3D Printing and Intellectual Property

Intellectual Property (IP) Laws provide legal protection for things that are produced creatively, be these books, art works, inventions, trademarks or designs. Typically they prevent copying or unauthorised use of intellectual property without the permission of the creator/owner of a particular design, artwork, trademark etc.

There are a host of different IP laws such as patents, trademarks, design rights and copyright. Some of these laws place constraints on what can be legally made with a 3D printer. IP law can be very complex, especially when it comes to 3D printing which is a new technology whose wider implications for IP have not been fully worked out.

When choosing or developing a model to print, the following guidelines may help you steer clear of projects that potentially infringe IP laws. Please note that this list is intended as a guide only and does not cover every scenario. If you are in any doubt that your project infringes IP laws, please seek professional legal advice. When using the library 3D Printer, the library reserves the right to refuse to print any object that we believe may infringe IP laws.

1. Objects intended to re-produce an existing product or part of an existing product (e.g. a spare part) for commercial/profit making purposes. Such projects may infringe patents, design rights and/or copyrights.
2. Objects printed from designs which are not licensed for use. For example, when downloading an object from a repository such as Thingiverse, make sure that it has a license which allows you to re-use the design to print your own copies of the object. For instance, a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC licence would allow you to make your own copies for non-commercial/academic use providing you acknowledge the original creator.
3. Objects which copy artistic works. Things such as cartoon and film characters are regarded as creative, artistic works and are automatically projected by copyright law. In general, it is not legal to reproduce objects representing such characters on a 3D printer without the permission of the copyright owner. For example printing a model of Disney’s Mickey Mouse character would not be allowed.
4. Objects that include trademarks, such as the Coca-Cola logo. Company trademarks and logos are protected by trademark laws. You cannot incorporate a commercial trademark into your designs which are in anyway intended to be reproduced commercially or for profit making purposes.

For a comprehensive discussion of 3D printing/scanning and UK IP laws please see –
