

DITA, where art thou?



**Kristen James Eberlein**  
**Eberlein Consulting LLC**

ConVEx

Recorded 24 August 2020

## Background

- **Trained as a historian, moved into tech comm in 2000**
- **Contractor and vendor for IBM, 2001-2009:**
  - Information developer
  - Team lead
  - Project manager
  - Information architect
  - Tools and build specialist
- **Consultant, 2012-present**
- **Leadership roles with the DITA TC, 2008-present**
- **Not involved in DITA development before 2008**

# Questions for our conversation

1. What was DITA designed for?
2. Have other problems emerged since DITA was designed and donated to OASIS? New expectations?
3. How is the landscape different than now than it was in 2004?
4. Has DITA addressed the problems that it was designed to solve?



'Forgive me, Mr. Levinger, there is another side to the question.'

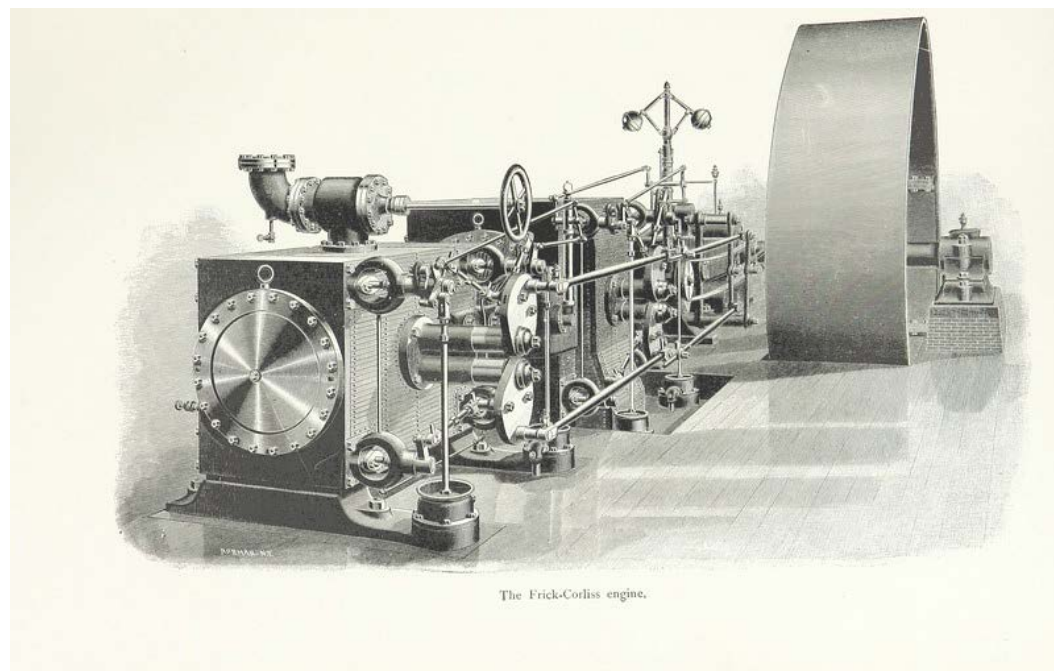
## History of DITA: IBM

- **Origins in a User Technologies' work group, commissioned 1998/1999**
- **Made available to external community in 2001, through a developerWorks article and associated downloads**
- **“A new architecture for authoring, producing, and delivering technical information”**



