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(54) **ANSWER WIZARD DROP-DOWN CONTROL**

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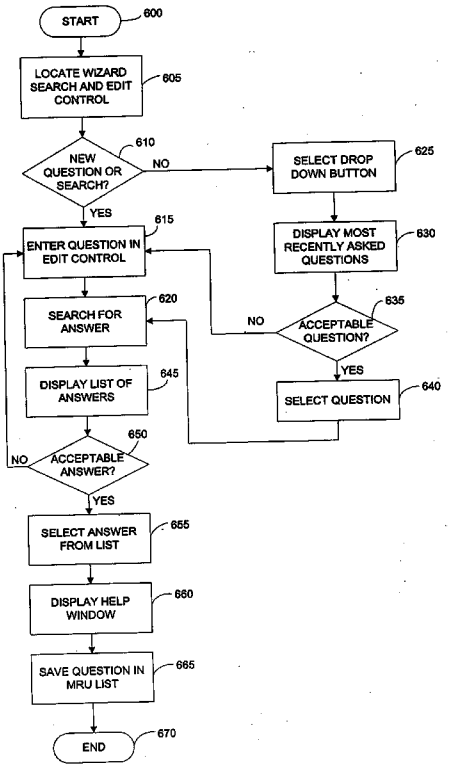
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An answer wizard drop-down menu for providing users quick and efficient access to help utilities, including help files and wizards provided by a software application, is provided. An answer wizard drop-down edit control and interface is located in a conspicuous, but non-obstructive location on a software application graphical interface. An edit control allows a user to enter a question regarding some desired functionality of the application. In response to the user's question, the user is presented with a list of potential answers to the question in a drop-down menu. If the user finds an acceptable answer to her question in the list of potential answers, the user selects the acceptable answer, and an appropriate help file application is launched to provide the user assistance with the functionality about which the user has questions. Each question so asked by the user is saved in a list of most recently used items. The next time the user needs assistance, the user may open the list of most recently used items to obtain a list of the most recent questions previously asked by the user. The user may then, if desired, select one of the previously asked questions and initiate another search on the selected question to obtain the list of potential answers. The user may then select a new or previously viewed answer to return to the help file application.



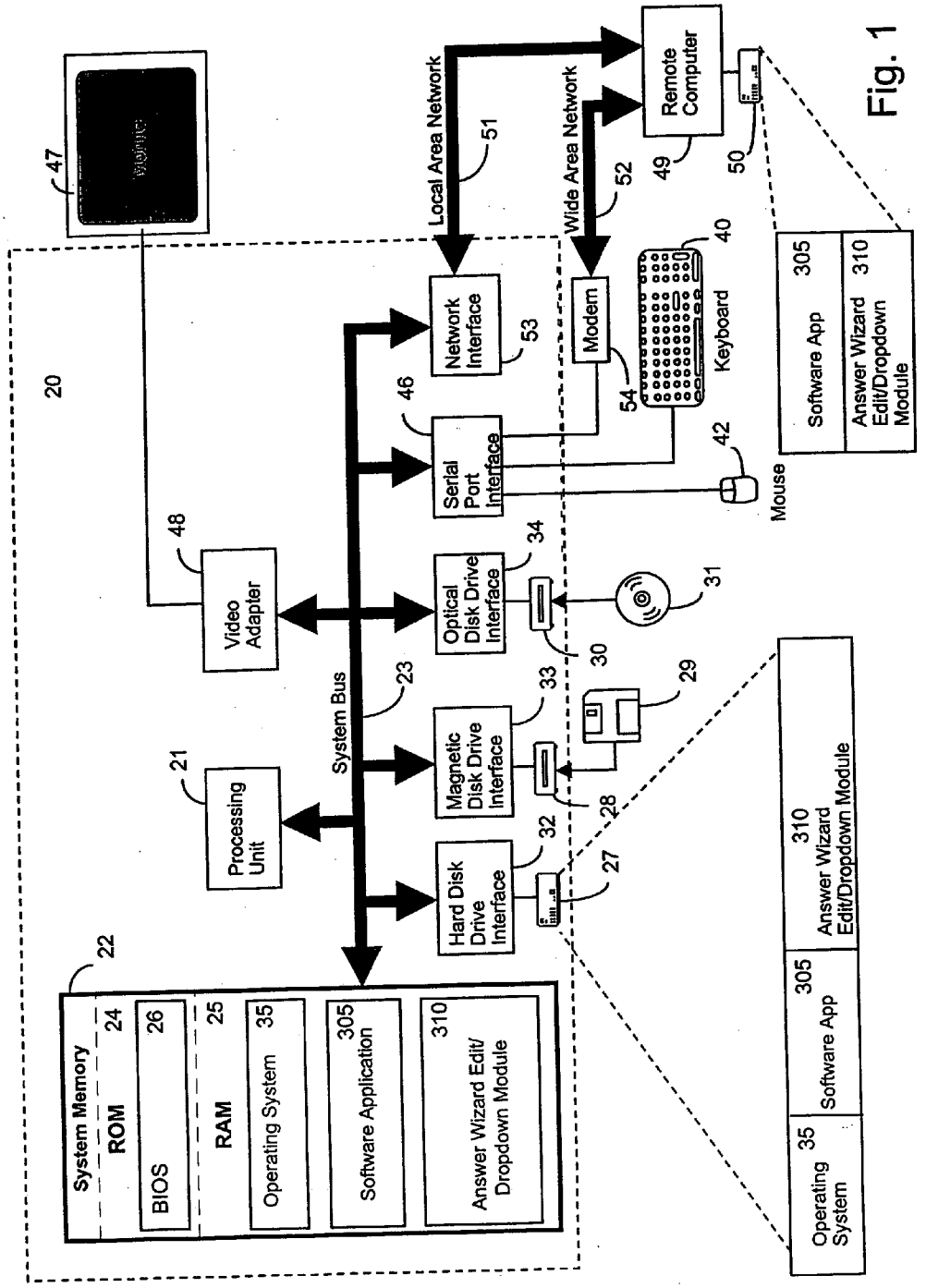
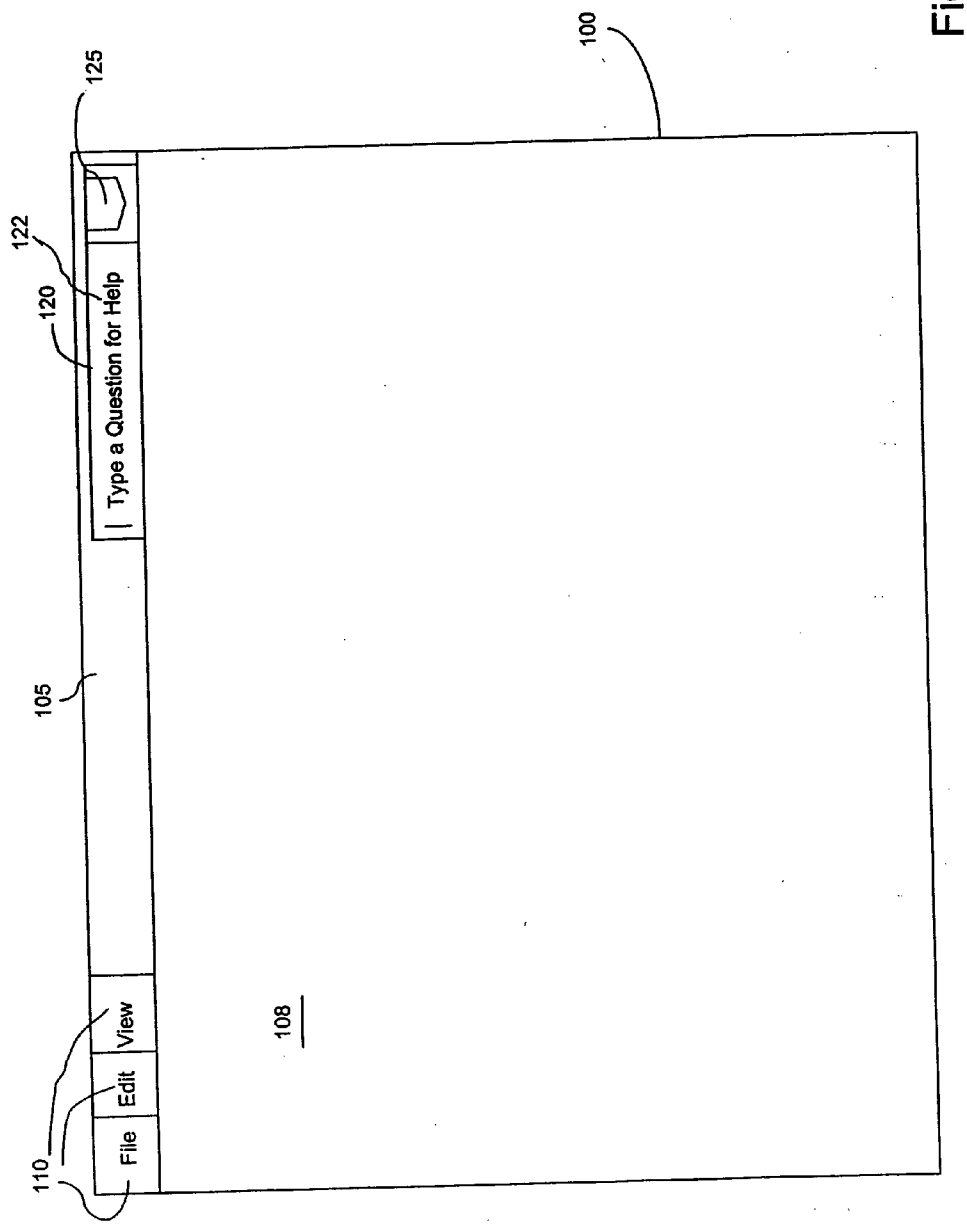

