

Downloading Hollywood

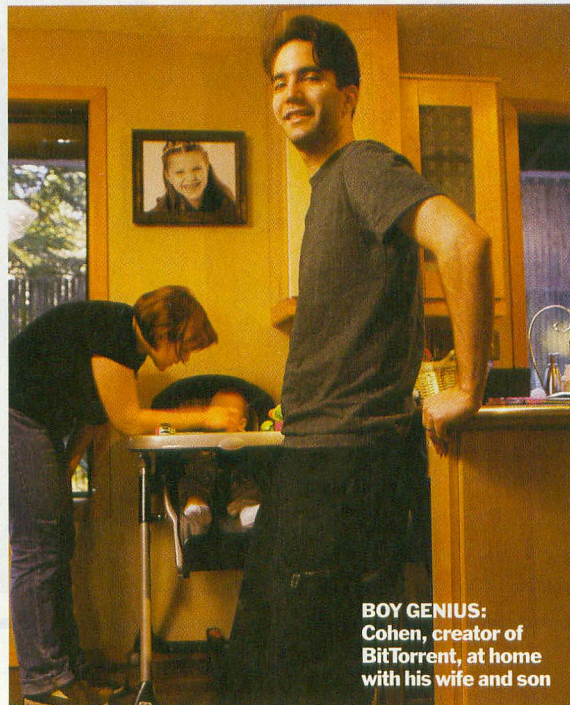
He's just a really smart computer geek. Why does this man have the movie industry running scared?

By **DAREN FONDA**

BRAM COHEN WAS AN UNUSUAL KID. While other first-graders were outside playing, he was writing computer code. By junior high, he could solve Rubik's Cube in a few minutes. A college dropout, he went on to co-found a hacker's convention in San Francisco. "I was always really weird," he says. Yet it was only two years ago, at age 27, that he learned why. Studying psychological conditions, he determined that he had Asperger syndrome, a mild form of autism, which explained his social difficulties and seemed tied to his obsession with puzzles. Cohen says he has trouble censoring his thoughts and making eye contact but has learned to control his symptoms using behavioral psychology. Now he has a new task: fending off accusations by the Hollywood film industry that a breakthrough piece of software he wrote is threatening the movie business the way Napster menaced—and subsequently revolutionized—the music world.

Cohen is the author of a free program called BitTorrent, which has been downloaded more than 20 million times and underpins a new generation of file-sharing technology. BitTorrent addresses a couple of the biggest problems of file sharing—that downloading bogs down when lots of folks access a file at once, and that some people leech, downloading content but refusing to share. BitTorrent eliminates the bottleneck by having everyone share little pieces of a file at the same time—a process techies call swarming. And the program prevents leeching since folks must upload a file while they download it. All this means that the more popular the content, the more efficiently it zips through the network—bad news if you're a movie studio trying to thwart the trading of hit films like *The Incredibles*. Says Andrew Parker of the Web-tracking firm CacheLogic: "It has turned the download world on its head."

Hollywood has good reason to be worried. BitTorrent downloads account for one-third of Internet traffic, according to CacheLogic. So-called tracker sites post links to movies, video games and episodes of TV shows, the content of which is then traded at turbocharged speeds. With more folks



BOY GENIUS: Cohen, creator of BitTorrent, at home with his wife and son

ROBBIE MCCLANNAN FOR TIME

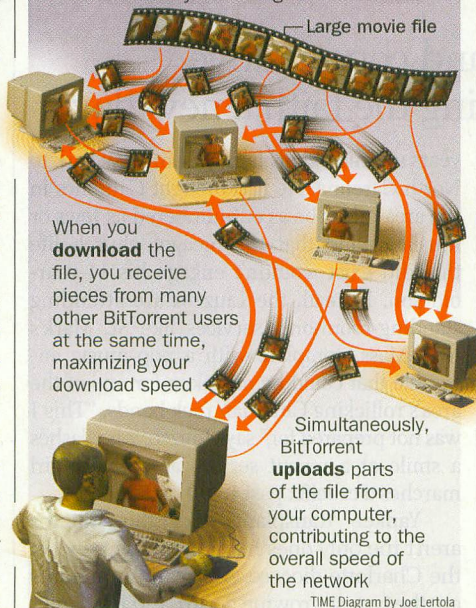
logging onto the Internet via broadband connections, online trading of movies, TV shows and porn is surging. Downloads of feature films alone are up 175% in the past year, says BigChampagne, another Web-tracking firm. In response, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) recently filed dozens of civil suits against tracker sites in the U.S. and Britain, as well as criminal complaints against sites in France, Finland and the Netherlands. The industry is hoping that in a case scheduled for next month, the U.S. Supreme Court will rule against firms that produce file-sharing software, such as Morpheus and Grokster. Neither Cohen nor BitTorrent is named in the lawsuit, although an MPAA spokesman says Cohen is under scrutiny for continuing to develop the software "and making it easy to steal copyright material."

Yet the BitTorrent universe may be a step ahead of the lawyers. For every tracker site that's legally challenged and goes dark, another pops up. As open-source software, BitTorrent does not reside on a central site that can be shut down, and it continually evolves as software writers tinker with the code. A recent upgrade, called Exeem, blends the swarming technology with the more robust search capabilities of earlier peer-to-peer software; instead of visiting tracker sites, users enter a title in a search box and Exeem scours the Web for the file—making it trickier for the piracy police to clamp down on scofflaws.

Cohen insists he didn't unleash BitTorrent to fuel movie piracy or get rich. He points out that the technology has an array of legitimate uses. A software firm like Red Hat uses it to send out updates of its Linux products, lowering its bandwidth costs, and nonprofit sites like *etree.org* use it to distribute live concerts, with the blessings of musicians. Cohen, who lives outside Seattle, supports his wife and two kids with donations from BitTorrent users and says he would be the last person to download content illegally. "People want to make an example of me," he says. Sure, he has a DESTROY CAPITALISM sticker on his PC. But he still gets his movies the old-fashioned way: with a mail-order subscription to Netflix. —**With reporting by Sandeep Kaushik/Seattle and Jeffrey Ressler/Los Angeles**

THE SWARMING EFFECT

Unlike older file-sharing programs, BitTorrent breaks up large files, such as movies, into small chunks and distributes them to many users in a frenzy of sharing



TIME Diagram by Joe Lertola