Resources

A CTAN Search Page

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A Comprehensive TeX Archive Network (CTAN) site is a big place. Keeping track of what files are where, even just in the LaTeX subtree, and of what those files do, is a big job. Recently I (and others; see below) have added a resource — a web page — that you can use to find what you want.

1 An Offer of Help

One thing that this page will do for you is what you'd think it would do: locate files by name. The other day I needed `cwebmac.tex`. I went to `http://tug.ctan.org/CTANfind.html`, submitted the filename, and was rewarded with a results page such that clicking on the filename downloaded the file. Besides the file I asked for, also shown on that page is some more information, the surrounding directory and the file's date, so that I can decide among (possible) multiple choices. There are also links to download the entire directory packaged as a zip file or as a tarred and gzipped file.

By the way, my download wasn't made from `tug.ctan.org` but rather from my favorite CTAN mirror. The first time I used `CTANfind`, before seeing the results page I got a page that asked me to select the mirror. That's how the system found out my preference. How that preference is remembered is that when I selected a mirror, my browser got a cookie with the information in it. Now, every time that I go to this same `CTANfind` page, the browser presents this cookie and the information is used in the generated results.

Another thing that this page will do for you is to help answer questions like, "Is there an already written solution to . . . ?" That's because it has the ability to search Graham Williams's wonderful Catalogue[1] of information on TeX and LaTeX. For instance, one of the things I struggled with first in trying LaTeX was to have a letter place the closing on the left. If only I had `CTANfind` — searching the Catalogue for 'letter' gives perhaps two dozen responses, at least one of which, `block`, does the job.

There is one more thing that this tool can do for you. A design target for this page was that from it you could quickly answer half of the questions from a day's `comp.text.tex`. So included at the end are a few links, to the UK TUG FAQ, to the *Short Introduction to LaTeX*, etc., that seem to me to be the most often referenced.

I hope that you find this tool useful.

2 A Request For Help

Here are the technical details: Behind the web page are two CGI scripts that in turn rely on data files generated as cron jobs (the programs are in Perl 5). These were written to be easily set up at other sites. If you are a CTAN mirror and you are willing to try hosting your own version then `joshua.smcvt.edu/ctan/install_search.shtml` should make installation on any UNIX system straightforward; no editing of Perl source.

Having a version of `CTANfind` running on each continent would be great (although Antarctica might be tough!). Right now, you can go to `tug.ctan.org/CTANfind.html` and `joshua.smcvt.edu/ctan/CTANfind.html` in the USA, and `www.tex.ac.uk/CTANfind.html` in England.

3 With a Little Help From My Friends

The net can be such a fine place. A number of people let me steal, err . . . , borrow their ideas (some of which they were patient enough to explain to me at length first). I'd particularly like to thank Karl Berry, Robin Fairbairns, and Graham Williams.

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[1] in `\help\Catalogue\catalogue.html` on CTAN