Numdiff User Manual

This manual describes how to install and use Numdiff, a program which compares putatively similar files line by line and field by field, ignoring small numeric differences or/and different numeric formats.

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2 Overview

Computer users often find occasion to ask how two files differ. Perhaps one file is a newer version of the other file. Or maybe the two files started out as identical copies but were changed by different people.

There are several ways to think about the differences between two files. One way to think of the differences is as a series of lines that were deleted from, inserted in, or changed in one file to produce the other file. The well-known `diff` program compares two files line by line, finds groups of lines that differ, and reports each group of differing lines. Without particular options, the `diff` program considers any change in the amount or in the type of the characters as a relevant difference. However, trough some command line options it also provides ways to suppress certain kinds of differences that are not important to the user. For instance, `diff` provides ways to ignore differences in the amount of white space between words or lines, or differences in alphabetic case.

Another way to think of the differences is as a series of words that were deleted from, inserted in, or changed in one file to produce the other file. Here "word" refers to a sequence of non white-space characters delimited by a couple of white-spaces, one before and the other one after the word.

The less known `wdiff` program by Franc,ois Pinard `<pinard@iro.umontreal.ca>` compares words in two files and reports the differences.

At last, one can think of the differences between two files as a sequence of pairs of bytes that can be either identical or different. The `cmp` program reports the differences between two files byte by byte, instead of line by line or word by word. As a result, it is often more useful than `diff` or `wdiff` for comparing binary files.

However, none of these approaches turns out to be good when you want to compare a couple of text files composed partially or entirely by numerical fields. Indeed, when you compare a couple of such files, what you want to obtain usually is a list of the numerical fields in the second file which **numerically** differ from the corresponding fields in the first file. But, as you probably knows, a same number can be written using different notations and programs like `diff` or `wdiff` can not recognize whether a difference between two numeric fields is only due to the notation or is actually a difference of numerical values.

For instance, 11.23 and 11.2300000 are the same number but represented in different ways. While, if you are interested in numerical values, it is obvious that the difference in the representation is not meaningful and then it should be ignored, however `diff` and `wdiff` consider the previous one as a relevant difference and there is no way for you to tell these programs to ignore it !

Another example of this type is given by 98765.4321 and 9.87654321E04 where the difference is only due to the use of the scientific notation in place of the common notation.

Moreover, depending on your country you could stick to different conventions in writing numbers. For instance, the amount "three hundred millions and fifty-two thousands of dollars and forty-six cents" is usually written by an Italian accountant as 300.052.000,46$ while an American accountant would write 300,052,000.46$. Of course, 300.052.000,46$ and 300,052,000.46$ represent the same amount of money but `diff` and `wdiff` would report a difference, which probably is not what you would in a similar case.

At last, sometimes you could want to ignore even differences in numerical values as long as they do not overcome a certain threshold. In other words, you could desire to suppress all "small" numerical differences too.

For instance, it could happen that you want to ignore all numerical differences whose absolute value is not greater than 0.0001. If this is the case, then the numerical fields 33 and 33.00009 must be considered equal, while 33 and 33.00011 must be reported as different.

However, `diff` and `wdiff` can not be used to ignore "small" numerical differences, since they do not even know what a numerical difference is.

What I have been saying till now explains why I decided to implement a new program with the capability to "appropriately" compare files containing numerical fields. In writing this program I was inspired by `ndiff`, a GPL'ed software by Nelson H. Baabe of the Salt Lake City University. The author of `ndiff` had the same good reasons as me to write `ndiff`. Actually `ndiff` is a good tool and I used it for a while. But I did not completely like the way it works and so `numdiff` was born. Although `ndiff` inspired `numdiff`, they are completely different from the viewpoint of the source code: `numdiff` has been entirely written from scratch.

`numdiff` can be used to compare putatively similar files line by line and field by field, ignoring small numeric differences or/and different numeric formats. `numdiff` takes two mandatory arguments, the paths of the two files to compare, and, after splitting them into lines and the lines into fields according to a given list of field delimiters, it compares every field of every line of the first file with the field of the second file at the same position (here position refers both to the line number and to the location within the line). If the compared fields are both legal numerical values, then `numdiff` performs a numerical comparison between them, else it performs a literal comparison, that is to say the usual byte by byte comparison. In case of literal comparison, two fields are regarded as equal if they are formed by the same sequence of characters. In case of numerical comparison and without specific command line options, two fields are regarded as equal if their numerical difference is zero. Be careful ! If you do not explicitly specify a list of field delimiters by the option '`-s`', then `numdiff` takes as field delimiters the characters newline ('`\n`', ASCII code 0x0A), horizontal tabulation ('`\t`', ASCII code 0x09), and blank (' ', ASCII code 0x20).

