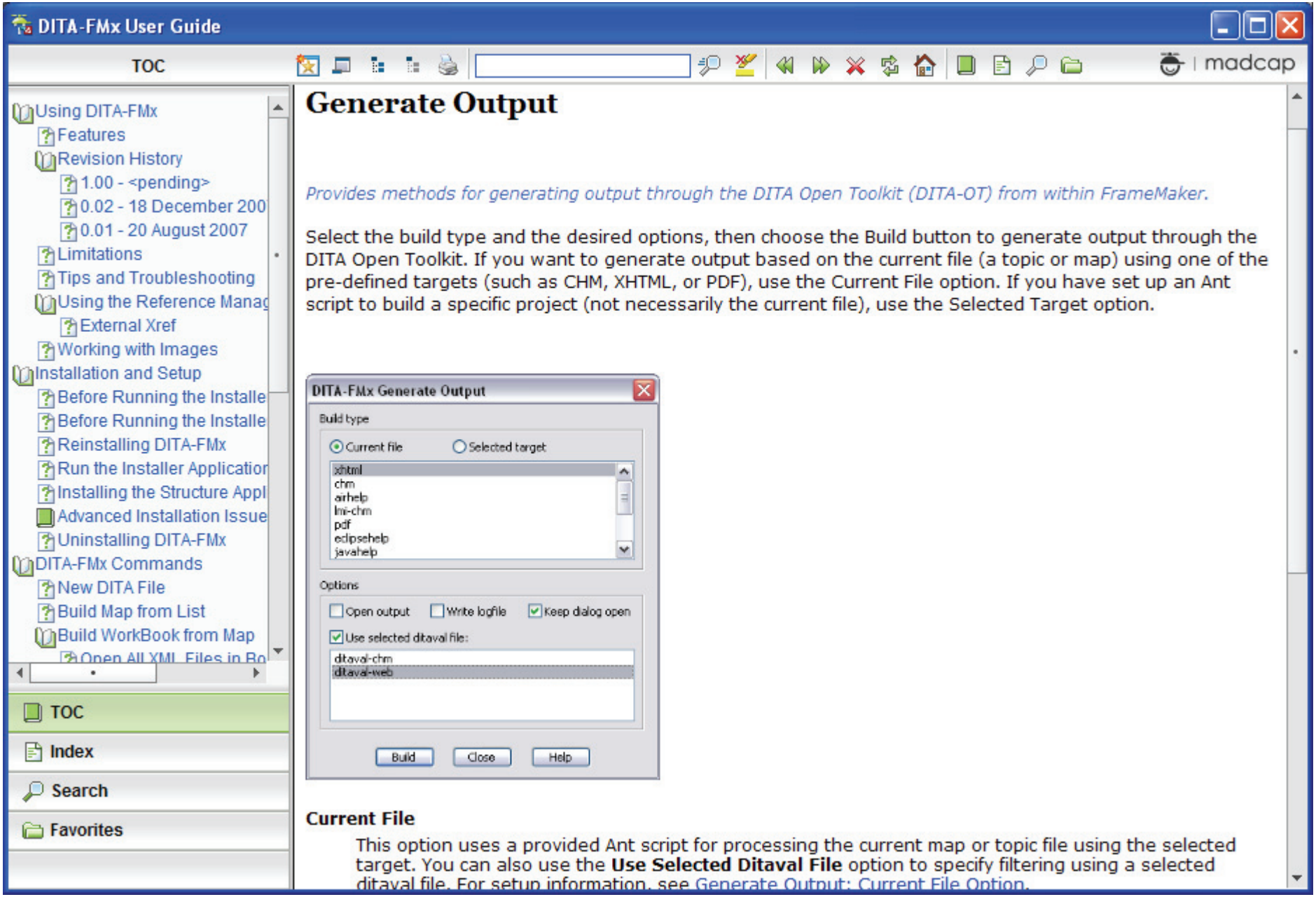
Adobe RoboHelp AIR Output (cont.)



MadCap Flare AIR Output

- Flare's AIR output is a "wrapped" WebHelp system. All of the features are HTML-based and not defined with programmatic Flex/ ActionScript controls.
- Provides typical Help system features such as Contents, Index, Search, Glossary, Favorites, and Forward/Back.
- Other features can easily be added by modifying the underlying WebHelp system.

MadCap Flare AIR Output (cont.)