Monitor
47
20
Local Area Network
51
Wide Area Network
52
Remote Computer
49
50
Network Interface
53
Modem
54
Keyboard
40
Serial Port Interface
46
Mouse
42
Video Adapter
48
Optical Disk Drive Interface
34
31
30
Magnetic Disk Drive Interface
33
29
28
Hard Disk Drive Interface
32
27
System Bus
23
Processing Unit
21
System Memory
22
ROM
24
BIOS
26
RAM
25
Operating System
35
Software Application
305
Answer Wizard Edit/ Dropdown Module
310
Software App
305
Answer Wizard Edit/Dropdown Module
310
Operating System
35

Fig. 1

Fig. 2


100
125
122
120
Type a Question for Help
105
108
View
Edit
File
110

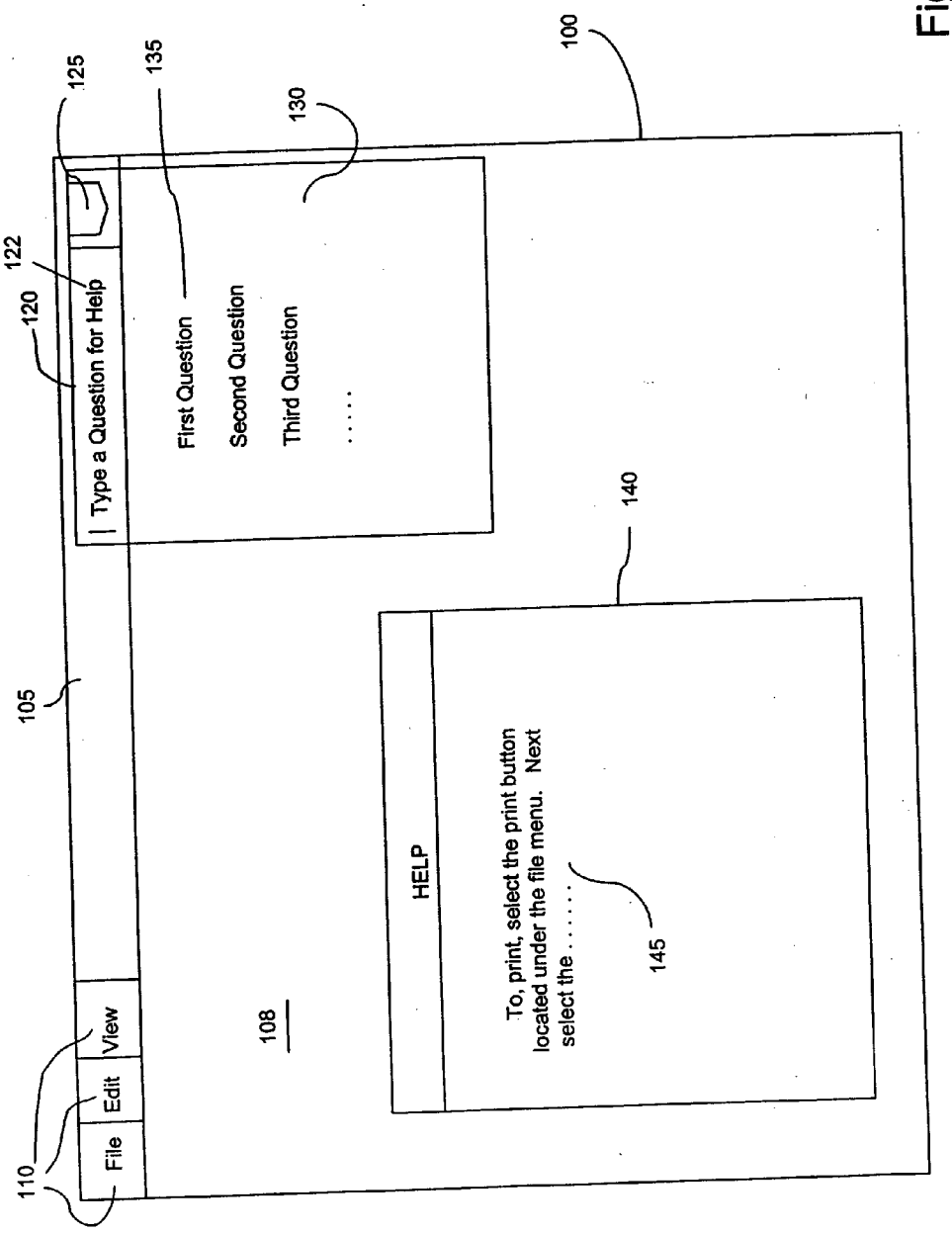

100
125
135
130
122
120
Type a Question for Help
First Question
Second Question
Third Question
.....
140
105
HELP
To, print, select the print button located under the file menu. Next select the .....
145
108
View
Edit
File
110

Fig. 3

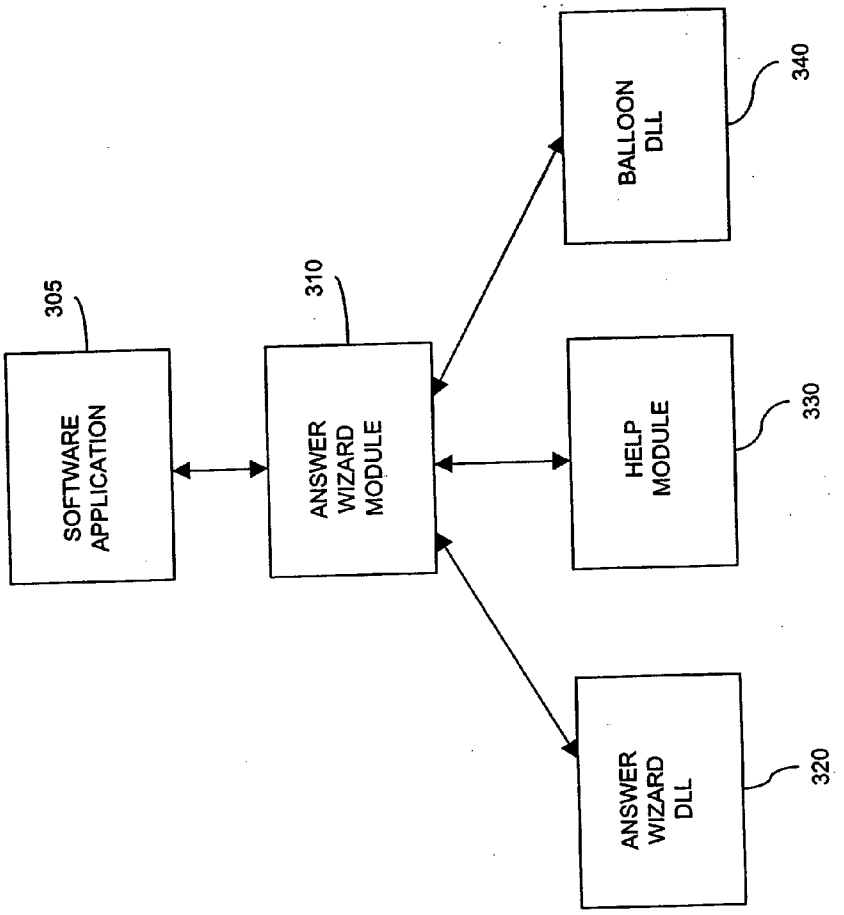
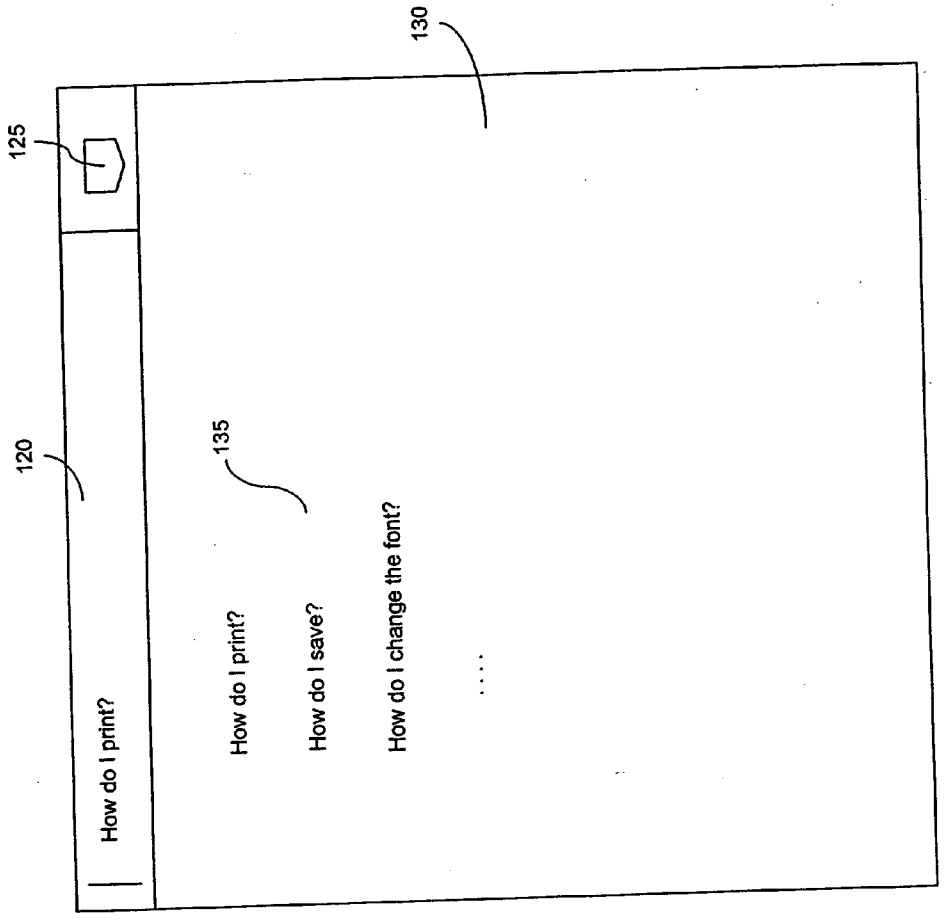