For instance, if the file '`list1`' contains the data

```
accident        123     23Joshua          34.55           +3+4i          water
dog       -3455.321     cat             2.345678e-9     .0005-6.23e2i
```

and file '`list2`' contains the data

```
Accident        123     23456          34.5500         +3.0001+4i
dog       -3455.320098  Cat     +2.345678e-9            -6.23e2i    $$$
A new line
```

then the output of the command '`numdiff list1 list2`' will be:

```
----------------
##1       #:1   <== accident
                ==> Accident
@                                                   @@
##1       #:3   <== 23Joshua
                ==> 23456
@                                                   @@
##1       #:5   <== +3+4i
                ==> +3.0001+4i
@ Absolute error = 1.0000000000e-4, Relative error = 2.0000000000e-5

Line 1 in file "list2" is shorter:
<== water
==>
----------------
##2       #:2   <== -3455.321
                ==> -3455.320098
```

```
@ Absolute error = 9.0200000000e-4, Relative error = 2.6104672633e-7
##2       #:3   <== cat
               ==> Cat
@                                                    @@
##2       #:5   <== .0005-6.23e2i
               ==> -6.23e2i
@ Absolute error = 5.0000000000e-4, Relative error = 8.0256821830e-7

Line 2 in file "list1" is shorter:
<==
==> $$$

Line 3 in file "list1" is shorter:
<==
==> A new line

Line 4:
<==
==>


+++  File "list1" differs from file "list2"
```

At the same time `numdiff` will print the following error message on stderr:

```
***  End of file "list1" reached
     Likely the files "list1" and "list2" do not have the same number of lines !
```

I have to remark that `numdiff` can recognize complex numbers, provided that they are written in the form $a + bi$ or $a - bi$ with no extra characters between the value a and the sign $+$ or $-$ (actually the symbol i used to represent the imaginary unit can be changed by a suitable command line option, but we shall see it in Chapter 4 [Invoking], page 9). If you do not know what complex numbers are, do not worry ! In this case probably you will never manage files containing complex numbers and so you can happily continue to ignore them. :) Even if the output of `numdiff` is self-explanatory, in the next section I will explain in details all you have to know about it.

2.1 Output format

Let us go back to the previous example. If the files '`list1`' and '`list2`' contain the data

```
accident        123     23Joshua          34.55          +3+4i          water
dog       -3455.321     cat             2.345678e-9     .0005-6.23e2i
```

and

```
Accident        123     23456          34.5500         +3.0001+4i
dog       -3455.320098  Cat     +2.345678e-9           -6.23e2i    $$$
A new line
```

respectively, then the output of the command '`numdiff list1 list2`' will be:

```
----------------
##1       #:1   <== accident
               ==> Accident
@                                                    @@
```

```
##1       #:3   <== 23Joshua
                ==> 23456
@                                                       @@
##1       #:5   <== +3+4i
                ==> +3.0001+4i
@ Absolute error = 1.0000000000e-4, Relative error = 2.0000000000e-5

Line 1 in file "list2" is shorter:
<== water
==>
----------------
##2       #:2   <== -3455.321
                ==> -3455.320098
@ Absolute error = 9.0200000000e-4, Relative error = 2.6104672633e-7
##2       #:3   <== cat
                ==> Cat
@                                                       @@
##2       #:5   <== .0005-6.23e2i
                ==> -6.23e2i
@ Absolute error = 5.0000000000e-4, Relative error = 8.0256821830e-7

Line 2 in file "list1" is shorter:
<==
==> $$$

Line 3 in file "list1" is shorter:
<==
==> A new line

Line 4:
<==
==>


+++  File "list1" differs from file "list2"
```

`numdiff` prints a report on the standard output for every field of the first file which differs from the corresponding field of the second one.

First this report indicates the location of the field, that is to say the number of the line where the field appears and its position within the line (this is "1" if it is the first field of its line, "2" if it is the second field of the line, "3" if it is the third one and so on. Fields are numerated starting from the left hand of the line and proceeding towards the right hand). For each report the line number is introduced by the symbol "##", while the field number by "#:". Then `numdiff` shows in what the difference consists. For instance,

```
##1       #:1   <== accident
                ==> Accident
@                                                       @@
```

means that the first field of the first line is "accident" in the first file, while in the second file it appears as "Accident". This difference could then be canceled by removing "accident" from the first file and inserting "Accident" in place of it. The arrows "<==" and "==>" try to visualize this idea. Analogously,

```
##2       #:2   <== -3455.321
```

```
                ==> -3455.320098
@ Absolute error = 9.0200000000e-4, Relative error = 2.6104672633e-7
```

means that the second field of the second line is "-3455.321" in the first file and "-3455.320098" in the second one. Since the contents of the field are numerical in both files, `numdiff` also prints the absolute and relative errors.

