

'DO I LOOK LIKE A CEO?'

Bram Cohen has Asperger's, which makes it hard to deal with everyday life. Even so, he started his own company, BitTorrent

By Susan Berfield
Photograph by Eric Millette



Bram Cohen's brain works differently from most people's. He has Asperger's syndrome, a condition that keeps him rooted in the world of objects and patterns, puzzles and computers, but leaves him floating, disoriented, in the everyday swirl of human interactions. When Cohen was in his late twenties he sat on a wooden chair with a Dell keyboard on his lap for the better part of nine months writing a software program. In 2001 he introduced BitTorrent, an ingenious, disruptive, and controversial piece of technology that is available for free and lets people easily exchange huge amounts of digital information, from software

upgrades to videos. Pirated movies have always been the most popular files shared. They, along with more legitimate files, now generate about half of all traffic on the Internet.

BitTorrent brought Cohen fame and notoriety. It turned him into a folk hero and a Hollywood villain. Later, to reclaim the program for himself and possibly for some greater good, Cohen was obliged to become something else he had never considered: aboss. Four years ago, at age 29, he co-founded a company, BitTorrent, to build a business around his software. He got good money from venture capitalists but is still trying to find a convincing strategy.

For Cohen, this has been a fraught journey into the sometimes bewildering world of the office. The social conventions that ease everyday interactions can still elude him. He doesn't like to shake hands or wear shoes or make small talk. He often plays with a Rubik's Cube. Sometimes when he is outraged, or more often when he is fatigued, he bursts forth with unwelcome candor. He can be oblivious, lecturing on solar cells or economic theory or euphemisms until someone stops him.

Cohen's predicament is not so unusual. Asperger's, only formally recognized in the mid-1990s, is being diagnosed with increasing frequency. Many psychologists view it as a mild form of autism, though that definition is controversial; some advocates believe it is simply a different way of being. In the

coming years more people like Cohen will arrive in the workplace, and their presence will have significant consequences, perhaps most obviously in the way we communicate.

Cohen's childhood in Manhattan was one of isolation. He lived comfortably enough with his mother and father and younger brother, Ross, and they shared a vigorous intellectual life. But he had no friends. At 16, he could program in three languages. Yet he could not comprehend the social hierarchies of adolescence. "I was picked on a lot," he says. "There was something obviously wrong with me. But it wasn't acknowledged until I was much older that something had always been off-kilter. Were I to have to redo high school, I would just drop out immediately." He attended the State University of New York at Buffalo for one miserable year and then left.

"THIS IS STUPID"

Back in Manhattan, staying with his parents, he struggled in the working world as a computer programmer. "At first he would be enthusiastic, and then pretty *soon* he would tell the people who were running the startup they were doing things wrong," says his father, Barry, a writer who had returned to school to study computer science. "If they didn't listen to him—and they

Cohen in San Francisco, where his quirks aren't seen as a big deal

never did—he would say 'this is stupid' and he would quit."

By 1997 the code rush was on, and Cohen went west. In San Francisco he felt at ease, and even a bit elated, surrounded by other computer geeks. Here his trouble deciphering human complexities, his seeming indifference to social imperatives, and all his quirks of character were mostly viewed as beside the point. The point was what he could accomplish. In this, Silicon Valley is not as distinct a place as it might seem. Psychologists have noticed clusters of people with Asperger's wherever there is a concentration of high-tech companies.

It took Cohen a few years and several more startups before he discovered what he wanted to do: find an efficient way to share huge amounts of digital data. Napster and other peer-to-peer programs already allowed people to pass smaller music files from one computer to another. But big files would clog the system. The elegance of Cohen's solution is that as more people join a network, data move faster rather than slower. His software breaks files into pieces and scatters them on users' hard drives. When someone requests a movie, the software gathers the pieces from the nearest computers on the network and assembles them only once they reach their destination. This allows a file to download much more quickly.

Cohen was surprised that BitTorrent ushered in the golden era of movie piracy. "I was some dude working on some project," he says. "I couldn't anticipate the piracy. But I was very careful from the beginning to distance myself from it. There's only so much planning you can do for the effect on the Internet at large when you're just trying to get people to use your software."

