

Column: Cool Tool

Figures:

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Beyond Visual Compare: Beyond Compare

Whil Hentzen

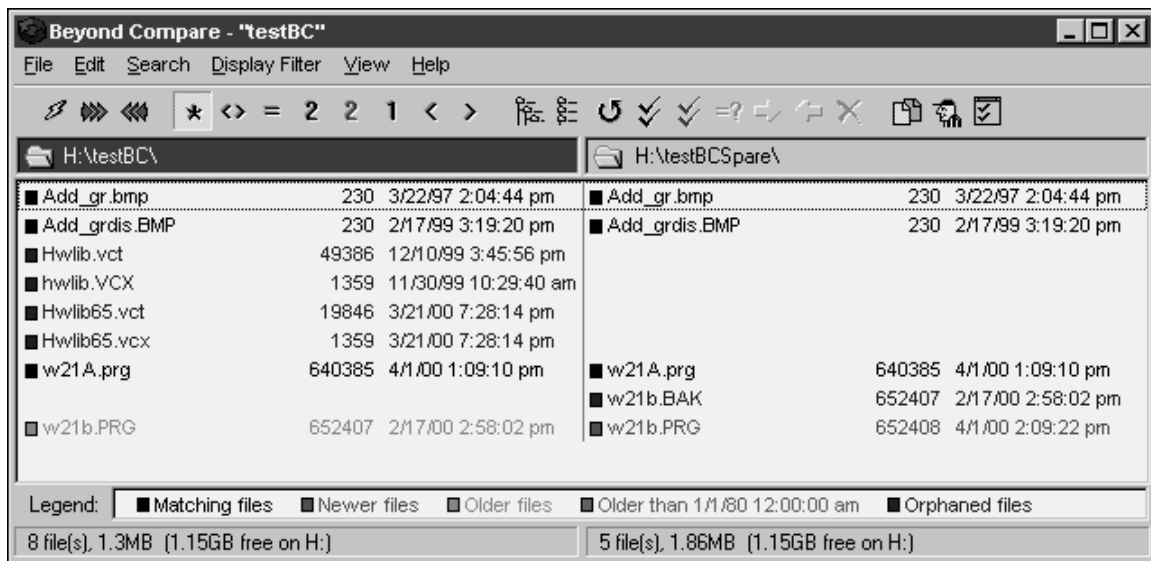
About a hundred years ago (well, actually, it was in late 1993), I wrote about a Cool Tool that displayed a visual comparison of two ASCII files. That was back in the days of FoxPro 2.0, so the types of files we were interested in comparing had extensions like TXT, PRG, and, occasionally, SPR. Yes, most everything we were interested in was an ASCII file of one sort or another, and so this tool, Visual Compare, was most handy.

One ironic feature was its name – Visual Compare ran in a DOS box, and the results appeared in a 25x80 display. While acceptable in the days of Windows 3.1, this doesn't quite cut it anymore.

Fast forward a century or so, and we find our needs to be pretty much the same. We're interested in comparing files that have extensions like TXT, PRG, and, occasionally, VCX or SCX. Additionally, we're interested in comparing the contents of two directories. We were interested in that feature in 1993, but our requirements weren't as rigorous as they are today.

ScoterSoftware in Madison Wisconsin has developed a tool that has completely replaced Visual Compare in my toolbox; Beyond Compare. It's got a schizoid personality – it provides robust and flexible directory comparisons functionality and allows you to configure the comparisons six ways from Sunday, but also compares two individual files, much like Visual Compare did, but with several additional features that I love.

Figure 1 shows the main screen of Beyond Compare, where I'm looking at a pair of test directories. Since this is screen shot is black and white, you can't see that the various types of comparisons are identified via colored boxes (in the legend at the bottom of the dialog) but they are.

