

ByteNoise

The Digital Revolution, Part Three: Copyright

Capitalism is based upon the principle of moving physical objects that, by their nature, cannot be copied.

The hacker spirit is based upon the principal of sharing information that, by its nature, cannot be restrained.

The problem, if you can call it that, is that products are being digitised. This process transforms them from objects into information. Despite this, they retain their legal status as products.

Property is any object that someone has claimed as their own. As absurd as it may seem to an outsider that people may claim ownership of land that was there billions of years before they were, that's the system we use. It makes more sense to demand monetary compensation for the effort you put into making something, of course. There's a big difference between finding edible fruit, actively toiling a field in order to harvest crops, and preparing a sandwich using a loaf of bread you've bought down the market.

At every step of the way, different people contribute different skills, working together as a team to make products. As our society progresses, these skills get increasingly specialised. Generally speaking, this is a good system. From this point of

view, it makes sense that if you put effort into arranging words, paints or musical notes into a particular pattern that's either useful or entertaining to other people, you should be rewarded financially by those people for your efforts, in exchange for copies of your arrangements. That way, you can afford to engage in the activity full time.

The problem comes along when someone has the ability to perfectly replicate what you made without having to spend anywhere near as much effort making that replica. The printing press introduced the ability for one person to copy another person's book perfectly. Naturally, someone making such a copy didn't pay the author anything for the privilege because the author wasn't required in order to make the copy, only the original. This became illegal, with the introduction of the Stationers' Register, later replaced by the first official copyright law, the Statute of Anne. There then followed a cat-and-mouse game between new technologies that copied information and extensions to the copyright laws, leading all the way up to the current issue with the Internet.

It is a tricky question as to whether someone who invested time and effort in creating something original should have the right to profit from every copy of it that's made, even if those copies don't cost anything to produce. It's also a tricky question as to whether that original author should be allowed to forbid other people from making new copies of their work at all. Most governments currently seem to favour the rights of a work's original author, opposing the rights of others to do what they like with that work, such as sharing it freely.

I am certainly in favour of encouraging people to create things. However, it seems that attempts to prevent people from copying them, both via the legal system and via technology, are getting

increasingly out of hand. Large corporations that make entertainment have an annoying knack of crippling their own officially sanctioned copies of their works, in order to protect those products from you, the consumer. Of course, this tactic only gives the consumer more of an incentive to get the simpler version of the same work that other people are giving away.

There is also a big difference, in my opinion, between claiming to have created what someone else actually made (plagiarism), profiting from someone else's work by copying it without their consent (professional piracy), and freely sharing someone else's work without their consent (amateur piracy). Punishing people for sharing things seems to go against the spirit of a civilisation.

Back to [The Digital Revolution, Part Two: E-books](#) | [On to The Digital Revolution, Part Four: The Future of Entertainment](#)