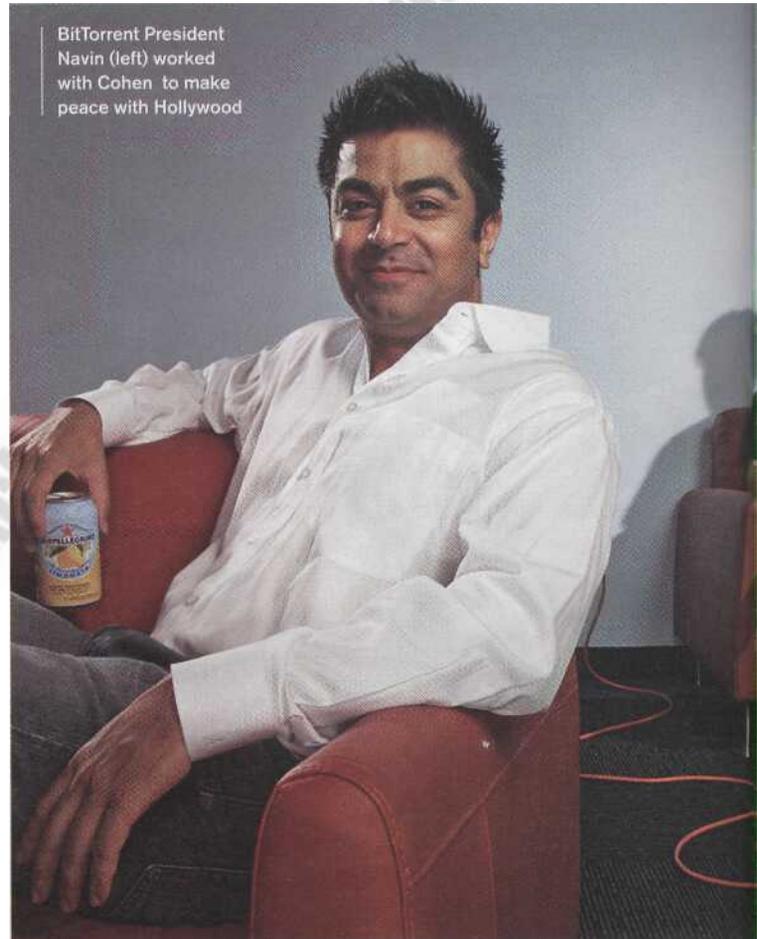
LEARNING EMPATHY

Cohen mostly enjoyed his newfound status. And it was amid this success that he was able to put a name to his lingering complaint. One afternoon in the summer of 2003 he was eating at a Mexican restaurant in Berkeley with his girlfriend, Jenna, and her young daughter. They were talking about empathy, a notion that baffled Cohen. "Then a baby cried, and my daughter turned and made a sad face," Jenna recalls. "He said, 'You mean like that?' I said, 'Yes, it's automatic.'" Not for Cohen, though, who told her that emotions seemed mysterious. Jenna, who had worked with autistic kids, suggested he might have Asperger's.

Cohen never sought a formal diagnosis but turned his considerable attention to the matter. He learned how to detect and mimic human expressions, follow social cues, maintain eye contact, flirt. He began pretending to be normal. "Then I realized how out of it I had been my entire life," he says. Jenna likens Bram to the android Data on *Star Trek*: "He'd add information to his social algorithm and practice until it became natural. He's graduated to being an eccentric nerd."

During the next year, Jenna and Bram had a son and were married. Cohen's father began pestering him to create a company around his hugely popular software. "And I kind of felt like I should do something," says Cohen, who was moving among various projects. A friend introduced him to Ashwin

Navin, who had worked at Goldman Sachs and Yahoo!, and along with Cohen's brother, they formed BitTorrent. Then they set out to make peace with the movie studios and bring in investors. In May 2005 pirated versions of the much-anticipated third *Star Wars* movie, *Revenge of the Sith*, were being swapped before the official release. Shortly after, Dean Garfield, the head of legal affairs at the Motion Picture Association of America, approached Cohen and Navin to see if they were serious about going legitimate. They began talking. In November of that year, BitTorrent and the MPAA announced a deal that was largely symbolic but did improve the company's reputation in Hollywood: BitTorrent agreed to remove links



that directed users to pirated movies. Cohen doesn't like to travel, but he went down to Los Angeles for the day.

Cohen and Navin also were meeting with venture capitalists. David Chao, a co-founder of DCM, a \$1.6 billion fund, had been using the software to share family videos and was intrigued by it. Cohen arrived at Chao's office for an initial presentation, took off his shoes, and announced that he had Asperger's. "It's one of the first things he tells most people," says Chao. "He wants to make sure there are no misunderstandings." Cohen said he wanted to run the company, mostly because he didn't trust anybody else to, but promised he'd one day bring in a more experienced leader. Navin would be

president. Chao agreed to invest \$8.75 million. At the first board meeting, Cohen worked on a Rubik's Cube while he was talking, recalls Chao. "He wasn't distracted, though. His hand was solving it." With someone else, Chao says, he might have said "Please don't play games while we're having a board meeting," but he didn't.