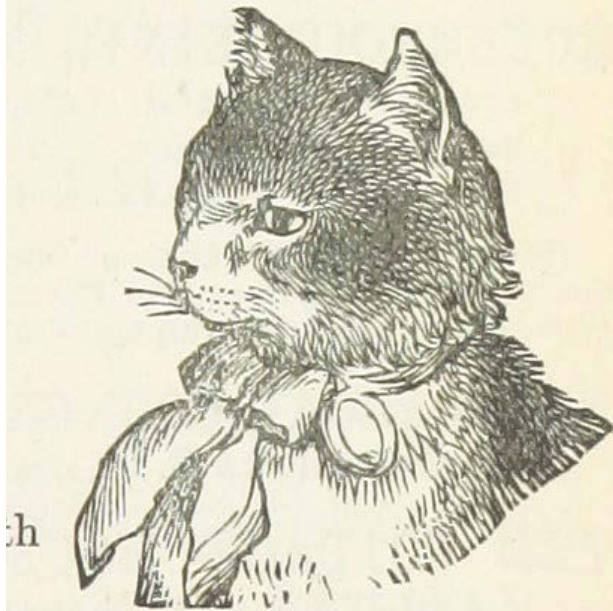
## Landscape at IBM at turn of the century

- Huge, behemoth of custom SGML markup: IBMIDDOC
- Locked into an expensive tool stack:
  - Arbortext Editor (highly customized)
  - Omnimark
  - XML Professional Publisher (XPP)



## Landscape at IBM (cont.)

### CHARACTERISTICS:



h  
nowledge of the subject and with a  
sing to read. The medical advice

- Long ramp-up time for IBM hires.
- Teams of professional information developers, ranked as “software engineers”. Represented at the Director level of IBM.
- Entire niche industry providing contractors to IBM skilled in IBMIDDoc and Bookmaster.

## Landscape at IBM (cont.)

- **Multi-channel publishing:**  
Print, PDF, Web, Online help, etc.
- Translated into many languages
- Products beginning to merge into solutions
- Difficult to absorb content from business partners and acquisitions.

or the planets moving through the sky ; and astronomers tell us that from the observations which they make they

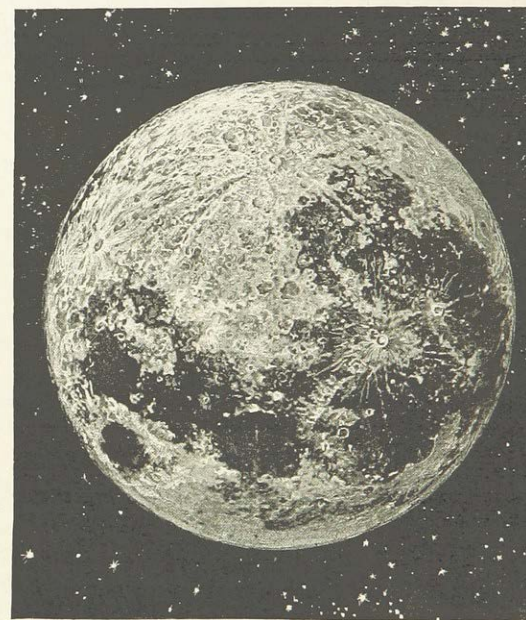


Fig. 5.—The Moon as Seen through a Telescope.

learn that the earth, the planets, and the moon were all

# Rationale for DITA: High-minded level

## What did it need to support?

- Topic orientation
- Promise of XML: “greater reuse, semantic specificity, and interchangeability”
- “Next generation” information delivery:
  - “Smart content ... that lets a user search on things that matter to them”



## Rationale for DITA: Corporate nitty gritty

### What did DITA need to do?

- Support investment in legacy documents: SGML, Bookmaster, Lotus Notes, and many more
- Handle frequent acquisitions and multiple business partners
- Provide infrastructure for (then new) information centers
- Solve expensive problems:
  - Lock-into proprietary tool chain
  - Long ramp-up time for information developers
  - Expensive contract support for information development
  - Extensive localization

## History of DITA: Outside IBM

- **2001: Made available through developerWorks**
- **2004: Donated to OASIS**
  - The DITA Technical Committee, 2004-present
  - Approved as a standard:
    - DITA 1.0: June 2005
    - DITA 1.1: May 2007
    - DITA 1.2: December 2010
    - DITA 1.3: December 2016