The absolute error (or absolute difference) is given by the absolute value of the difference between the values appearing in the two files.

The relative error (or relative difference) is actually defined in a more complicated way. If "n1" is the value appearing in the first file and "n2" is the value in the second file, then the absolute error is given by the formula "A=|n1-n2|", while the relative error "R" is given by:

- "R = 0" if "n1" and "n2" are equal,
- "Inf" (infinity) if "n2" differs from "n1" and at least one of them is zero,
- "R = A/ min(|n1|, |n2|)" if "n1" and "n2" are both non zero and "n2" differs from "n1". "min(|n1|, |n2|)" denotes the minimum between the absolute value of "n1" and the absolute value of "n2".

I have to remark that, with these definitions of absolute and relative error it turns out that A(n2, n1) = A(n1, n2) and R(n2, n1) = R(n1, n2). In other words, the absolute/relative error does not change if you only change the order of the compared values.

If the contents of a field are, in at least one of the compared files, non-numerical, then the output line reporting absolute and relative errors is replaced by the separator:

```
@                                                    @@
```

It can happen that a line in one of the two files to compare contains more fields than the corresponding line of the other file. When this is the case, `numdiff` reports this difference by telling that a certain line (identified by its line number) appears to be shorter in one of the two files, just as in

```
Line 1 in file "list2" is shorter:
<== water
==>
```

or in

```
Line 2 in file "list1" is shorter:
<==
==> $$$
```

When this is the case, `numdiff` also shows the *tail* of the line as it appears in one of the compared files.

It can also happen that one of the two files to compare has less lines than the other one. In this case `numdiff` prints the number of the first line which compares in only one of the two files. Moreover, it prints on the standard error a message telling in which of the two files the end has been prematurely reached:

```
***  End of file "list1" reached
     Likely the files "list1" and "list2" do not have the same number of lines !
```

At last, `numdiff` prints on standard output a message reporting the final status of the comparison. This message says either the two files are equal or they are different, just as in the example we are considering:

```
+++  File "list1" differs from file "list2"
```

I have to remark that the user can make `numdiff` avoid to print, partially or totally, the messages that it would otherwise send to standard output. This can be achieved by some suitable command line options, see Chapter 4 [Invoking], page 9.

3 Installing

To successfully compile, build and install Numdiff some tools are required. The first one is an ANSI C compiler. This compiler should at least accept the option '`-o`' in order to place its output in a specified file. Numdiff has been successfully compiled and tested on Slackware GNU/Linux 10.2 with the version 3.3.6 of the GNU C Compiler, and on SunOS 5.8 with the version 2.95.3 of the same compiler.

Moreover, you need a POSIX implementation of the `make` utility (I used both GNU make and smake by Joerg Schilling to compile Numdiff) and a POSIX implementation of the commands `rm` and `find`. At last, you need a proper installation of GNU Texinfo (in order to install the info documentation) and a shell sh-compatible.

Configuration, building and installation of Numdiff can be performed through the standard three steps:

```
./configure
make
make install
```

If you leave enabled the Natural Language Support and you also want to install the localization files (at the moment only the italian localization is supplied), then, after '`make`', you will have to type and run

```
make install-nls
```

By default, '`make install`' will install all the files in '`/usr/local/bin`', '`/usr/local/info`' etc. You can specify an installation prefix other than '`/usr/local`' using the option '`--prefix`' in the `configure` step, for instance '`--prefix=$HOME`':

```
./configure --prefix=$HOME
```

For better control, you can use the options '`--bindir`', '`--datadir`', '`--infodir`' and so on. Type '`./configure --help`' to obtain the complete list of all the available options.

Anyway, the localization files will always be put in '*`PREFIX`*`/share/locale`', where *PREFIX* is the path specified by the option '`--prefix`' or, if this option has not been given to `configure`, '`/usr/local`'.

Analogously, the documentation files, including a full User Manual available in several formats (HTML, PDF and plain ASCII text), will be put in '*`PREFIX`*`/doc/numdiff`'.

Once Numdiff has been installed you can remove all the files previously installed by a simple '`make uninstall`'. If you have also installed the localization files trough '`make install-nls`', then, in order to remove also these ones, use '`make uninstall-nls`' in place of '`make uninstall`'.

Between the options accepted by `configure` there are '`--enable-mpa`', '`--enable-hpa`', '`--enable-ldpa`', '`--enable-dpa`', '`--enable-debug`', '`--enable-optimization`', and '`--enable-nls`'.