305
SOFTWARE APPLICATION
310
ANSWER WIZARD MODULE
BALLOON DLL
340
HELP MODULE
330
ANSWER WIZARD DLL
320

Fig. 4

Fig. 5


130
125
120
135
How do I print?
How do I print?
How do I save?
How do I change the font?
....

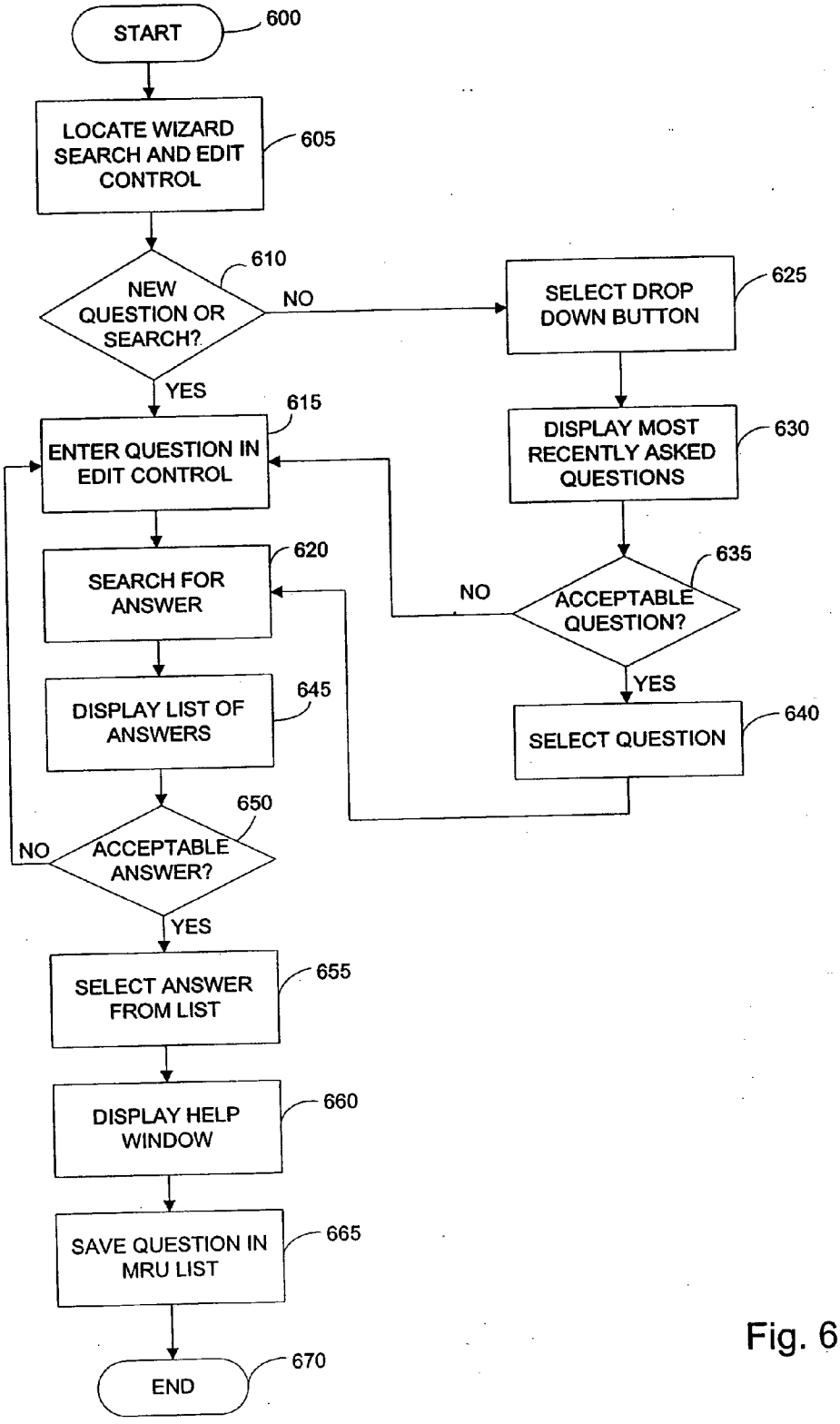

START
600
LOCATE WIZARD SEARCH AND EDIT CONTROL
605
NEW QUESTION OR SEARCH?
610
NO
YES
SELECT DROP DOWN BUTTON
625
DISPLAY MOST RECENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
630
ENTER QUESTION IN EDIT CONTROL
615
SEARCH FOR ANSWER
620
ACCEPTABLE QUESTION?
635
NO
YES
DISPLAY LIST OF ANSWERS
645
SELECT QUESTION
640
ACCEPTABLE ANSWER?
650
NO
YES
SELECT ANSWER FROM LIST
655
DISPLAY HELP WINDOW
660
SAVE QUESTION IN MRU LIST
665
END
670

Fig. 6

ANSWER WIZARD DROP-DOWN CONTROL

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 09/880,424, filed Jun. 13, 2001, which is incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention generally relates to an interactive help utility. More particularly, the present invention relates to a method for efficiently interacting with the help utility functionality.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] Since the advent of computers, a large and growing number of computer software applications have been developed to assist users in all aspects of business, education, entertainment and personal development. As an ever-increasing number of software applications are developed, the amount of and complexity of functionality provided to users by those software applications have increased dramatically.