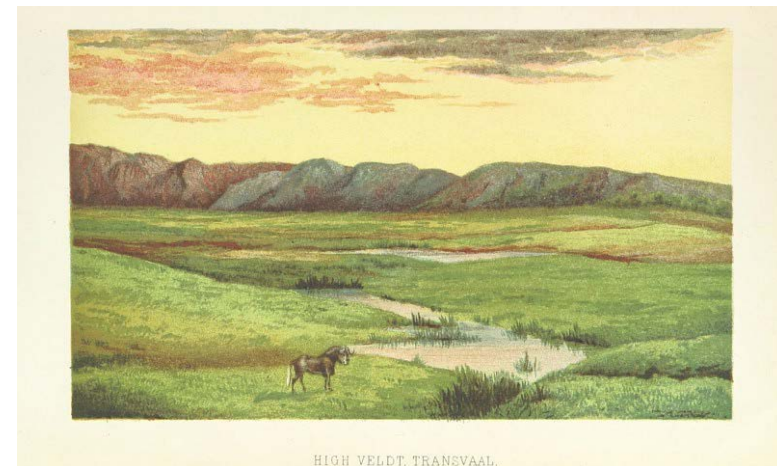


## History of DITA ... Outside of IBM

- **Early adopters; how did they fare? Quite well.**
- **Companies:**
  - Nokia
  - AMD
  - IXIASOFT
  - Idiom Technologies (later sold to SDL)

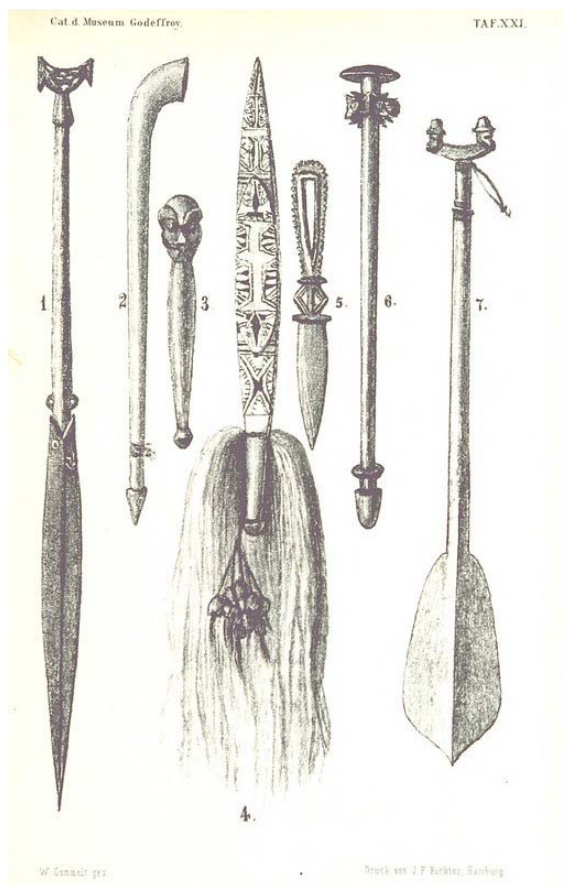
## Landscape in 2020: General impressions

- DITA in use in many industries
- DITA used for much more than software and hardware: Medical information, pharmaceutical information, etc.
- Primacy of Web-delivered content
- Decline of the book paradigm and rise of topic orientation



HIGH VELDT, TRANSVAAL.