The option '`--enable-debug`' turns on debugging when compiling the source code. This is obtained by passing to the compiler the '`-g`' option, but you can change this default debugging flag (which could not even be recognized by your compiler) by setting the environment variable `DBGFLAGS` before calling `configure`.

The option '`--enable-optimization`' turns on basic optimization when compiling the source code. This is obtained by passing to the compiler the '`-O`' option, but you can change this default flag (which could not even be recognized by your compiler) by setting the environment variable `OPTFLAGS` before calling `configure`.

The option '`--enable-nls`' turns on Natural Language Support. But you do not need to use it explicitly, since Natural Language Support is enabled by default. However, you can disable it by using '`--disable-nls`'.

The options '`--enable-mpa`', '`--enable-hpa`', '`--enable-ldpa`', and '`--enable-dpa`' are used to enable the support for, respectively, multiple precision arithmetic, high precision arithmetic, long double precision arithmetic and double precision arithmetic. By default, the support for multiple precision arithmetic is enabled if no explicit specification is given.

The support for high precision arithmetic requires the installation of HPAlib (version 1.6 or later), a free (LGPL-ed) library for high precision computations available at the web address `http://savannah.nongnu.org/projects/hpalib`.

Be careful ! Multiple precision arithmetic is better than high precision arithmetic. The support for high, long double and double precision arithmetic is only provided to allow running Numdiff on **slow** computers. Moreover, some of the features of Numdiff, which can be activated through some suitable command line options, are available only if Numdiff has been built with the support for multiple precision arithmetic. In particular, when this support is available, the user can select at runtime, by the option '`-#`', the precision which Numdiff will have to use in doing its computations, see Chapter 4 [Invoking], page 9.

4 Invoking

SYNOPSIS

```
numdiff -h|v
```

or

```
numdiff [-a maxerr][-r maxerr][-2][-P][-N][-s ifs][-b][-q][-D][-E][-I][-S]
[-# prec][-d c1c2][-t c1c2][-g n1n2][-p c1c2][-n c1c2][-e c1c2]
[-i c1c2][-F f1-f2][-L l1-l2][-l path][-o path] file1 file2
```

where *file1* and *file2* are the names of the two files to compare. In the first case `numdiff` prints a short help (actually not so short) or/and version number, Copyright, NO-Warranty disclaimer and some build information. In the second case `numdiff` compares the files specified by the two (mandatory) arguments following the list of the options. The complete path of a file should be given, a directory name is not accepted. Moreover, the two arguments cannot refer to the same file but one of them can be `"-"`, which refers to stdin.

OPTIONS

- '`-a maxerr`' Specify the maximum absolute error permitted before that two numerical values are regarded as different (The default value is zero)
- '`-r maxerr`' Specify the maximum relative error permitted before that two numerical values are regarded as different (The default value is zero)
- '`-2`' Order that two numerical values are regarded as equal only if both absolute and relative error do not exceed the corresponding tolerance threshold (The default behavior is considering equal two numerical values if at least one between absolute and relative error does not exceed the corresponding tolerance threshold, or zero if no tolerance threshold has been specified)
- '`-P`' Ignore all differences due to numeric fields of the second file that are less than the corresponding numeric fields in the first file (consider only positive errors)
- '`-N`' Ignore all differences due to numeric fields of the second file that are greater than the corresponding numeric fields in the first file (consider only negative errors)
- '`-E`' While printing the differences between the two compared files show only the numerical ones
- '`-D`' While printing the differences between the two compared files neglect all the numerical ones
- '`-I`' Ignore changes in case while doing literal comparisons
- '`-s ifs`' Specify the set of characters to use to split the input lines into fields (The default set of characters is white space, tab and newline)
- '`-b`' Suppress all messages concerning the differences discovered in the structures of the two files
- '`-q`' Suppress all the standard output of the program
- '`-S`' Add some statistics to the standard output
- '`-# prec`' Specify the number of digits in the significands used in multiple-precision arithmetic
- '`-d c1c2`' Specify the characters representing the decimal point in the two files to compare
- '`-t c1c2`' Specify the characters representing the thousands separator in the two files to compare
- '`-g n1n2`' Specify the number of digits forming each group of thousands in the two files to compare

- '`-p c1c2`' Specify the (optional) prefixes for positive values used in the two files to compare
- '`-n c1c2`' Specify the prefixes for negative values used in the two files to compare
- '`-e c1c2`' Specify the exponent letters used in the two files to compare
- '`-i c1c2`' Specify the characters representing the imaginary unit in the two files to compare
- '`-F f1-f2`' Select the fields that have to be compared (The default behavior is comparing all the fields)
- '`-L l1-l2`' Select the lines whose fields have to be compared (The default behavior is comparing all the fields in all the lines)
- '`-l path`' Redirect warning and error messages from stderr to the indicated file
- '`-o path`' Redirect output from stdout to the indicated file
- '`-h`' Show help message and predefined settings
- '`-v`' Show version number, Copyright and NO-Warranty

DIAGNOSTICS

The exit status is 1 if the two given files differ, 0 if they are equal, -1 (255) in case of error.