[0004] Often users become bogged down in the complexity and quantity of functionality offered by their software applications. They often have difficulty locating the desired functionality; when they are able to locate desired functionality, often they do not understand how to use the functionality to its fullest benefit. Many computer software applications contain help files and so called "wizards." Wizards are interactive help utilities within applications or operating systems that may be used to guide the user through steps of particular tasks such as opening a document, printing a document, saving a document, and the like. It is known in the prior art to include help files in software applications for providing information to the user about a particular component or functionality of a software application. It is also known in the art to provide a wizard for guiding a user through the steps of the task at hand, for example, printing a document. However, the user typically must launch the help file functionality in order to receive assistance from the help files. And, unfortunately, the user may be just as unfamiliar with the steps required to launch the help file functionality as he/she is with executing the task at hand.

[0005] Some prior art systems include a wizard that deploys as a graphical user interface on the screen of the user's computer. The user may select the wizard in order to get assistance with performing the desired functionality.

[0006] It is with respect to these considerations and others that the present invention has been made.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] In accordance with the present invention, the above and other problems are solved by a method and system for providing an answer wizard edit/drop-down control and interface that is located in a conspicuous, but non-obstructive location on a software application graphical interface and allows a user to enter a question or search string regarding some desired functionality of the application. Preferably, the answer wizard edit/drop-down control and interface are located in the toolbar of a software application.

[0008] In response to a question or search string received via the edit control, a list of potential answers is displayed in a drop-down menu. If the user finds an acceptable answer to the question or search string in the list of potential answers, he/she may select the acceptable answer, and the appropriate help file application will be launched to provide assistance with the functionality at which the question or search string is directed.

[0009] Each question or search string entered is saved in a list of most recently used items. The next time assistance is needed, the user may open the list of most recently used items to obtain a list of the questions previously asked. The user may then select one of the previously asked questions and rerun the query for a list of potential answers to the selected question. The user may then select the same help file application and assistance obtained by the user the last time the user had that particular question, or the user may select a different answer and associated help file application and assistance.

[0010] These methods may be implemented as a computer process, a computing system or as an article of manufacture such as a computer program product or computer readable media. The computer program product may be a computer storage medium readable by a computer system and encoding a computer program of instructions for executing a computer process. The computer program product may also be a propagated signal on a carrier readable by a computing system and encoding a computer program of instructions for executing a computer process.

[0011] These and other features and advantages, which characterize the present invention, will be apparent from a reading of the following detailed description and a review of the associated drawings. It is to be understood that both the foregoing general description and the following detailed description are exemplary and explanatory only and are not restrictive of the invention, as claimed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0012] **FIG. 1** illustrates a computer system that provides an operating environment for an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

[0013] **FIG. 2** illustrates an exemplary screen display of a computer generated user interface window showing the functionality of the present invention.

[0014] **FIG. 3** illustrates an exemplary screen display of a computer generated user interface window showing the functionality of the present invention.

[0015] **FIG. 4** illustrates interaction between a software application and an answer wizard edit/drop-down control module of an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

[0016] **FIG. 5** illustrates a screen display of a computer generated user interface window showing an exemplary answer wizard drop-down menu of the present invention.

[0017] **FIG. 6** illustrates an operational flow of the steps performed by the system and method of the present invention in providing assistance to a user of the answer wizard drop-down module of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0018] An exemplary embodiment of the present invention includes an answer wizard drop-down control that

provides users with quick and efficient access to help utilities, including help files and wizards provided by a software application. An answer wizard drop-down control and interface is located in a conspicuous, but non-obstructive location on a software application graphical interface. An edit control allows a user to enter a question regarding desired functionality of the application. In response to the question, a list of potential answers is presented in a balloon to the user.

[0019] If the user finds an acceptable answer to his/her question in the list of potential answers, the user can select the acceptable answer, and a help application, loaded with the help file appropriate to the user's question, will be launched. Each question so asked by the user is saved in a list of most recently asked questions. Accordingly, the next time the user needs assistance, the user may open this list to view the questions he/she has most recently asked. The user may then, if desired, select one of the previously asked questions and rerun the query for a list of potential answers to the selected question. The user may then select the same answer as he/she previously selected in order to obtain the same assistance as he/she previously sought when asking that particular question, or the user may select a different answer, thereby launching the help application with a different help file loaded, providing the user with a different answer than he/she was previously provided.

[0020] **FIG. 1** and the following discussion are intended to provide a brief, general description of a suitable computing environment in which the invention may be implemented. While the invention will be described in the general context of an application program that runs on an operating system in conjunction with a personal computer, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention also may be implemented in combination with other program modules. Generally, program modules include routines, programs, components, data structures, etc. that perform particular tasks or implement particular abstract data types. Moreover, those skilled in the art will appreciate that the invention may be practiced with other computer system configurations, including hand-held devices, multiprocessor systems, microprocessor-based or programmable consumer electronics, minicomputers, mainframe computers, and the like. The invention may also be practiced in distributed computing environments where tasks are performed by remote processing devices that are linked through a communications network. In a distributed computing environment, program modules may be located in both local and remote memory storage devices.

[0021] With reference to **FIG. 1**, an exemplary system for implementing the invention includes a conventional personal computer **20**, including a processing unit **21**, a system memory **22**, and a system bus **23** that couples the system memory to the processing unit **21**. The system memory **22** includes read only memory (ROM) **24** and random access memory (RAM) **25**. A basic input/output system **26** (BIOS), containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between elements within the personal computer **20**, such as during start-up, is stored in ROM **24**.

[0022] The personal computer **20** further includes a hard disk drive **27**, a magnetic disk drive **28**, e.g., to read from or write to a removable disk **29**, and an optical disk drive **30**, e.g., for reading a CD-ROM disk **31** or to read from or write to other optical media. The hard disk drive **27**, magnetic disk drive **28**, and optical disk drive **30** are connected to the system bus **23** by a hard disk drive interface **32**, a magnetic disk drive interface **33**, and an optical drive interface **34**, respectively. The drives and their associated computer-readable media provide nonvolatile storage for the personal computer **20**. Although the description of computer-readable media above refers to a hard disk, a removable magnetic disk and a CD-ROM disk, it should be appreciated by those skilled in the art that other types of media which are readable by a computer, such as magnetic cassettes, flash memory cards, digital video disks, Bernoulli cartridges, and the like, may also be used in the exemplary operating environment.