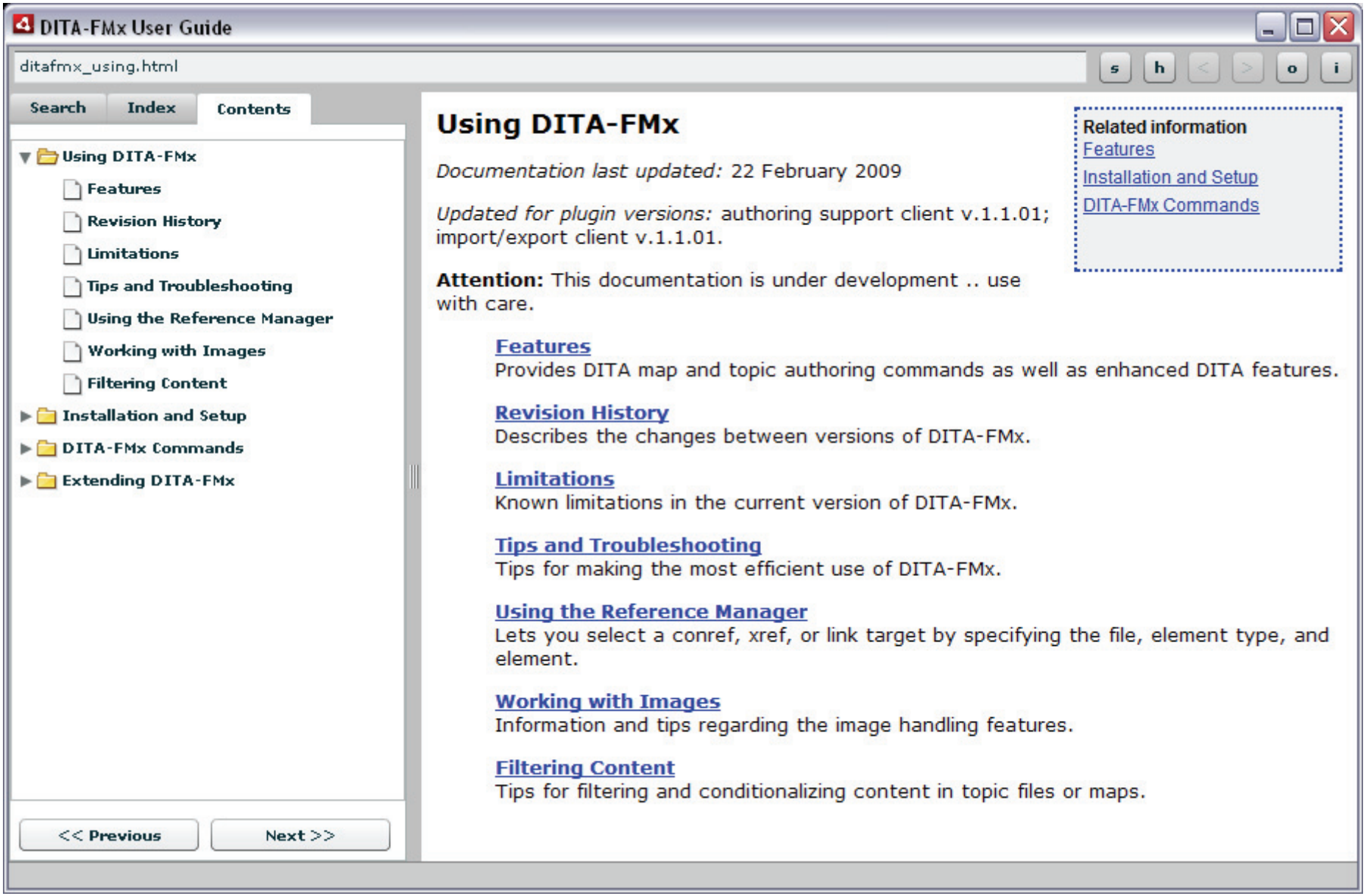
Custom AIR Help Options

- If you're willing to do some coding and development, your options for a Help delivery system are essentially unlimited.
- Start by creating "wrapped" AIR Help from an existing browser-based Help system.
  - Results in the same functionality as if it were not wrapped in AIR, but gives you a cross-platform, single file deliverable.
- Develop a custom AIR Help app that is highly dynamic and tailored to your users' needs.
  - Can look like a "traditional" Help system with additional features.
  - Or, it can provide new features and introduce a completely different paradigm.

Leximation AIR Help Output

- The Leximation DITA to AIR Help plugin for the DITA Open Toolkit is available free of charge.
- This provides the basic Help system functionality, and is intended to be used as the starting point for developing your own custom AIR Help system.
- Even if you're not using DITA, you can make use of this AIR application code for your own custom AIR Help system.
- Some features:
  - Standard navigation tabs for Contents, Index, and remote/local full text search with word highlighting
  - Next, Previous, Forward, Back, and Home buttons
  - Context sensitivity
  - Persistent window size and position

Leximation AIR Help Output from DITA (cont.)



Installing the lmi-airhelp DITA-OT Plugin

- Download and install the following:
  - DITA-OT 1.5
  - Adobe Flex 3 SDK
  - Adobe AIR 1.5 SDK
  - Java JRE 1.5
- Extract the lmi-airhelp archive into the DITA-OT *demo* directory.
- Modify the values in the *airhelp.properties* file.
- Add the *lmi-airhelp.jar* file to the CLASSPATH.
- Integrate the plugin with the OT (`ant -f integrator.xml`).

Testing the lmi-airhelp Plugin

- Copy the *sample_airhelp.xml* Ant script into the *DITA-OT/ant/* directory.
- Run the Ant script .. `ant -f ant/sample_airhelp.xml`
- Output is generated in *DITA-OT/ant/out/airhelp/*
  - To view AIR Help file, run *airhelp-test.bat*
  - To build self-signed certificate, run *airhelp-makecert.bat*
  - To create AIR package, run *airhelp-packager.bat*
- Resulting AIR file can be installed on Mac, Windows and Linux.

Custom AIR Help Ideas

Aside from "traditional" Help system features, some possibilities are:

- Combined remote/local search
- User comments visible to all users of the Help system
- A chat interface that lets users ask questions of other users of the Help system
- Ability for users and administrators to add new topics to the Help system that describe their best practices for using the tool
- Ability for users to customize the navigation or other UI elements
- Dynamically download content from the web based on the user's needs or user "type"
- Dynamically update content as it becomes available
- Much, much more...

Wrap Up

Resources:

- http://www.adobe.com/products/air/
- http://www.adobe.com/products/robohelp/
- http://www.adobe.com/products/robohelp/robohelp-packager-for-air/
- http://madcapsoftware.com/products/flare/
- http://www.leximation.com/airhelp/
- http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/AIR_Help/

Questions?

- Scott Prentice <sp *AT* leximation *DOT* com>
- Leximation - http://www.leximation.com