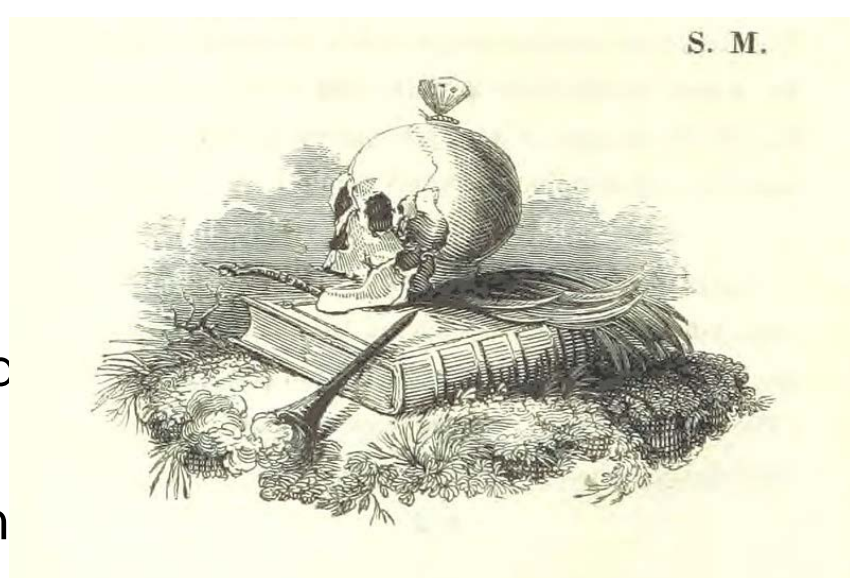
## Landscape in 2020: Tools



- **Large tooling ecosystem, including free and open source offerings (GitHub, DITA-OT)**
- **Free and open-source offerings:**
  - GitHub, BitBucket, GitLab ...
  - DITA Open Toolkit (DITA-OT)
- **Subscription-based services**
  - CCMS
  - Conversion
  - Localization
- **Inexpensive, compared to 1998/1999**

## Landscape in 2020: Authoring resources

- **Fewer technical writers; increase in documentation written by subject-matter experts**
  - Interest in Markdown
  - Documentation automatically generated from code
  - Growth of authoring tools that hide XML from authors
  - Has the quality of documentation suffered? Probably.
- **Wider community of technical writers with DITA expertise**



## Landscape in 2020: Adoption

- **Quiet (but thorough) adoption by large companies, especially those for whom information is a revenue-generating product:**
  - Amazon
  - Medical information
  - Publishing
  - Governments
- **More pain for small implementations, where documentation is a cost center.**
- **Support for topic-orientation by non-XML products: AuthorIT, Paligo, Flare**

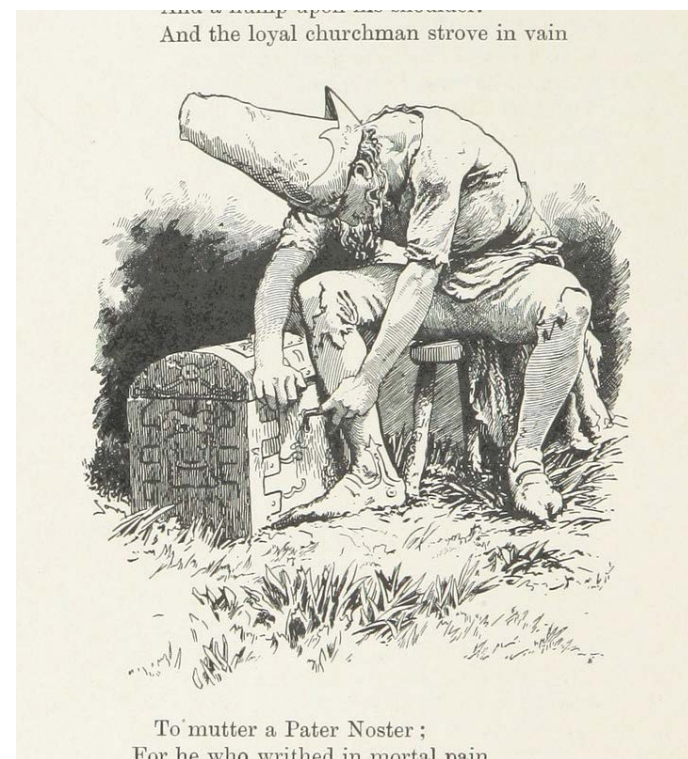
## Wrap-up: Has DITA delivered on its promises?