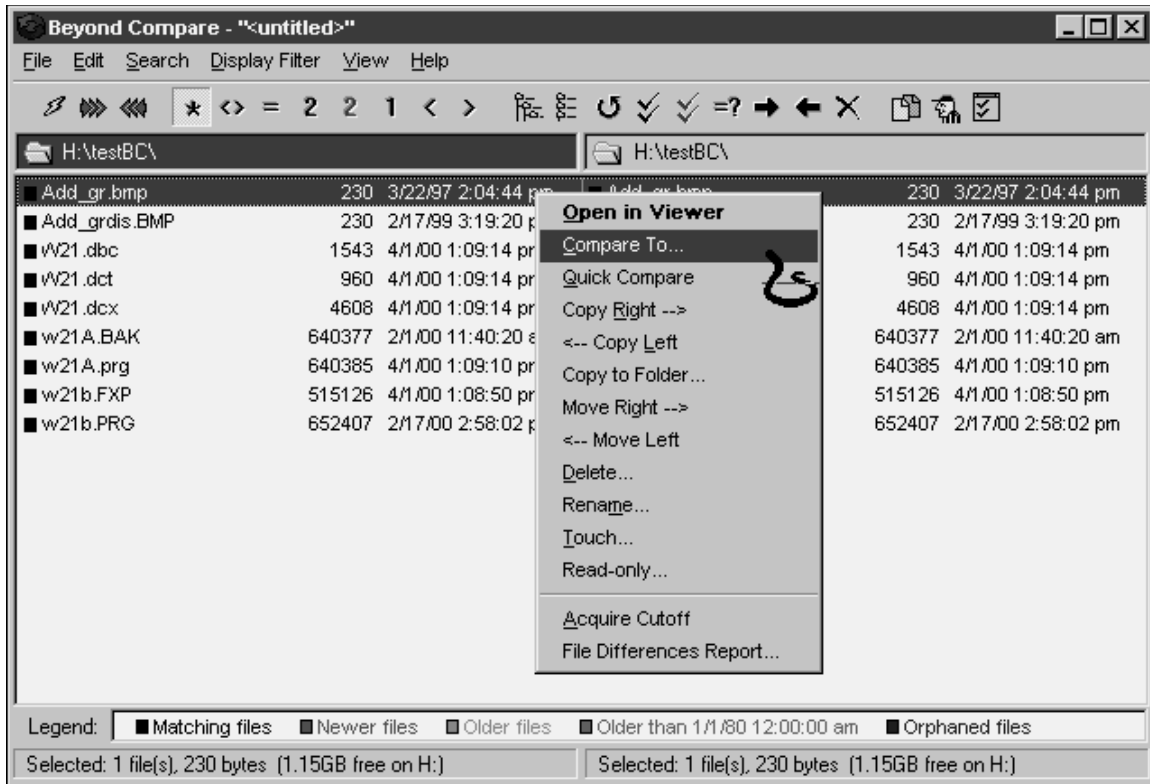


BC-1.TIF

Figure 1. The directory comparison screen of Beyond Compare displays the contents of two directories.

You'll see everything that you would expect – the files that are identical, those that are missing on one side or another, and those that have the same names but different attributes. For example, you'll see that W21A.PRG is the same on both sides, W21B.bak is only found in the Spare directory, and that the versions of W21B.PRG are different in both directories.

If you right click on a file, as shown in Figure 2, you'll get this great context menu that allows you to perform all sorts of functions that ordinarily you'd do in Explorer.



BC-2.TIF

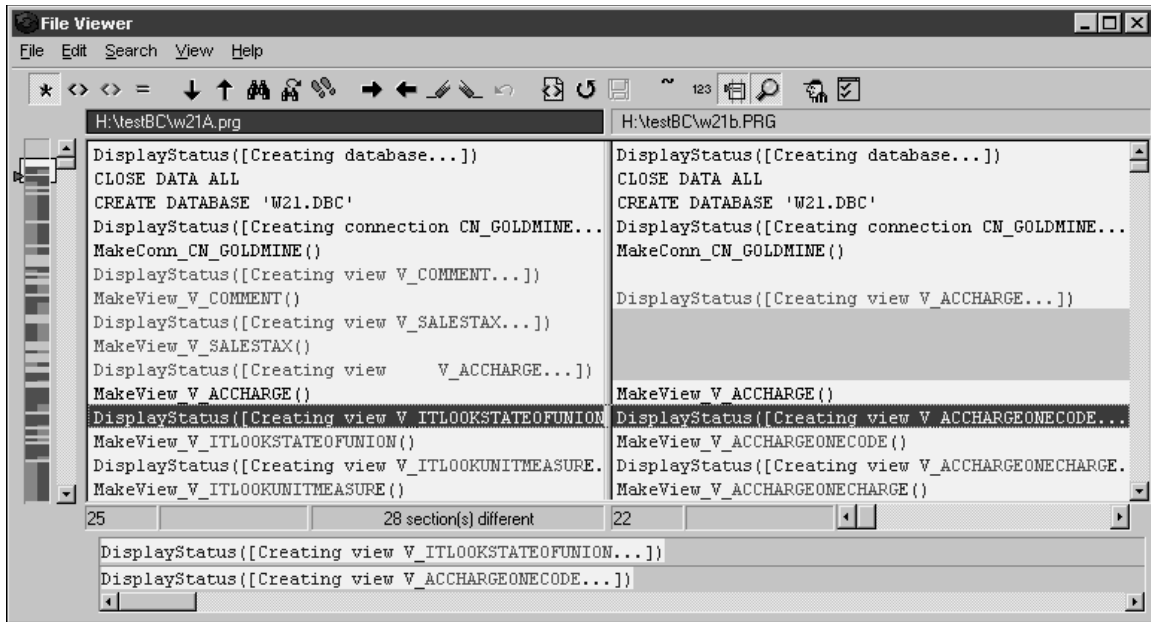
Figure 2. Right click on a file in the directory listing to display a context menu that allows you to manipulate and compare files a number of ways.

But that's not all. If you select the Compare To menu option and then right click on a second file, you'll get the screen shown in Figure 3.

The dialog shows you the two files you are comparing. (You can compare binary files, but the contents are usually not very interesting.) Again, as expected, you see the two files lined up side by side, with matching lines across from each other, and missing and different lines displayed in contrasting colors. So far, so good. But the best part is the part of controls - a little slider bar and a scroll bar - on the far left side of the dialog. You can use the scroll bar to move through the file, naturally.

The slider bar to its left represents the pair of files you are comparing. The vertical read-only text box has two halves: the left half and right half may be the same color – grey – or they may be different colors. These represent “birds-eye” views of the two files. The rectangular box/arrow slider on top of the text box shows you what part of the files you are looking at. Not only can you use the scroll bar's thumb, but you can grab the slider to reposition your location in the file.

The slider bar in the screen shot in Figure 3 shows that there are a lot of different sections in these two files.



BC-3.TIF

Figure 3. The dialog that compares two files displays the contents of the file as well as a legend of the file on the left side of the dialog.

There are oodles more features, such as a start up screen that allows you to “save” a session where you’ve defined the two directories you want to compare as well as settings that define how those two directories are compared. There’s also a configuration screen that has just about every imaginable comparison setting. For example, you can tell the comparison to ignore files that are exactly one hour apart (hmmmm!), that are a couple of seconds part, to flag files that are older than 1/1/1980, and so on.

Beyond Compare is shareware, which means you get to play with it for 30 days, and if you like it, send them a few bucks. It’s definitely worth every penny. A copy is included in this month’s Subscriber Downloads, and you can find out more at their website at www.scootersoftware.com.

Whil Hentzen is editor of FoxTalk.