[0023] A number of program modules may be stored in the drives and RAM **25**, including an operating system **35**, a software application **305**, and an answer wizard edit/drop-down control module **310**. A user may enter commands and information into the personal computer **20** through a keyboard **40** and pointing device, such as a mouse **42**. Other input devices (not shown) may include a microphone, joystick, game pad, satellite dish, scanner, or the like. These and other input devices are often connected to the processing unit **21** through a serial port interface **46** that is coupled to the system bus, but may be connected by other interfaces, such as a game port or a universal serial bus (USB). A monitor **47** or other type of display device is also connected to the system bus **23** via an interface, such as a video adapter **48**. In addition to the monitor, personal computers typically include other peripheral output devices (not shown), such as speakers or printers.

[0024] The personal computer **20** may operate in a networked environment using logical connections to one or more remote computers **49**. The remote computer **49** may be a server, a router, a peer device or other common network node, and typically includes many or all of the elements described relative to the personal computer **20**, although only a memory storage device **50** has been illustrated in **FIG. 2**. The logical connections depicted in **FIG. 2** include a local area network (LAN) **51** and a wide area network (WAN) **52**. Such networking environments are commonplace in offices, enterprise-wide computer networks, intranets and the Internet.

[0025] When used in a LAN networking environment, the personal computer **20** is connected to the LAN **51** through a network interface **53**. When used in a WAN networking environment, the personal computer **20** typically includes a modem **54** or other means for establishing communications over the WAN **52**, such as the Internet. The modem **54**, which may be internal or external, is connected to the system bus **23** via the serial port interface **46**. In a networked environment, program modules depicted relative to the personal computer **20**, or portions thereof, may be stored in the remote memory storage device. It will be appreciated that the network connections shown are exemplary and other means of establishing a communications link between the computers may be used.

[0026] A computing device, such as personal computer **20**, typically includes at least some form of computer readable media. Computer readable media can be any available media that can be accessed by personal computer **20**. By way of example, and not limitation, computer readable media may comprise computer storage media and communication

media. Computer storage media includes volatile and non-volatile, removable and non-removable media implemented in any method or technology for storage of information such as computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules or other data. Computer storage media includes, but is not limited to, RAM, ROM, EEPROM, flash memory or other memory technology, CD-ROM, digital versatile disks (DVD) or other optical storage, magnetic cassettes, magnetic tape, magnetic disk storage or other magnetic storage devices, or any other medium which can be used to store the desired information and which can be accessed by personal computer **20**.

[**0027**] Communication media typically embodies computer readable instructions, data structures, program modules or other data in a modulated data signal such as a carrier wave or other transport mechanism and includes any information delivery media. The term "modulated data signal" means a signal that has one or more of its characteristics set or changed in such a manner as to encode information in the signal. By way of example, and not limitation, communication media includes wired media such as a wired network or direct-wired connection, and wireless media such as acoustic, RF, infrared and other wireless media. Combinations of any of the above should also be included within the scope of computer readable media. Computer readable media may also be referred to as computer program product.

[**0028**] Referring now to **FIG. 2**, an exemplary graphical user interface window **100** is illustrated. The window **100** includes an exemplary text or data input area **108** and a main toolbar **105**. Situated in the main toolbar **105** are exemplary software functionality buttons **110**, such as File, Edit and View buttons. As is well known to those skilled in the art, the graphical user interface window **100**, illustrated in **FIG. 1**, is representative of a typical text input window of a word processing application. An exemplary word processing application includes Word manufactured by Microsoft Corporation of Redmond, Wash.

[**0029**] In a typical graphical user interface window, such as the window **100** illustrated in **FIG. 1**, functionality of the software application presenting the window **100** is provided by selecting various icons and buttons. For example, in accordance with an exemplary word processing application, selection of the File button **110** may open a drop-down menu (not shown) under which a user of the software application may find additional functionality include File Open, File Close, File Save, File Print, etc.

[**0030**] In accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, an edit control **120**, hereafter referred to as "control 120", is provided in the toolbar **105** of the window **100**. It should be understood that the toolbar **105** includes any area located on a data or text input and editing window where users are provided buttons and controls for utilizing the functionality of a software application for operation on or related to data or text entered, edited, or manipulated by the user. Preferably, placement of the control **120** in the toolbar **105** makes the functionality of the present invention readily and quickly accessible to the user because the user does not have to search for the control or be prompted to its use by a separate help utility. The control **120** includes a search string text entry area **122** and a drop-down button **125**. Preferably, the control **120** is used to enter a search string or question, hereafter referred to as a "question," to request assistance from the help files associated with the software application **305** with which the user is working.

[**0031**] **FIG. 3** illustrates the graphical user interface window **100** showing a drop-down menu **130** immediately underneath the control **120**. In accordance with an exemplary embodiment, the drop-down menu **130** will contain a list of questions most recently asked by the user any time the user triggers the drop-down menu. As is well known to those skilled in the art, the drop-down menu **130** may be triggered in a number of ways, including, clicking on the drop-down button **125**, keyboard action, or other action including focusing the mouse over the drop-down button **125**. As described below, the drop-down menu **130** may be populated with a list of answers to questions asked by the user through the control **120** regarding the functionality of the software application with which the user is not familiar. A list of exemplary answers to a question asked by the user in the control **120** is illustrated in the drop-down menu **130**.

[**0032**] A help window **140** with help text **145** is illustrated in the exemplary text entry area **108**. As briefly described above, the help window **140** is displayed to the user in response to selection of one of the answers presented in the drop-down menu **130** in response to the question entered into the control **120** by the user in accordance with the present invention. For example, say the user is using an exemplary word processing application for entry and edit of a letter. If the user decides to print the letter but realizes that he/she is unfamiliar with the print functionality of the word processing software application, the user may enter a question in the text area **122** of the control **120**. For example, the question might be, "How do I print?". After entry of the desired question, the user hits the "Enter" button of his/her keyboard to obtain answers to his/her question. In response to the user's question, one or more short answers are provided in balloon form to the user, as illustrated in the drop-down menu **130** illustrated in **FIG. 3**.

[**0033**] If the user finds an acceptable answer provided in the drop-down menu **130**, the user may select the answer in a way well-known to those skilled in the art. For example, the user may click on the selected answer, or the user may use the arrow keys on her keyboard to focus on the desired answer and then hit "Enter." In accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, upon selection of an acceptable answer, functionality of the software application **305** in use by the user causes the help window **140** with help text **145** to be displayed, as illustrated in **FIG. 3**. The text **145** displayed in the help file window **140** provides the user with a detailed response to the user's question. For example, the text **145** might instruct the user, "To print, select the print button located under the File menu."

