

Do Androids Dream of Electric Memes?

by Fred Coppersmith

Author's Note: This short essay was originally posted as a response to a question posed on the Invisible City (www.invisible-city.com/) Writers and Copyright Agora on August 28, 2000. The Agora no longer exists in this form.

I've always had some trouble with this "information wants to be free" mentality perpetuated by the internet and so many of its users. It seems to me like it's an excuse for a laxity of law and a renunciation of the idea of ownership: "You didn't write that story, it belongs to the world." "That isn't your song, it's part of our chorus."

The idea that the internet is some burgeoning brave new world where everyone's a prophet and the architect of the cooperative dream...well, certainly it's nice, it's non-threatening, but it's also an oversimplified and flawed view of that world. Because the Internet isn't always the shiny happy global village we might like to think, and not everyone who buys a ticket to the artists' commune has everyone else's best interests at heart.

Some of us, I'm sorry, want the credit (or blame) that our creative efforts have earned us without worrying that whatever it is that we've created—be it a novel, or a painting, or a blueprint, or a song—will be misrepresented, distorted, or, worse, stolen right out of our hands.

If you renounce copyright and accept the mantle of "meme breeder" and all that it entails, can you then be angry when someone takes what you've created and alters it for his or her own use, reshapes your vision in strange new ways, attempts perhaps even to profit from it while claiming to have originated the meme in the first place? Steven Wright quotations are misreported all the time; why should your work fare any better online without the protection of copyright? Without a stamp that says "this is mine, please get permission before you use it", what protection do you really have against theft?

So you ask, is it substantially different to pass a novel around person-to-person than to send it to others via e-mail? And I think it all comes down to this: volume. You acknowledge it, then brush it aside because...well, I suspect because it's a little too obvious to seem relevant. We're all aware that e-mail ups the ante, implies a much larger readership over a shorter period of time, but is it really so different than a lending library or sharing your own copy of a novel with friends? Well, yeah, it is. One is a social interaction of sorts, a personal interchange of ideas, of memes, of whatever; the other, however well-intentioned, is just distribution. The rapid ease of electronic communication like e-mail renders "person-to-person" an outmoded concept. Share a novel with friends and you may convince someone to buy his or her own copy. Share a novel via e-mail and you'll likely convince several someones that paying for books, too, is an outmoded concept. Why buy milk when you can get the cow for free?

Frankly, that's my trouble with Napster as well. Sure it's cool, it's neat—it's a super-keen toy—but how could it possibly do anything but hurt record sales, sales upon which artists really do depend? Yes, record companies have very deep pockets, and art should not be about commerce or the bottom line, but we do not live in a socialist utopia where we are judged solely on the merit of our work. If I produce an album which very few people buy because it's readily available free of charge at Napster or the like, how soon before I'm flipping burgers or waiting tables instead of making music? Why should the artist be deprived all control? If Metallica or any other band doesn't want their music distributed, wants to invoke their copyright, then Napster has a responsibility to police its users and make sure that that copyright is enforced. I'd be a little dismayed if the link you provide (<http://david.weekly.org/code/napster-metallica.php3>) were meant as an encouragement to disregard copyright law or Napster's responsibility to help uphold it.

While Jeremy is right that anyone who writes for love of money is a fool, it would be nice to make a living at what I love to do. It would be nice to enjoy the fruits of my labor. I wish the satisfaction of a job well done would be enough to pay my electric bill and put bread on my table, but I won't be that kind of fool

either. We live in a society where money matters, and if you think that's deplorable go out and try to change it. But don't ignore it or tell me that I'm silly for wanting to exercise some control over the memes original to me, to my life. I believe in intellectual property. I believe in giving credit where credit is due. I believe in copyright law, not because I want to get rich or appear clever (I imagine I'll never be either of these), but because I want to know that what I write is still mine, that for better or worse it is my voice that is heard, and that I have some say in how that voice is rebroadcast in the future.

But, hey, that's just me.