

# Re: Tab indentions on different platforms?

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- *From:* Thorsten Kampe <[thorsten@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:thorsten@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)>
  - *Date:* Sun, 30 Dec 2007 20:41:09 -0000
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\* Ben Finney (Sun, 30 Dec 2007 15:36:12 +1100)

Steven D'Aprano <[steve@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx](mailto:steve@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)> writes:

On Sat, 29 Dec 2007 15:29:25 +0000, Thorsten Kampe wrote:

I'd personally go for spaces because:

1. I don't like things I cannot see (control characters)

You can see spaces but not tabs? Your editor is pretty weird. In all the editors I've every used, both spaces and tabs show up as empty white space. (Or coloured space if I set the editor to use a coloured background.)

Though Thorsten could have been clearer, "thing that is not a space character but shows up as white space" is a near-enough approximation of "thing I cannot see".

2. I never had problems with spaces but plenty with tabs

Periodically, I ask on this list what problems people have with tabs. (I'm fully aware that mixing tabs and spaces is a Bad Thing.) I've had little luck getting any answer except "Tabs are bad, m'kay?".

Posit: White space is most often achieved by the user inserting a sequence of space characters (U+0020).

Posit: Tab characters (U+0009) are, in a majority of environments, rendered visually indistinguishable from a sequence of space characters.

Corollary: most readers will, when seeing a stretch of white space on

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a line, default to assuming that it represents a sequence of space (U+0020) characters.

Corollary: So when a file containing either spaces or tabs is edited in such an environment, the common way chosen by the user to get to the same indentation level as existing lines is to prepend space characters (using the spacebar or the Tab key or whatever facility the editor provides) until the indentation lines up visually -- remembering the caveat that tabs and space-sequences are visually indistinguishable in many environments.

Argument: The user will get an unexpected result when they do the obvious thing (prepend space characters) in a tabs-only file. With existing spaces-only files, the obvious way to get matching indentation gives the expected result.

Conclusion: Thus, using tabs-only is inferior to using spaces-only for indentation, because it violates the Principle of Least Astonishment <URL:[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle\\_of\\_least\\_astonishment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principle_of_least_astonishment)>.

Man, how did you know what I wanted to say (but failed to to express) :-) ? Anyway: the consequence of your well done argumentation is that someone editing Python code has to use a specialised editor to prevent screwing up tab indented code – and that's bad.

Thorsten

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