DEFAULT NUMERIC FORMAT (for both files to compare):

Decimal point = '.'

Thousands separator = ','

Number of digits in each thousands group = 3

Positive sign = '+'

Negative sign = '-'

Prefix for decimal exponent = 'e'

Symbol used to denote the imaginary unit = 'i'

SOME EXPLANATIONS

The options '`-D`', '`-E`', '`-b`' and '`-q`' are used to hide part of the standard output of the program according to some rule.

The option '`-D`' triggers the "dummy mode". In this mode `numdiff` does not print the numerical differences. A numerical difference occurs when a given field turns out to be of numerical type in both files to compare, but it has in the second file a value differing from the one contained in the first file. The "dummy mode" is so called since when it is active, `numdiff` does not perform the job for which I created it.

The option '`-E`' triggers the "essential mode". In this mode `numdiff` only prints the numerical differences between the two files and, if there are some, the differences in the structure, which occur either when a line of text comes out to be formed by a different number of fields in the two files to compare or when the two files have a different number of lines.

The option '`-b`' triggers the "brief mode". In this mode `numdiff` does not print the differences in the structure of the two files.

Finally, the option '`-q`' triggers the "quiet mode". When in this mode `numdiff` does not print anything on the standard output. The "quiet mode" is useful if you only want to know whether a couple of files are equal or not. This information can be obtained by looking at the exit status of the program.

The option '`-S`' adds to the standard output of `numdiff` the following information:

- the largest absolute error in the set of relevant numerical differences and the corresponding relative error, and
- the largest relative error in the set of relevant numerical differences together with the corresponding absolute error.

For relevant numerical differences I mean those ones appearing in the output of `numdiff` when the options '`-D`' and '`-q`' are not used. The information printed by the option '`-S`' is not removed when this option is used together with '`-q`'.

The options '`-a`', '`-r`', '`-2`', '`-P`' and '`-N`' affect the way `numdiff` performs the comparisons between numerical values. Without any of these options, `numdiff` considers two numerical fields as equal when their difference is zero.

The option '`-a`' can be used to specify that two numerical fields must be considered equal as long as their absolute difference does not exceed a given threshold, which is supplied by the argument following the '`-a`' option.

The option '`-r`' can be used to specify that two numerical fields must be considered equal as long as their relative difference does not exceed a given threshold, which is supplied by the argument following the '`-r`' option.

The option '`-2`' is only meaningful when both '`-a`' and '`-r`' are present on the command line. If the user specifies a non-zero tolerance threshold for both absolute and relative error by using both '`-a`' and '`-r`', `numdiff` adopts this behavior: it considers equal two numerical fields as long as at least one between absolute and relative error does not exceed the corresponding threshold. With the option '`-2`' `numdiff` regards two numerical values as equal only if both absolute and relative error do not exceed the threshold of tolerance. For instance, if *file1* contains the unique line

```
100
```

and *file2* the line

```
100.00012
```

then the output of the command '`numdiff` *`file1 file2`*' will be

```
----------------
##1       #:1   <== 100
               ==> 100.00012
@ Absolute error = 1.2000000000e-4, Relative error = 1.2000000000e-6

+++  File "file1" differs from file "file2"
```

the output of the commands '`numdiff -a 1.0e-4` *`file1 file2`*' and '`numdiff -r 1.0e-6` *`file1 file2`*' will be the same, while '`numdiff -a 1.0e-4 -r 1.3e-6` *`file1 file2`*' and '`numdiff -a 1.3e-4 -r 1.0e-6` *`file1 file2`*' will print the message

```
+++  Files "file1" and "file2" are equal
```

since the actual relative error is 1.2e-6 < 1.3e-6, the actual absolute error is 1.2e-4 < 1.3e-4, and it is sufficient that one of them does not exceed the tolerance specified on the command line to make `numdiff` consider equal the two compared values. However, the commands '`numdiff -a 1.0e-4 -r 1.3e-6 -2` *`file1 file2`*' and '`numdiff -a 1.3e-4 -r 1.0e-6 -2` *`file1 file2`*' will print the message

```
----------------
##1       #:1   <== 100
               ==> 100.00012
@ Absolute error = 1.2000000000e-4, Relative error = 1.2000000000e-6
```

```
+++  File "file1" differs from file "file2"
```

since the option '`-2`' makes `numdiff` regard two values as equal only if both absolute and relative difference do not exceed the corresponding threshold of tolerance.