As Cohen and Navin began hiring employees, issues emerged. Ross, who was in charge of the engineers, didn't seem suited to the more structured environment being created. Bram fired him. "He just didn't work out," says Bram. The brothers haven't spoken much since, and Ross didn't return phone calls and e-mails.

Then there was Bram himself. He could be disruptive. He likes to talk and play with his puzzles. "We have to keep him contained so others can work," says Navin. "New employees didn't know they could tell him they had to get back to work." And his overly blunt but rarely ill-intentioned comments didn't always go over well. Ivy Hsu, the office manager, was the first person Cohen and Navin hired. One day Cohen said to her: "I don't understand the point of being detail-oriented.

new chief executive, Cohen dissed the process and some of the other candidates in his blog: "Just because you were approached about being BitTorrent's CEO doesn't necessarily mean that I'd ever heard of you. If I had ever heard of you, it doesn't necessarily mean that I thought you had the necessary experience — Even if I did think you had the necessary experience, it doesn't mean I wouldn't have gotten fuming mad at your name being suggested for any of a number of other reasons, including in some cases widely known lack of competence and morals." Heidrick doesn't talk about its clients and declined to comment about its work for BitTorrent.

The executive BitTorrent hired is Doug Walker, who had led graphics software company Alias Technology in Toronto. He is circumspect when it comes to Cohen but does say: "You're always going to have an honest conversation with Bram. To me that's fair, even if you may not always like it."

So does Bram Cohen's creation have a future? Some wonder if BitTorrent has missed its moment. Gaming companies are using the software to more swiftly and cheaply distribute their wares. Hollywood studios? Not so much. The company's reputation for piracy may be part of the problem.

But media companies also are finding ways to deliver entertainment themselves. All of which has left Cohen & Co. retrenching—in mid-August they laid off 20% of

60 employees—and struggling to find a way forward.

Still, Cohen's original brainstorm has carried him far. And even if his company falters, or his attention is diverted to solving a different problem, his software will be used by millions of people around the world.

COHEN LIKES TO TALK AND PLAY WITH HIS PUZZLES. "WE HAVE TO KEEP HIM CONTAINED SO OTHERS CAN WORK," SAYS NAVIN

Only the dumb people in this world focus on small details." Hsu has since learned how to deal with him. "You have to communicate according to the rules he understands," she says. "You can cut him off, you can walk away. There is no point in sugarcoating things, because if you do, he may miss the whole point. You just tell him: 'Bram, you're wrong. Bram, don't say things like that.' Usually you would never do that to your boss."

By the end of 2006 it was clear that Cohen's days as CEO were coming to an end. Some founders unprofitably delay this rite of passage. For Cohen, it couldn't come soon enough: "Do I look like a CEO to you? Just saying." BitTorrent was ready to sell a commercial version of the software to media, gaming, and tech companies and to launch a consumer site with licensed content. Navin and Cohen had also interested another investor, Ping Li, a partner at venture capital firm Accel, an early backer of Facebook. Li agreed to put in nearly \$20 million to help BitTorrent expand. There would be accounts to supervise, strategies to devise, performance reviews to conduct, meetings to attend. Cohen was bored just thinking about it all.

Giving up the post of chief executive to become chief scientific officer wasn't hard for Cohen, but the nine-month search for his replacement, led by the recruiting firm Heidrick & Struggles, was full of frustration. After BitTorrent found a

BUSINESSWEEK.COM | To learn more about how BitTorrent's Bram Cohen manages with Asperger's, watch a video interview at www.businessweek.com/go/tv/autism

Business Exchange

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In Defense of Piracy

In an essay in *The Wall Street Journal*, Stanford Law School professor Lawrence Lessig argues that our copyright laws are confusing, inefficient, and sometimes nonsensical. Lessig, who is on the board of Creative Commons and author of the forthcoming book *Remix*, believes that the war on peer-to-peer file sharing is a failure. "After a decade of fighting, the law has neither slowed file sharing nor compensated artists," he writes. "We should sue not kids, but for peace."

To read Lessig's essay, go to: <http://bx.businessweek.com/online-video/reference>

