Piracy…Again

The ubiquity and normality of online access in the developed world is a boon for many of us, especially for consumers. We can locate items we want or need from sources all over the world, compare prices to find the best deals, and arrange for our purchases to arrive at our front doors, all without leaving our desks (or armchairs). For those of us who engage in research, we can (virtually) walk into an astonishing array of archives, libraries, museums, and other repositories, explore or rummage through their holdings, and locate information relatively quickly. Often, it would require years of work and miles of travel to accomplish the same goals and, very often, we also find records and information that we might never even know was available. Even if the data we seek is not accessible online, our preparation for archival research is more thorough, making the actual visits much more effective.

There is, however, a darker side to this environment. Easy access to data combined with the ready availability of technologies facilitated by online distribution make illegal duplication of copyrighted material, both intellectual and physical, all too simple. The sheer vastness of the scope of material open to online access also breeds a belief that everything should be freely available and, thus, lowers the threshold for appreciating the necessity and significance of copyright for the development and distribution of new ideas and objects.

Exactly two years ago I wrote and published an editorial addressing this issue. The Nautical Research Guild shortly thereafter also issued a strong statement of policy against piracy, which it also published on the modelshipworld.com website. I know that none of us involved in this process were so naïve as to think that such action would stop piracy, but the problem is of sufficient gravity that it is incumbent on the Guild and its Journal to make strong efforts to educate people about it.

Piracy has serious impacts. Authors who devote years to researching and writing their books, drafters who meticulously research and prepare the plans we use for our models, innovators who develop tools and fixtures that ease or expedite our projects, designers who create the ever-expanding selection of kits we enjoy, all suffer when pirates come along and, without doing any of the work these individuals undertook to make these things for us, duplicate it and, because they stole the creators' labor, sell it cheaply, destroying the financial benefits these creative people deserve.

The pace of piracy has not diminished significantly. In some parts of the world, the pirating of books has reached the point that, quite often, pirate editions appear on booksellers' shelves before the actual publishers can ship their products and is leading publishing firms to quit the business entirely. Many kit designers and manufacturers are reluctant to release anything but very limited information about their current projects for the same reason. This can cause them difficulties; quite a few of the better regarded manufacturers appreciate the value of presenting prototypes so that experts on the subjects can give feedback on the accuracy of their work. Fear of having their work stolen inhibits this and results in potentially less accurate kits.

The fundamental point about successful piracy, however, is not the pirates' ease of access to other people's property but the willingness of thousands of people to buy goods or services they have stolen. Every time one of us buys a pirated item, our short-term excitement over a bargain hastens the demise of innovation, the creators lose and so, ultimately, do we. While such a buyer is unlikely to face legal consequences, I and the Guild board urge everyone to think carefully about the long-term ramifications of purchasing pirated goods.

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