The option '`-P`' makes `numdiff` consider two values equal whenever the second one, i.e the one coming from the file specified as last on the command line, is less or equal than the first one, which is the value coming from the file specified as first on the command line. If the values to compare are complex numbers, saying that the second one is less or equal than the first one means that both real and imaginary part of the second one are not greater than the real part and, respectively, the imaginary part of the first one.

Finally, the option '`-N`' makes `numdiff` consider two values equal whenever the second one, i.e the one coming from the file specified as last on the command line, is greater or equal than the first one, which is the value coming from the file specified as first on the command line. If the values to compare are complex numbers, saying that the second one is greater or equal than the first one means that both real and imaginary part of the second one are not less than the real part and, respectively, the imaginary part of the first one.

The options '`-I`', '`-l`', '`-o`', '`-h`' and '`-v`' do not require further explanations. The options '`-l`' and '`-o`' are only supplied for the users of some poorly designed operating systems (like MSDog or MSWindoze), whose default shell does not allow the redirection of standard error and standard output. The option '`-I`' has no effect on the outcome of numerical comparisons.

Several things must be told about the option '`-s`'. First, it will be better if you will always quote the set of the delimiters, just as in the next examples:

```
numdiff -s ' \t\n,;:.' file1 file2
numdiff -s ' \t\n\r\f\v"\:;' file1 file2
numdiff -s `` \t\n''' file1 file2
```

I recommend you actually to always use the single quote character (') to enclose the list of the delimiters, since in this way you will prevent any substitution or handling of characters by the shell.

`numdiff` recognizes and interprets the following sequences of characters within the argument passed to the option '`-s`':

- '`\f`' form feed
- '`\n`' newline
- '`\r`' carriage return
- '`\t`' horizontal tab
- '`\v`' vertical tab

since these characters are often used as delimiters in files containing numerical data and they could not be included directly in the set of delimiters. Therefore, by passing the string '`\t\n,;:.`' as argument for the option '`-s`', one tells `numdiff` use as field delimiters the characters **blank**, **horizontal tab**, **newline**, **comma**, **semicolon**, **colon** and **dot**. Passing '`\t\n`' as argument to the option '`-s`' is the same as not using at all the option '`-s`', since **blank**, **horizontal tab** and **newline** are the default field delimiters. In the list of field delimiters the character **backslash** ('`\`') is always treated in a special way. If followed by '`f`', '`n`', '`r`', '`t`' and '`v`' it is combined with the subsequent character and interpreted in the way we have just seen. Otherwise, the **backslash** is coupled with the following character and then removed. In particular, if you want to specify the **backslash** itself as field delimiter, you have to put **two backslashes** ('`\\`') in the list of delimiters. Therefore, the delimiters specified by the command line

```
numdiff -s' \t\n\\\"' file1 file2
```

are **blank**, **horizontal tab**, **newline**, **backslash** and **double quote** since '`\\`' and '`\"`' are interpreted by `numdiff` as '`\`' and '`"`'.

Even if I have recommended to enclose the set of delimiters in single quotes, there is one case in which you will be constrained to use the double quote character (’’) to enclose the set of field delimiters, just as in one of the previous examples. However you must take into account that in this case the shell could make some substitutions on the command line before executing `numdiff`. For instance, if your shell is GNU bash, then (citing the man page of GNU bash)

> Enclosing characters in double quotes preserves the literal value of all characters within the quotes, with the exception of ‘$’, ‘‘’, and ‘\’. The characters ‘$’ and ‘‘’ retain their special meaning within double quotes. The backslash retains its special meaning only when followed by one of the following characters: ‘$’, ‘‘’, ‘"’, ‘\’, or **<newline>**. A double quote may be quoted within double quotes by preceding it with a backslash . . . The special parameters * and @ have special meaning when in double quotes . . .

Therefore, if the set of delimiters is formed by ‘ ’, ‘\t’, ‘\n’, ‘\’ and ‘"’ and you decide to enclose them in double quotes, then the `numdiff` command line should be

```
numdiff -s'' \t\n\\\\\"'' file1 file2
```

and not

```
numdiff -s'' \t\n\\\"'' file1 file2
```

Indeed, in this last case the shell would replace the string

‘ \t\n\\\"’

with

‘ \t\n\"’

and then `numdiff` would take ‘ ’, ‘\t’, ‘\n’ and ‘"’ as field delimiters.

