ONLINE *exclusive!!*

The Scene

By Ayon Nandi

Ian Dallas, SM '00, is a Yalie with an interesting pet project: "organizing chaos."
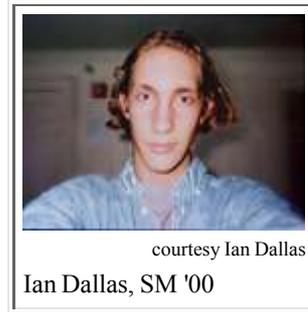
According to Dallas, who goes by the online moniker *neofish9*, "organizing chaos" is the purpose of the website he, along with a couple of friends from outside of Yale, built and maintains --

courtesy Ian Dallas

Ian Dallas, SM '00

Scenelink, a forum for the underground Internet culture, which consists of a generation of young computer users that trade files over the Internet.

"I wanted to provide a service"

The aspects of design and communication are what attracted Dallas to the idea of creating a website and led him to start the Scenelink project about a year ago. In addition to "organizing chaos," Dallas's website helps him apply his interests in design and communication. These two interests have also led him to work for *The Yale Record* and, for the past year, to design the *Yale Daily News Magazine*. In addition, he uses his design skills to create digital art and graphics, many of which appear in *The Record* and *YDNM*.

Dallas, however, wanted more out of his web project: "I wanted to create something that would contribute something...I wanted to provide a service," he said. Being a member of the underground Internet scene, Dallas saw a need for the services he could provide through the website.

The other factor in choosing the Scenelink project was the audience. Dallas recognized the difficulty in finding a large target audience that also had a strong online presence; the underground Internet culture seemed a perfect choice since "the audience [for Scenelink] is already connected."

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The underground culture is centered on trading files over the Internet. Each file is released by a group of people that cooperate to make the artwork, graphics, and the copies of software that go into the files. These files can be artwork, graphics, games, and other software. For example, in order to make a "warez" file, or a file that includes copies of pirated software, one person must extract the files from the program CD, another person must compress the size of the files to a manageable size, and so on. Certain groups have "rich histories," according to Dallas, going back "15 years or more... They started on Commodores."

This online community refers to itself as "the scene." Dallas joined the scene while still in high school, as the operator of a BBS. BBS's (Bulletin Board Services) served as hubs for the scene; they allowed people to download and trade files as well as to chat with others in the scene.

After spending much time with the BBS, Dallas discovered IRC (Internet Relay Chat), a real-time chat program that members of the scene use to talk, socialize, and, most importantly, trade files. IRC introduced a new element of speed to the scene, along with a new element of competition. With the shortened time frame of IRC, groups began to compete more intensely on how fast they could release a certain piece of software. "Everything was so much faster," Dallas said. "On a BBS, a 30-day-old file is considered OK. But on IRC, a day-old file is considered old."

With the speed of IRC came decentralization. Dallas described the paradoxical situation: "Everyone is instantaneously connected with everyone else, but there is no connection at the center between people...so no one really knows what is going on beyond their limited vision."

Enter Scenelink

Scenelink aims to organize the millions of communications on IRC into a central location (a hub) where participants in the scene can check in every day and see what their peers are up to. On Scenelink, groups can post announcements of when and what they are releasing, and can also check on what other groups are releasing. This includes information on warez files, sound files, art files, and much more. In addition, Scenelink provides monthly content, in the form of longer articles, features, and interviews with members of groups that report on trends and issues in the scene, written by the staff of Scenelink (which includes Dallas and a few online friends). "So many people trade files without knowing how much work these groups put into the release... Hopefully, [on Scenelink] they can see that there is

some kind of community, that there are people behind it," Dallas said.

Dallas has a number of goals for the future of Scenelink. Foremost among them is greater exposure. He hopes that Scenelink will be able to cater to new inductees to the scene as well as people already in the scene.

He also plans to automate the updating of the page. At present, Dallas takes each submission from the groups, then copies, edits, and pastes it onto his page. Soon, he hopes to automate the process with CGI or PERL scripting, so that Scenelink "becomes more of a machine, and less of a handmade thing."

Finally, Dallas hopes to expand the Scenelink's forum feature. A few months ago, when the Federal Government rewrote the software copyright laws to place the threat of prosecution on the heads of warez traders everywhere, Dallas put the potential of Scenelink as a forum to work. Previously, the government could not prosecute software pirates unless they made a profit. However, since most warez traders never ask for money, only for other files, the government could not prosecute anyone. However, the law was rewritten, expanding the meaning of "profit" to include the type of trading that occurs online. So for Issue #3 of Scenelink, Dallas collected responses and opinions from numerous groups and posted them on the website, creating an online discussion. It turned out to be a lot of work, however, and he hopes that in the future, he can automate the process of creating such online discussions. Basically, Dallas hopes to "completely remake Scenelink for the last time," in the near future, from its current structure of monthly content supplemented by daily, shorter updates.

The underground Internet culture has been both the audience for Scenelink and the basis of its success. Ian Dallas, with Scenelink, seems to have accomplished his goal of creating "an online community."

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