

Torrents for Noobz

By B-Tech
Forum Technology Writer

Whether you are new to the internet or have never heard of BitTorrent, this article is for you. BitTorrent, which we will refer to as torrent, is a protocol for transferring large files or collections of files on the internet. A torrent file ends with the file extension .torrent, this allow them to be easily recognized by which ever program you decide to use to download.

It works by allowing tons of people that have specific files to share them with anyone that wants the files. This is accomplished by sending many small packets that get collected by your Torrent client (uTorrent, Vuze, Shareaza, LimeWire, etc.). The actual content of a torrent file is a list of all of the places where your torrent program can find people that have other parts of the files. The places that keep track of where everyone with a certain file on the internet is called a Tracker.

When someone gets an entire copy of the files they change from a peer to a seeder. A peer is also known as a leech, someone that doesn't have all of the files that are in the torrent file. When you finish downloading something you are then a seeder. When you are using torrents, it is generally polite to seed, which means when you finished getting all of the data, keep the files available so other people can download them off of you. And that is a little primer of how BitTorrent works.

Now, torrents themselves aren't illegal in anyway, same as VHS or DVD. It is just a medium that can be used to distribute content. The problem is that people are distributing content (albums, movies, TV) that are not theirs to distribute. There are two large organizations that are devoted to making sure people end up paying for the software they use. These companies are called the RIAA and MPAA. In the past few months, however, they seem to have calmed down and been mostly ignoring the average home user. But they are still out there, so beware.

That brings me to protection. You want to make sure you are protected, meaning they big bad guys don't come a knockin'. The program called Peer Guardian (PG) for windows is a great start. It blocks the bad guys from connecting to you and seeing if you are downloading their content. There is a version of PG for about every operating system (Windows, Linux, MacOS). In addition to the bad guys, it prevents malicious trackers and seeders from poisoning your computer with bad content (fakes, viruses, spyware).

To keep your computer safe you always want to have an up to date virus scanner. That means that expired subscription of Norton Internet Security 2003 you have is doing you no good at all. Download.com, a trusted site, has many great anti-malware programs (mal = bad en espanol). AVG is a good freeware virus scanner for home use.

Trust is important in the Torrent community. If you download content from a source you don't know or trust you are always playing a game of Russian roulette with your computer's life. Movies and music are generally safe, very few viruses or malware come in directly via a movie or music file. The exception is music or movies that tell you that you need a program to view or play a specific file. This is usually a con to get you to install something nasty. Wma and Wmv files can also have licensing requirements, meaning the file itself will send you to a website. This goes back to the trust issue, no legit file will ever require you to take this action. If you ever see something like that happen, give up, delete the file and try again. Users that have posted a lot of torrents to a torrent site are usually legit. There will be 10-100 comments on the torrent site about the quality and functionality of the content of the torrent file.

Always read the comments.

Another thing to watch out for is fake torrents posted by people that are trying to mess with you. These can be identified by torrents that have 21000 seeders and leechers simultaneously. I have never seen even a legitimate torrent have more than 10000 people on it at one time. This should raise a red flag.

If you plan on downloading programs or software, know that when you install that software, whatever was in the file will be on your computer. This is a risk you take with getting games and programs. It goes back to trust and the comments. Usually if a file is bad someone will comment saying virus, or doesn't work. Some of these people don't know what they are talking about, but I would still heed any warning you see in the comments unless you can prove them wrong yourself.

BitTorrent is a powerful protocol, so much so that it is responsible for 35% of all internet traffic according to Torrentfreak. As with most powerful tools it is up to the user to make decisions about how they want to use it.

I guess what I am saying is don't pirate content. If you do want to download a movie or music find a way to get some money into the hands of the creators of that content. The attitude of the community is that information wants to be free, but that doesn't mean that the people that create the content we love shouldn't get their dues. In short, show some love, to the creators and the community. It is all about sharing. Good luck and be safe.