A last advice about the use of the option ‘-s’. I recommend you to always put **newline** (on Unix© and Unix-like operating systems, like GNU©) and **carriage return** (on MS-Dog/MSWindoze) in the set of field delimiters. Otherwise, these characters would be included in all the fields staying at the end of a line and this would cause some undesirable effects. For instance, a number put at the end of a line would not be considered as a numerical field by `numdiff`, since `numdiff` would consider the final **newline** as part of the field which then would be qualified as non-numerical. Maybe in the future I will modify `numdiff` in order to remove the mandatory specification of **newline** as field delimiter.

The options ‘-#’, ‘-d’, ‘-t’, ‘-g’, ‘-p’, ‘-n’, ‘-e’ and ‘-i’ are only meaningful if `numdiff` has been built with the support for Multiple Precision Arithmetic, see Chapter 3 [Installing], page 7. If this is not the case, then `numdiff` will simply ignore them and, for what concerns the numeric format, it will always use the default one for both files to compare while the precision of the computations will be the one chosen when `numdiff` was compiled. You can know whether `numdiff` has or has not been compiled with the support for Multiple Precision Arithmetic through the option ‘-v’.

The option ‘-#’ lets the user specify the number of digits in the significands used in multiple-precision arithmetic. The default value is 35, the largest admissible value is 180. Take into account that an higher precision makes the execution of `numdiff` slower. This is particularly true when the files to compare contain a lot of numerical fields. Moreover, you have to care that `numdiff` can truncate the value of a numerical field if it has *too much* digits with respect to the current precision. To be precise, denoted by P the current value of the precision:

- If the number is written in common notation, then `numdiff` will consider, in addition to all the digits of the integer part, only the first P digits of the fractional part.
- If the value is written in scientific notation, then `numdiff` will only consider the first P digits of the fractional part of the mantissa.

The options '`-d`', '`-t`', '`-g`', '`-p`', '`-n`', '`-e`' and '`-i`' can be used to instruct `numdiff` about the numeric formats used in the files which it is going to compare. The two files to compare do not have to adopt the same numeric format, and then `numdiff` allows to specify different numeric formats for them. Indeed each of the options '`-d`', '`-t`', '`-g`', '`-p`', '`-n`', '`-e`' and '`-i`' can have as argument one or two characters (one or two digits if the option is '`-g`'). In the first case, the argument refers to both files to compare, in the second one the first character is for the file specified as first on the command line, the second character is for the file specified as last one on the command line. For instance, the option '`-d`' can be used to tell `numdiff` which character(s) is(are) used to mean the decimal point in the two files to compare. If you give the command '`numdiff -d_ file1 file2`', then `numdiff` will understand that both in *file1* and *file2* the character **underscore** ('`_`') is used in place of the default one ('`.`') to indicate the position of the decimal point in the numerical values. But if the command is '`numdiff -d_: file1 file2`', then `numdiff` will understand that the decimal point is indicated by the character **underscore** in *file1*, and by **colon** ('`:`') in *file2*.

Naturally, if you omit to use one of the options '`-d`', '`-t`', '`-g`', '`-p`', '`-n`', '`-e`' and '`-i`', then the corresponding attribute will take its default value, see [Default Numeric Format], page 10.

You must be really careful when you use one or more of these options. First, not all characters can be passed to them as arguments. For instance, the arguments of the option '`-g`' must be digits. The arguments of the options '`-d`' and '`-t`' must be punctuation marks (the punctuation marks are all the characters of the ASCII set for which the standard C function `ispunct` returns a non zero value), those ones of the options '`-p`', '`-n`', '`-e`' and '`-i`' must be graphical characters but digits (graphical characters are all the characters of the ASCII set for which the standard C function `isgraph` returns a non zero value).

Moreover, it is not possible to set the decimal point, the thousands separator, the positive sign, the negative sign, the prefix for decimal exponent and the symbol of the imaginary unit so that, for a same file, two or more of these characters come out to be equal. This rule also applies when you miss to explicitly set one of the previous arguments through the appropriate option. For instance, the command '`numdiff -d,. file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` abnormally terminate after printing the error message:

```
The numeric format specified for the first file is illegal,
the following symbols should be all different
while two or more of them are actually equal:

Decimal point = ‘,’
Thousands separator = ‘,’
Positive sign = ‘+’
Negative sign = ‘-’
Prefix for decimal exponent = ‘e’
Symbol used to denote the imaginary unit = ‘i’
```

