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FTP

By Richard Lowe

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Believe it or not, browsing the web with Internet Explorer or Netscape is relatively new. It wasn't that long ago (ten to fifteen years) when the tools you would use on the internet (not the web) were email, gopher (a menu based browser), archie (a file and directory locator) and FTP.

The letters FTP stand for File Transfer Protocol, and that's exactly what FTP allows you to do – transfer files from place to place. In fact, FTP is by far the most efficient (the fastest) way to copy large files across the internet.

Today many people use a sophisticated FTP client to get files to and from their web sites. This has several advantages over the method commonly used by amateurs on free web sites. Many newbies who don't know any better use the gadgets provided by their free host to edit their sites. The problems with this are many and varied.

First, the gadgets are not very impressive as editors. Most users who want to create a web site of any size and complexity will find themselves constrained horribly by these tools. Probably the only good thing about these editing tools is they give people a nice, easy way to start creating web sites without a huge learning curve. But take my word for it, you will outgrow them soon enough.

In addition, a major problem is the editing is generally done directly on the host site. This means you do not have a back up of your site on your own hard drive. If your host decides to close your account, goes bankrupt or just plain is unavailable, you lose

FTP

your site. If you ever want to have a frustrating experience, just try and call your host and ask them to restore your site from one of their backups!

Other people use products such as Dreamweaver or FrontPage, which include site updating capabilities. These are often very convenient until they don't work or perform unexpected actions. For example, I spent several days trying to figure out why my CGI routines were not working, until I realized that FrontPage was uploading the files incorrectly. From that moment forward, I used an FTP package to upload my files.

Most of the modern FTP clients are very simple to use. You just launch the program, enter some basic information (such as the site address, account name and password) and connect. Once connected, you can usually just drag and drop files from your own hard drive to the site.

Precisely why is it a good idea to use an FTP client over, say, FrontPage (or Dreamweaver) or direct editing on a hosts web site?

FTP is fast and efficient – As it turns out, FTP is actually one of the most efficient ways to transfer large amounts of data on the entire internet. Don't believe me? Try transferring a very large file, say a megabyte, using FTP. It really moves, doesn't it?

By using FTP, you have an automatic backup – If you use FTP you will be editing your files locally on your own computer. As you make changes you will copy the files up to your host's computer. This means no matter what happens to your host, even if their computer is totally destroyed, you've got a copy of your site on your own disk. The reverse is also true – if your computer is trashed you can recover your site from your host's system.

FTP gives you control – You can choose whether to transfer in binary (executables and compressed files) or ASCII (text files) as needed. This is an advantage over FrontPage, which does not give you the choice. This means you cannot use FrontPage to upload your site if you use, for example, CGI routines.

Some good FTP projects include the following.

AceFTP – <http://www.visicommedia.com/aceftp/>

This FTP client has the ability to do multiple tasks at the same

FTP

time. This means you can start a long copy, look at the site and copy some smaller files all at the same time.

AutoFTPPro – <http://www.primasoft.com/32org/32ftpro.htm>

Has the ability to schedule transfers for selected times. The template feature allows you to create a pattern which can make future transfers much easier.

CuteFTP – <http://www.internet-tips.net/Products/cuteftp.html>

This is the product that I like to use. It is very easy to use, with a simple interface that allows drag and drop.

KnoWare, Inc – <http://www.knowareinc.com/>

Several different FTP clients. FtpNetdrive maps an FTP site as a drive letter, which integrates it directly into your desktop. Internet Neighborhood adds the FTP site directly to your network neighborhood. These are both very nice products.

WebDrive – <http://www.riverfrontsoftware.com/>

WebDrive is a Windows 95/98/NT FTP software client that allows you to map an Internet FTP site to a local drive utilizing the standard FTP protocol. This enables you to connect to an FTP site and perform familiar file operations like copy, xcopy, and directory functions with the Windows explorer, a DOS box, or any other application like Microsoft Word, Excel, etc. WebDrive instantly FTP enables any application that reads or writes files by allowing the application to read files from or write files to the FTP site.

WS_FTPPro – http://www.ipswitch.com/Products/WS_FTP/index.html

Another very nice FTP client with scheduling, speed and integration into the browser. This allows you to enter ftp:// in the address bar of the browser to call up the program.

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Anonymous FTP

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How many times have you downloaded a file off the internet? I'll bet you just clicked a link and the download started automatically. You probably didn't notice the URL as it flashed across your screen, but there's a good chance that it was an FTP address.

You know about FTP, don't you? FTP stands for File Transfer Protocol, and it is a very efficient way to copy files over the internet. It's far more efficient than the standard HTTP protocol (the way your browser transfers information). Because of that, you will find FTP addresses buried in web sites all over the internet.

Most of the time, these are anonymous FTP sites, which means you do not need a username and password to get the files. You see, you can set up FTP to require a username and password – this is perhaps the most common way people get information loaded up to their web site.

However, if you want you can remove the username and password requirement to allow anyone to get access to your files. Most of the time an anonymous FTP site only allows files to be downloaded from the site: finding one that allows uploads is very rare as this means anyone can add information at any time.

It's easy to log into an anonymous FTP site. Sometimes no username or password is required at all, and sometimes you just enter "anonymous" and a password of your email address. Once you do that using your favorite FTP client (or just Internet Explorer), you can have a great time looking through what's available.

Why would anyone want to use FTP instead of just loading some web pages? Besides the fact that FTP is more efficient, it's also very easy to maintain. An FTP site is structured very much like your standard file system, with directories (or folders) and

FTP

files, along with folder-level security (the ability to require a username and password on selected folders or directories). That's about all there is to an FTP site. It's very simple to maintain, relatively secure (as long as you don't allow people to upload or write) and easy for visitors to understand.

You will find fully anonymous FTP sites are common in situations where large numbers of files need to be made available to the general public. These include support sites which post patched versions of software, desktop themes and screen savers and volumes of documentation.

The wealth of information that is available from these sites is huge. It can be an incredible pleasure to explore the files available on one of these sites. One of the things that makes them so pleasurable is no one has gone through any great effort to make a good presentation (as with a web page). Thus, what you see is raw files containing information, and not pretty web pages.

Some great anonymous FTP sites and FTP site lists include the following:

Swedish University Network's, FTP archive

<ftp://ftp.sunet.se/pub/>

One of the truly great FTP sites. Tons of files freely available for download.

Archive-name astronomy-ftp-sites

<http://www.seds.org/pub/faq/astroftp.html>

List of FTP sites with information for people interested in astronomy.

Perry's FTP-List Page

<http://home.iae.nl/users/perry/ftp-list.html>

List of hundreds (if not thousands) of FTP sites.

Introduction Exhaustive List of FTP Sites

<http://hoohoo.ncsa.uiuc.edu/ftp/intro.html>

Another list of lots and lots of FTP sites.

Richard Lowe Jr. is the webmaster of Internet Tips And Secrets at <http://www.internet-tips.net> – Visit our website any time to read over 1,000 complete FREE articles about how to improve your internet profits, enjoyment and knowledge.



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