

Compare It! v. 3.2
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Introduction

Compare It! is a (text) file comparison and (two-way) merge utility. “Who in the world is still using text files?” you ask. Among others, programmers do. For better or worse, it is standard practice for computer programs to be expressed as ASCII (or more recently, Unicode) text stored in files. Even if you are not a programmer, programs embedded in the HTML, RTF, PostScript, and other files on your computer are often text. Programmers have the habit of changing these files many times during the lifespan of a software product and different versions are often compared to monitor what has changed. You’d think that a programmer’s editor would track changes like Microsoft Word does so that they would not need to be inferred afterwards by file comparison with a product like Compare It!, but that’s just not how it is. This program calculates a minimal set of line (or section) deletions, insertions, moves, and edits that distinguishes two files and facilitates manipulating (i.e., merging) the changes.

Packaging

The product is shareware and delivered electronically via a website with no paper involved. One may evaluate and use it for 30 days after which there is an obligation to pay the registration fee by mail, phone, or fax. Upon registration one receives a key which turns off the “nags” and entitles one to updates and technical support. The generous license is good for three computers: home, work, and portable. There are separate downloads for ASCII and Unicode versions and options for packaging with or without the installer. In each case the download is pleasantly small, approximately 1 MB, which reflects the fact that the product is intended to do one thing and do it well.

Documentation

Documentation is contained in a help file that spans just over 50 pages that can be printed or searched. The section on user interface basics, the application window illustration, and the list of keyboard shortcuts, toolbar buttons, and menu commands are the most helpful. The help window shows version number 3.0 rather than 3.2. This and some inconsistencies in the texts of menu items give the impression that a single programmer is having some difficulty keeping everything in sync.

Installation

The program does not need formal installation and will execute directly from the zip file. Formal installation allows one to specify whether settings should be stored in the registry or initialization files and to remove the program through the control panel.

Operation

The help file divides operations into comparing, merging, and editing files. The editing capability is a bonus that allows one to change text anywhere, not just where the files differ, without resorting to an external editor. On the other hand, many comparison programs support visual comparison of entire directories, which this product doesn't. A companion program, Synchronize It!, is dedicated to that need, but did not accept my reviewer's activation key, so I cannot comment on it. Another common activity is the three-way comparison or merge, which is included in the wish list for future releases, but not implemented in the current one.

Comparing files

Two files, source and destination, can be specified in three ways: via an open file dialog, a handy select files dialog that includes a drop target, and drag and drop directly into the application window. They can even be retrieved from zip archives or converted with a filter to text from a non-text source. Files are shown left and right or top and bottom with color syntax highlighting for C++, Java, Pascal, and C# built in. This feature is not generally found in programs that accompany version control tools. According to the documentation, other programming languages can be added, but only through a relatively simple keyword list rather than an actual parser. Additionally, the texts of the user interface can be translated (or corrected) via external configuration files. When I tried this, many of the texts did change, but some didn't and I assume that they remain hard-coded in the executable and can't be substituted, which would be an oversight.

There are two basic ways to synchronize the display of files. The first is to add "virtual lines" to the file where text was deleted so that corresponding lines display directly across from each other. The other way is to show only the real ones and indicate how they align. Compare It! takes the first approach for inserted and deleted lines, but must resort to the second for moved lines. The color of text and background is determined by whether the text exists in the source file, the destination file, both, or both but containing intraline changes. It is unfortunate that this coloration interferes with the syntax coloring determined by the programming language. There is no option that allows the two schemes to coexist for changed lines. Intra-line comparison and the treatment of white space, special characters, and case can be controlled in great detail through the options dialog.

The display includes an "overview bar" to indicate which part of the files is currently shown and allows immediate jumps to points of interest without scrolling. If no lines have been moved, the bar has a single column; if lines have moved, a second column appears and arrows connect the moved sections. The overview bar can get confusing this way, but can be expanded to untangle the graphics. If the moved sections of code do not fit in the same screen, bookmarks can be used to jump between them. It appears that the files cannot be scrolled separately to move both sections into view.

Merging (and editing) files

Buttons appear in the area between the two files to facilitate copying of changes back and forth between the files or deleting the changes. The buttons are quite small and somewhat difficult to click. Different combinations of the shift, control, and alt keys change the buttons visually and control whether changes are added before or after other text or are deleted all together. Not indicated by those buttons, but available via the toolbar and menu are commands for moving single lines of text back and forth, which is a convenient way to accept part of a change, but not its entirety. After each merge, the cursor is automatically moved to the next line or difference, which allows for speedy operation. There are also buttons for navigating directly from one change to the next. When a line is changed (but for some reason not when it's deleted), an arrow icon appears next to it and the color indicates a merged line. If the user types text into the editor, a pencil icon appears in the same place, making the two icons mutually exclusive. This is also the area where bookmarks are indicated. They barely stick out from under the other icons and are nearly invisible. This area clutters quickly.

Either before or after files are merged, one can print the files side-by-side with highlighted differences or generate reports in six different formats (including HTML and UNIX diff) for display or print with a separate application. Version 3.2 does not include syntax highlighting in the printout or report, but I can imagine using the output for a code review focusing on changed lines or for a report regarding a bug fix. The reporting capability is one not previously available to me through other products associated with code editors or version control and is very welcome.

Technical support

I was apprehensive about the probability of getting technical support from a shareware author, but was pleasantly surprised. I emailed a question and suggestion to the company, received a reply, returned it, and received an answer all in one afternoon! It often takes months for me to get that far with a large company. There are some cosmetic problems with the program resulting perhaps from not enough eyes looking at it or not enough feedback returning to the author, but no problem affecting the stability of the program in my tests.

Recommendation

Like most developers, I have multiple programs similar to Compare It! but associated with and sometimes inseparable from their hosts. My favorite until now does not support Unicode, creates no reports, and where possible will be replaced. It does, however, do at least a rudimentary three-way merge and another does a simple directory comparison, so Compare It! will not yet replace them all. If an economical and trustworthy two-way comparison and merge is what you need, this product will very likely fulfill it.

Company/Product information

Vendor: Grig Software
Address: (orders only)
ShareIt! Inc.
PO Box 844
Greensburg, PA 15601-0844
Tel: 800-903-4152 (orders only)
URL: <http://www.grigsoft.com>
Email: sales@grigsoft.com

Product: Compare It! v. 3.2
Cost: \$23 according to the review request for Compare It!
\$29 normal web price for Compare/Synchronize It! package
\$19 Christmas special for combined package

System requirements

Operating System: Windows 95/98/ME/NT/2000/XP (for ASCII)
Windows NT/2000/XP (for Unicode)

Test systems

Home-built PC

Processor: AMD Athlon XP 2200+
Memory: 512 MB
Operating System: Windows XP Professional and
Windows ME running under VMware

About the Reviewer

Keith Alcock produces many text files containing code and is satisfied with file-level differencing, but prefers to store code in an object database with method-level differencing (i.e., to write Smalltalk) when possible.