Indeed, through the option '`-d`' we have told to `numdiff` that in the first file the decimal point is indicated by the character **comma**, but at the same time we have not modified the character in use to separate the groups of thousands, which has remained the default one, i.e. **comma**, for both files to compare. In this way, we have implicitly told to `numdiff` that in *file1* the character **comma** represents both decimal point and thousands separator. Since this is not reasonable, `numdiff` refuses to work. To avoid this problem it would be sufficient to explicitly notify to `numdiff` the thousands separator through the option '`-t`': '`numdiff -d,. -t., file1 file2`'. Of course, here we are supposing that the decimal point and the thousands separator are represented in *file1* by **comma** and **dot** respectively, in *file2* by **dot** and **comma**. I strongly suggest you that in writing a file you avoid the use of the same symbol to mean two different things (like would be using **comma** for both decimal point and thousands separator): it would be dummy, would not it ? :)

At last, it is possible (but it is stupid) to use as argument for the options '`-d`', '`-t`', '`-g`', '`-p`', '`-n`', '`-e`' and '`-i`' one of the characters used to separate the fields in the files to compare. In a such case `numdiff` does not complain but you have to consider that first it uses the set of field delimiters in order to split the files into fields and then it takes into account the numeric formats specified for the two files when it has to distinguish between numerical and non-numerical fields. However, it should never happen to specify as argument for one of the options '`-d`', '`-t`', '`-g`', '`-p`', '`-n`', '`-e`' and '`-i`' a character which is also used as field delimiter: again, in writing a file you should avoid (and people usually avoid it) to use the same symbol to mean two different things.

The options '`-L`' and '`-F`' can be used to restrict the comparison between files to a certain range of lines or to a certain group of fields. Without these options `numdiff` compares all the fields of all the lines.

With the option '`-L`' the user can make `numdiff` restrict the comparison to a certain line or to a certain range of lines. For instance '`numdiff -L 5 file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` compare only the fields in the fifth line of *file1* with the corresponding fields in the fifth line of *file2*.

Similarly '`numdiff -L 5-10 file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` compare only the fields which are contained in the lines from 5 to 10.

As you can see, you can specify a range of lines by using the notation '*n1*`-`*n2*', where *n1* and *n2* are the line numbers of the first and of the last line in the range of lines that you want to compare.

If you use two or more times the option '`-L`' with different specifications, then `numdiff` will only consider the last specification. Therefore '`numdiff -L 5-10 -L 6 -L 10-20 file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` compare the fields in the lines from 10 to 20.

With the option '`-F`' the user can make `numdiff` restrict the comparison to a certain field or to a certain group of fields. For instance '`numdiff -F 3 file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` compare only the third field of each line of *file1* with the third field of the corresponding line of *file2*.

Similarly '`numdiff -F 3-7 file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` compare, for every line in *file1* and *file2*, only the fields from the third one to the seventh one (both included).

As you can see, you can specify a range of fields by using the notation '*n1*`-`*n2*', where *n1* and *n2* are the field numbers of the first and of the last field in the range of fields that you want to compare.

By using two or more times the option '`-F`' you can extend the comparison to a group of fields formed by more ranges and/or single fields. For instance '`numdiff -F 5-10 -F 6 -F 12-20 -F 4 file1 file2`' will make `numdiff` compare the fourth field, the fields from the 5th one to the 10th one and the fields from the 12th one to the 20th one of every line. Care the difference with respect to the option '`-L`', since, as I told above, if you use two or more times the option '`-L`' only the last specification will be considered by `numdiff`.

Moreover, take into account that the largest field number that you can use while writing a specification for the option '`-F`' is 32768.

Of course, you can use the options '`-F`' and '`-L`' together. In this way you can restrict the comparison to a certain group of fields within a certain range of lines.

If you use the option '`-F`' and/or the option '`-L`' the exit status of `numdiff` will reflect the outcome of the restricted comparison. For instance, the exit status of '`numdiff -L 1-7 file1 file2`' will be 1 only if `numdiff` will have found a difference in the first seven lines of *file1* and *file2*. If the two files differ only in the lines after the seventh one, then `numdiff` will end with a zero exit status.

5 Warnings

- If Numdiff has been built with the support for multiple precision arithmetic, then, after reading a numerical field, it can truncate its value if this number has *too much* digits with respect to the current precision. To be precise, denoted by P the current value of the precision:

  If the number is written in common notation, then `numdiff` will consider, in addition to all the digits of the integer part, only the first P digits of the fractional part.

  If the value is written in scientific notation, then `numdiff` will only consider the first P digits of the fractional part of the mantissa.

  By current value of the precision I mean the integer value specified by the option '`-#`', or the default one (35) when this option is not in use.
- At the moment Numdiff can only manage text files with an 8-bit encoding (ASCII and ISO 8859-* text files). Sooner or later Numdiff might support UTF-8 encoding.
- Bug reports have to be sent to the address `ivprimi(at)libero.it` . Please, put Numdiff in the subject and indicate the version of Numdiff you are using, the version of the operating system you are running and, if you know it, the version of the compiler used to build Numdiff.

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