[**0034**] **FIG. 4** illustrates interaction between a software application **305** and an answer wizard edit/drop-down control module **310** (hereafter "edit/drop-down control module 310") of an exemplary embodiment of the present invention. In accordance with an exemplary embodiment, the edit/drop-down control module **310** is a software module that provides the above described answer wizard drop-down functionality to a software application **305**, such as a word processing application. According to an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, three software modules including the answer wizard dynamic link library (DLL)

320, the help file module **330** and the balloon DLL **340** are utilized by the edit/drop-down control module **310** for providing the functionality of the answer wizard drop-down menu described above. The answer wizard DLL **320** is a software module comprised of executable routines that is preferably stored separately from the software application **305** and edit/drop-down control module **310**. The functionality of the answer wizard DLL may be called by the software application **305** and/or the edit/drop-down control module **310**, as necessary.

[**0035**] In accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the answer wizard DLL **320** performs a search of available help topics contained in the help module **330** based on the question entered by the user in the control **120**, illustrated in **FIGS. 1 and 2**. The methodology of the search performed by the answer wizard DLL **320** is well known to those skilled in the art and includes a search on certain recognized keywords in the question entered by the user. For example, if the user enters the string "How do I print?," the answer wizard DLL **320** parses the question to find recognized keywords with which to search the help topics contained in the help module **330**. For example, the answer wizard DLL **320** may parse the question, "How do I print?," to yield the keyword "print," with which the answer wizard DLL searches the help topics provided in the help module **330**. When the answer wizard DLL locates help topics in the help module related to the keyword "print," it returns to the edit/drop-down control module **310** a series of potential answers related to the keyword "print."

[**0036**] As is understood by those skilled in the art, the potential answers provided by the answer wizard DLL **320** to the edit/drop-down control module **310** for presentation to the user in the drop-down menu **130** may be provided in a hierarchical structure based on the keywords parsed by the answer wizard DLL **320**. For example, the word "print" may yield topics related to print functionality before it yields topics related to printers because the string provided by the user contains the word "print," as opposed to the word "printer." If instead the user enters the question, "How do I print and save?," into the search and edit control **120**, the answer wizard DLL **320** may parse the string to yield the keywords "print" and "save," to be used for searching help topics provided by the help module **330**.

[**0037**] The help module **330** is a software application or module available for use by the software application **305** and/or the edit/drop-down control module **310** either as a resident software module or as a DLL. According to an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the help module **330** accesses a collection of files written in hypertext markup language (HTML) containing information helpful to users on a variety of topics. When the answer wizard DLL **320** parses the question entered by the user to provide the user with a list of answers, the answer wizard DLL in concert with the edit/drop-down control module **310** and the help module **330** establishes a path from each of the potential answers to a related help topic provided by the help module **330**. When the user of the edit/drop-down control module **310** selects a desired answer, as described above, the edit/drop-down control module **310** launches the functionality of the help module **330** to provide the help window **140**, illustrated in **FIGS. 1 and 2**. The text **145** displayed in the help window **140** is the text contained in the file that the help module **330** selected as related to the answer, chosen by the user.

[**0038**] The balloon DLL **340** is a collection of executable routines utilized by the edit/drop-down control module **310** for displaying the drop-down menu **130** and the list of the potential answers. Operation of the balloon DLL **340** is well-known to those skilled in the art.

[**0039**] According to an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, the user may go back to previous questions to obtain help topics related to those questions without reentering the questions. **FIG. 5** illustrates a screen display of a computer-generated user interface window showing an exemplary answer wizard drop-down menu **130** of the present invention. Each time the user enters a question into the control **120**, that question or search string is saved in a list of most recently used items. Subsequently, the user may select the drop-down button **125**, and the edit/drop-down control module **310** will provide the user with a list of previously asked questions or previously entered strings **137** in the drop-down menu **130**, as illustrated in **FIG. 5**.

[**0040**] When the user does type in a new query in the edit control, the edit/drop-down control module **310** may then invoke the list of previously entered strings to find one that is similar to the user's new query. That is, if the user types, "How do I print?," the edit/drop-down control module **310** may provide previously-asked questions related to that question prior to providing a new answer to the question. If the user previously entered "How do I print?" and received an acceptable answer, but now the user enters "I want to print," the edit/drop-down control module may show the user that she has already entered "How do I print?" If the user desires to go back to the same help topics provided in response to the previous question, the user may select the previous question to get the same answers and potential help topics she received before. It should be understood by those skilled in the art, that if the number of previously asked questions or previously entered search strings exceeds the space allotted for the drop-down menu **130**, the user may scroll through the provided list in order to see all items in the list. According to one embodiment, a limited number of previously asked questions or search strings is stored, and once that limit is reached, the oldest items are dropped from the list as needed to provide storage space for newer items.

[**0041**] If the user determines that one of the previously asked questions is the appropriate question for the user's present inquiry, the user may select one of the questions, and the edit/drop-down control module **310** performs a search, as described above, for help topics related to the selected question. Potential answers to the selected question are provided to the user, as described above.

[**0042**] It is advantageous to describe the functionality of an exemplary embodiment of the present invention with reference to an exemplary operation during which a user seeks help with the save functionality of a word processing software application **305**. **FIG. 6** is an illustration of an operational flow of the steps performed by the system and method of the present invention in providing assistance to a user of the answer wizard drop-down module of the present invention. The operational flow described with reference to **FIG. 6** also will be described with reference to **FIGS. 1-5**.

[**0043**] The operational flow begins at step **600** and proceeds to step **605**. At step **605**, the user of the word

processing software application **305** decides to save her document and is unfamiliar with the save functionality of the word processing application. At step **605** the user locates the search and edit control **120** of the graphical user interface window **100** of the user's word processing application **305**.

[**0044**] At step **610**, a determination is made whether the user has a new question, or whether the user desires to select from previously asked questions. If at step **610**, the user desires to enter a new question, the method proceeds along the "Yes" branch to step **615**, and the user enters the question into the control **120**. According to the present example, the user may enter a question such as, "How do I save my document?"

[**0045**] At step **620**, the edit/drop-down control module **310** passes the question entered by the user to the answer wizard DLL **320**. The answer wizard DLL **320** parses the question entered by the user and queries the help module **320** for related topics. At step **645**, once the answer wizard DLL locates related topics provided by the help module, the answer wizard DLL passes the related help topics to the edit/drop-down control module **310** which presents the help topics in the form of potential answers to the user's question in the drop-down menu **130**, as illustrated in **FIG. 3**. As described above, the potential answers are presented in balloon form by the functionality of the balloon DLL **340**.

