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COMIC BY COLBI LORANGER, ASSOCIATE ARTIST EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Daily
OPINION

IF BUYING ISN'T OWNING,
PIRACY ISN'T STEALING



A laptop with a USB device connected to it. USB storage devices are sometimes used to carry pirated software.

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There used to be a time when buying a movie meant owning a movie.

A DVD you bought two decades ago would play the exact same way it did back then. The production could go bankrupt, the studio could be lit ablaze, the licensing agreement could expire, but that wouldn't change the fact that your copy was yours.

Increasingly, that relationship with media no longer exists.

Movies and shows are moved to giant streaming platforms en masse; games live on digital storefronts and music on phone icons rather than physical discs. Even many of the devices we buy to play games on do not “belong” to us in any meaningful sense. We have traded actual ownership for convenience, with massive libraries that can be taken from us at any moment at a corporation's discretion.

The digital transformation of media has made one option increasingly enticing: piracy.

Piracy is no longer about simply getting something without paying for it; piracy and emulation have become necessary for the preservation of media and cultural history.

While piracy is generally copyright infringement, legality alone does not dictate morality.

Imagine, for whatever reason, you wake up with an uncontrollable, insatiable desire to play the 1996 Microsoft PC game “The Magic School Bus Explores the Age of Dinosaurs.” The only problem is, there is no way to buy it. You cannot go to Steam and spend \$5.99, and buying a used CD-ROM would not give a cent back to the people who made it. So, you download a pirated copy online.

Legally, the obscurity

of what you have “stolen” does not make the copyright magically disappear (no pun intended). But morally, does piracy even count as theft here? What exactly have you “stolen?” There was no sale to lose.

The Magic School Bus is a silly example, but hundreds of games, films, shows and other works from decades past face the same problem — including many significant pieces of cultural history. What happens to them when the original creators decide they are no longer worth being kept up? Piracy can take the sale, but not when that sale is nonexistent.

That distinction becomes more important as media continues to transform in its current direction. DVDs do not become unreadable when a studio goes bankrupt, cartridges do not stop working when a store closes. Digital media centralizes that control, and makes consumers eternally dependent on the company, long after the initial sale. When servers close and licenses expire, media is ripped from consumers' hands alongside it.

This reveals another important statement that companies become guilty of violating: art does not become worthless the second it stops being profitable. Games, TV, movies and music are essential parts of our culture, and that has and always will be true. They entertain, teach, inspire and shape generations. They are reflections of our culture and the times we live in. We have a responsibility to keep that part of life alive and accessible, even if it is not profitable for a multimedia conglomerate.

Ideally, companies would keep their past alive. Unfortunately for us, there is often little financial incentive for them. A wildly popular movie might get rerelease after rerelease,

while an experimental film or obscure show disappears into the past. Corporations always have and always will chase profit.

But history cannot follow the same incentive. When companies do not bother to make their old works accessible and digitize their old libraries, it comes down to people to keep them alive: archivists, enthusiasts, collectors and the people who actually bother to care. Without them, important parts of history risk becoming inaccessible not because they have been destroyed, but because the companies with the power to license haven't deemed them profitable enough to keep alive.

However, there is an obvious contradiction in the opposition to preservation. Companies simultaneously decide that a work is not valuable enough to sell, while insisting that it is valuable enough that no one else can distribute it. You cannot own it. You cannot buy it. You cannot preserve it. You cannot access it. But they still own it.

Obviously copyright holders deserve the right to profit off of their work. But that should not become a gravestone. A company's ownership should not give them the ability to erase pieces of culture from our libraries through neglect.

Companies can solve this themselves. They can keep older works available, support backwards compatibility, rerelease archives and even work together with the communities intent on preservation. I promise, if most consumers are given a reasonable alternative, they will take it.

But if corporations want us to stop pirating their history, they need to give us a way to access it.

Until then, preserving culture will require breaking the rules designed to control it.



Someone inserting a VHS tape into a VHS player. VHS tapes have been outdated for many years, but used to be a major form of data storage.

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