BITTORRENT
FROM SCRATCH

BUILDING A PRODUCTION-GRADE BITTORRENT CLIENT IN PYTHON

PROTOCOLS
Bencoding &
Peer Wire Protocol

DISCOVERY
DHT, PEX, Magnet
Links & Trackers

DATA TRANSFER
Pieces, Choking,
Rarest First & More

REAL-WORLD ENGINEERING
Security, Performance
& Production Design

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BitTorrent from Scratch

Building a Production-Grade BitTorrent Client in Python

Steve T. Team Publications

This book is available at https://leanpub.com/bittorrentfromscratch

This version was published on 2026-07-03

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Building a Production-Grade BitTorrent Client in Python

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Introduction: Why Build a BitTorrent Client?

On July 2, 2001, a programmer named Bram Cohen released the first implementation of the BitTorrent protocol. It was written in Python, and its purpose was audacious: to solve one of the hardest problems on the internet, how to distribute large files efficiently without relying on a single server. The design was elegant in its simplicity. A file is chopped into pieces, each piece is downloaded from multiple sources simultaneously, and every downloader becomes an uploader. As more people join a swarm, the system gets faster rather than slower. This counterintuitive property, where demand strengthens supply, is what makes BitTorrent unique among file-distribution protocols.

Twenty-five years later, the protocol remains relevant. It powers software distribution for major Linux distributions, game updates, scientific data archives, and content delivery at massive scale. The protocol has evolved from a simple HTTP-tracker-based design into a rich ecosystem encompassing decentralized peer discovery, peer exchange, encryption, and IPv6 support. Yet the core remains the same: TCP connections between peers exchanging pieces over a wire protocol that fits in a few hundred bytes per message.

Building a BitTorrent client from scratch is one of the most comprehensive exercises in systems programming you can undertake. It forces you to reason about network protocols, concurrency, data integrity, distributed algorithms, and security–all at once. You will need to handle partial failures gracefully, manage limited resources under load, and communicate with heterogeneous peers across a global, untrusted network.

This book is a complete guide to building that client in Python. We will start with the fundamentals: what BitTorrent is, why it works, and how its pieces fit together at a high level. Then we will dive into each protocol component, implementing it step by step and explaining both the "how" and the "why." By the end, you will have a fully functional, standards-compliant BitTorrent client that can download torrents via trackers, DHT, PEX, and magnet links.

The code in this book uses Python 3.11+ features including modern asyncio patterns, dataclasses, and type hints. We use `asyncio` for network I/O,

`aiofiles` for asynchronous file operations, and the standard library's `struct`, `hashlib`, and `socket` modules for protocol-level work. The client is designed to interoperate with major existing clients such as qBittorrent, Transmission, and uTorrent, and we verify this interoperability throughout.

Here is what you will find in the chapters ahead:

- **Protocol fundamentals:** Bencoding, torrent metadata, info hashes, and magnet links form the data layer of BitTorrent.
- **Tracker communication:** Both HTTP and UDP tracker protocols for peer discovery.
- **The DHT:** A Kademlia-based distributed hash table that enables trackerless torrents.
- **The peer wire protocol:** The core handshake and message exchange between peers.
- **Piece selection and choking:** Algorithms that determine who gets what data and when.
- **Integrity and I/O:** SHA-1 verification, sequential file writing, and async file operations.
- **Supplementary discovery:** PEX, LPD, and magnet link metadata exchange.
- **Security and modern networking:** Encryption, IPv6, NAT traversal, and peer prioritization.
- **Performance and production quality:** Bandwidth shaping, logging, configuration, and optimization.
- **Testing and interoperability:** Unit tests, integration tests with real swarms, and debugging tools.
- **Packaging and the future:** Distribution, legal considerations, and what comes next for P2P.

Each chapter contains working code, protocol diagrams, references to the relevant BitTorrent Enhancement Proposals (BEPs), and exercises you can try. The code is not a toy: it handles real network errors, implements the full protocol specification, and is structured for maintainability and extension.

Let us begin.

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Chapter 6: Choking, Unchoking, and Piece Selection

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