[**0046**] At step **650**, the user reads the list of potential answers provided by the edit/drop-down control module **310** and the balloon DLL **340** and determines whether she believes any of the potential answers to be acceptable. If at step **650**, the user does not find any of the potential answers acceptable, the method proceeds along the "No" branch back to step **615**, where the user may enter a new question, or where the user may modify the previously- entered question. If at step **650** the user finds an acceptable answer in the list of answers provided by the edit/drop-down control module **310**, the method proceeds to step **655**, and the user selects an acceptable answer from the list.

[**0047**] At step **660**, upon selection of the acceptable answer, the help module **330** is invoked by the edit/drop-down control module **310**, and the help window **140** with text **145** is presented to the user, as illustrated in **FIG. 3**. For example, the text **145** presented to the user may read, "In order to save your document, select the save button under the File menu." At step **665**, the question entered by the user at step **615** is saved in a list of most recently used items for subsequent selection by the user. At step **670**, the method ends.

[**0048**] Referring back to step **610**, if the user believes that her present inquiry is similar to or is the same as a previous question entered by the user, the method proceeds to step **625**, and the user selects the drop-down button **125** on the control **120**. After the user selects the drop-down button **125**, the method proceeds to step **630** and a list of previously asked questions is displayed in the drop-down menu **130**, as illustrated in **FIG. 5**.

[**0049**] At step **635**, the user reads the list of previously asked questions to determine whether one of the questions or search strings is acceptable for the present inquiry. If the user finds an acceptable question, the method proceeds along the "Yes" branch to step **640**, and the user selects the acceptable question. The method then proceeds to step **620** for a search of help topics based on the selected question, as described above.

[**0050**] However, if at step **635** the user does not find an acceptable question in the list of previously asked questions, the method proceeds along the "No" branch to step **615** where the user may enter a new question. The method then proceeds to step **620**, and a search is performed on the new question entered by the user, as described above.

[**0051**] It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications or variations can be made in the present invention without departing from the scope or spirit of the invention. Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art when considering the specification and the practice of the invention disclosed herein. It is intended that this specification be considered as exemplary only, where the true scope and the spirit of the invention are indicated by the following claims.

We claim:

1. A method for providing computer software help utility, comprising the steps of:

providing a text entry area;

receiving a first search string at the text entry area;

if the first search string is related to a second search string stored in a list of most recently used search strings, then:

retrieving the second search string from the list of most recently used search strings, and

displaying the second search string;

searching a database for answers responsive to the first search string;

displaying a first set of one or more potential answers responsive to the first search string;

selecting, in response to a user input, one of the potential answers responsive to the search string; and

displaying a help text responsive to selecting one of the potential answers.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of providing a text entry area, further includes, providing a text entry area as part of a tool bar of a software application window.

3. The method of claim 1, further including the steps of:

allowing the user to determine whether an acceptable answer is provided in the displayed set of one or more potential answers;

if an acceptable answer is not provided, allowing the user to refine the first search string; and

searching the database for more answers responsive to the refined search string;

displaying a second set of one or more potential answers responsive to the refined search string; and

wherein the step of selecting one of the potential answers responsive to the search string includes selecting one of the potential answers from the second set of one or more potential answers.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

replacing the first search string with the second search string;

searching for answers responsive to the second search string; and

displaying a second set of one or more potential answers responsive to the second search string.

5. A computer readable medium having stored thereon computer-executable instructions which when executed by a computer, perform the steps of:

providing a text entry area;

receiving a first search string at the text entry area;

if the first search string is related to a second search string stored in a list of most recently used search strings, then:

retrieving the second search string from the list of most recently used search strings, and

displaying the second search string;

searching a database for answers responsive to the first search string;

displaying a first set of one or more potential answers responsive to the first search string;

receiving a selection of one of the potential answers responsive to the search string; and

displaying a help text responsive to the selection of one of the potential answers.

6. The computer readable medium of claim 5 having stored thereon computer-executable instructions which when executed by a computer, wherein the step of providing a text entry area, further includes, providing a text entry area on the tool bar of a software application window.

7. The computer readable medium of claim 5 having stored thereon computer-executable instructions which when executed by a computer, further perform the steps of:

allowing the user to determine whether an acceptable answer is provided in the first set of one or more potential answers;

if an acceptable answer is not provided:

refining, in response to user input, the search string, and

searching the database for more answers responsive to the refined search string;

displaying a second set of one or more potential answers responsive to the refined search string; and

wherein the step of receiving a selection of one of the potential answers includes receiving a selection of one of the potential answers from the second set of one or more potential answers.

8. The computer readable medium of claim 7 having stored thereon computer-executable instructions which when executed by a computer, further perform the steps of:

selecting, in response to user input, the second search string;

searching the database for answers responsive to the second search string;

displaying a third set of one or more potential answers responsive to the step of searching the database for answers responsive to the second search string;

selecting, in response to user input, one of the potential answers from the third set of one or more potential answers; and

displaying a help text responsive to step of selecting one of the potential answers from the third set of one or more potential answers.

9. A system for providing computer software help utility, comprising:

a processing unit;

a memory in communication with the processing unit, the memory storing instructions executable by the processing unit, the instructions operative to:

provide a text entry area on the tool bar of a software application window;

receive a first search string at the text entry area;

if the first search string is related to a second search string stored in a list of recently used search strings, then:

retrieve the second search string from the list of recently used search strings, and

display the second search string;

search a database for answers responsive to the first search string;

display a first set of one or more potential answers responsive to the first search string;

allow a user to determine whether an acceptable answer is provided;

if an acceptable answer is not provided in the first set of one or more potential answers:

receive a refined search string at the text entry area,

search the database for answers responsive to the refined search string,

display a second set of one or more potential answers responsive to the refined search string, and

allow a user to select one of the potential answers from the second set of one or more potential answers; and

display a help text responsive to selecting one of the potential answers.

10. The system of claim **11**, the instructions further operative to:

receive a selection of the second search string;

search the database for answers responsive to the second search string;

display a third set of one or more potential answers responsive to the second search string;

receive a selection of one of the potential answers from the third set of one or more potential answers; and

display a help text responsive to the selection one of the potential answers.

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