| Promise   | Has it delivered? |
|---|-------------------|
| Support for topic orientation                       | Yes               |
| Enable reuse by reference                           | Yes               |
| Ease of interchange                                 | Yes               |
| Richer environment of less expensive tools          | Yes               |
| Wider availability of authors with requisite skills | Yes               |



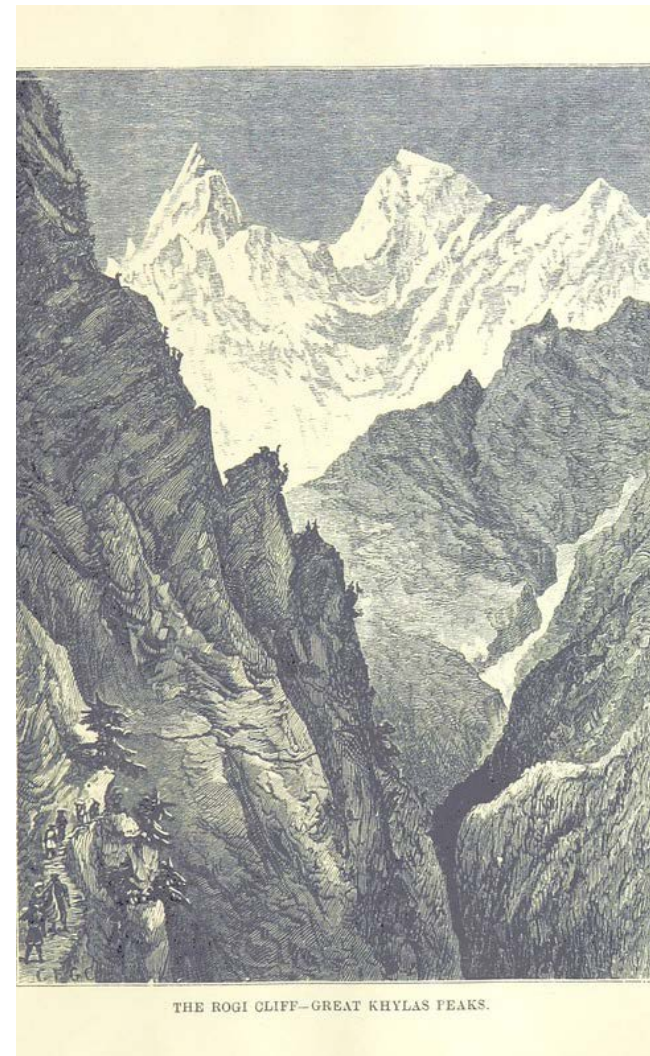
## Landscape in 2020: Pain points

- **Lack of corporate support for DITA TC and DITA-OT**
- **Perception of complexity, frustration**
- **Increased expectations:**
  - DITA expected to be a “shrink-wrapped” product that can be used out-of-the-box.
  - “People want a fancy Thanksgiving dinner, but made out of their microwave ovens.” (Zoe Lawson, DITA TC member)
- **Rise of Dev/Ops and demand for on-the-spot builds and community interaction**



## DITA reality check

- **DITA is XML. XML is inherently complex.**
  - Build XML and XSLT skills in-house, or expect to continue to retain a consultant for support.
  - Most company’s developers lack XML or XSLT skills.
- **Benefits of reuse hinge on a solid, thoughtful, information architecture and analysis of business processes. This work; it is NOT FREE.**
  - No magic button.
  - Garbage in, garbage out.
  - “With great power, comes great responsibility.”



## DITA: Moving forward into the future

- **DITA 2.0 (maybe December 2021?)**
- **Lightweight DITA**
- **Additional adoption resources**
- **(Wish list) Greater corporate participation in DITA TC and DITA-OT project**

## Questions?

Kristen James Eberlein  
Eberlein Consulting, LLC  
Durham, NC, USA

[kris@eberleinconsulting.com](mailto:kris@eberleinconsulting.com)

+1 (919) 622-1501