

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF MARYLAND**
Southern Division

MALIBU MEDIA, LLC,

Plaintiff,

v.

JOHN DOE,

Defendant.

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Case No.: GJH-18-2162

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MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff Malibu Media, LLC brought this action against Defendant John Doe for copyright infringement under the United States Copyright Act of 1976 (“Copyright Act”), 17 U.S.C. § 101 *et seq.* ECF No. 9. Following Defendant’s failure to answer or otherwise defend in this action, the Clerk of the Court entered default against Defendant on December 23, 2019. ECF No. 23.¹ Now pending before the Court is Plaintiff’s Motion for Entry of Default Judgment. ECF Nos. 24, 25.² No hearing is necessary. *See* Loc. R. 105.6 (D. Md. 2018). For the following reasons, Plaintiff’s Motion for Entry of Default Judgment is granted, in part, and denied, in part.

I. BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, a California-based company doing business as X-Art.com, alleges that Defendant violated the Copyright Act by using the BitTorrent file distribution network to download, copy, and distribute nine adult pornographic films subject to copyrights held by Plaintiff. ECF No. 9 ¶¶ 8, 23; ECF Nos. 9-1, 9-2.

¹ Despite an Order having issued on December 23, 2019, ECF No. 23, Plaintiff’s Motion for Clerk’s Entry Default, ECF No. 21, remains pending on the docket. The Clerk shall resolve it as granted.
² Plaintiff filed two versions of the Motion for Entry of Default Judgment: a sealed unredacted version, ECF No. 24, and an unsealed redacted version, ECF No. 25. The Motions are substantively identical.

BitTorrent is a peer-to-peer file sharing system that allows users to distribute large amounts of data, including, but not limited to, digital movie files. ECF No. 9 ¶ 10. Individuals often use BitTorrent to obtain and circulate infringed copyrighted content. ECF No. 25-4 at 1–2.³ In order to distribute a large file, the BitTorrent protocol breaks a file into many small pieces, or “bits”. ECF No. 9 ¶ 12. Users then exchange these bits amongst each other instead of attempting to distribute a much larger digital file. *Id.* Plaintiff alleges that its investigator, IPP International UG, downloaded one or more bits of nine of Plaintiff’s copyrighted films from Defendant’s Internet Protocol address (“IP address”), an address assigned to a customer on a specific date by an Internet Service Provider (“ISP”). *Id.* ¶¶ 17–21.

Initially, Plaintiff identified Defendant only by an IP address. ECF No. 1 ¶ 9. Accordingly, Plaintiff filed a Complaint for copyright infringement in this Court on July 13, 2018, ECF No. 1, and moved for leave to file a subpoena on Defendant’s ISP to obtain Defendant’s identity prior to a Rule 26(f) conference, ECF No. 3. The Court granted the Motion on July 16, 2018, subject to conditions and limitations dictated by the sensitive nature of the action and the uncertainty surrounding the specificity of IP addresses. ECF No. 5. Plaintiff then filed an Amended Complaint against Defendant on November 26, 2018, ECF No. 9, to which Defendant has not responded. Based on documentation demonstrating that Defendant had been identified and properly served, ECF No. 21-1, the Clerk entered default against Defendant on December 23, 2019, ECF No. 23, and Plaintiff subsequently filed the pending Motion for Entry of Default Judgment on January 3, 2020, seeking an award of statutory damages, injunctive relief, and costs. ECF Nos. 24, 25.

³ Pin cites to documents filed on the Court’s electronic filing system (CM/ECF) refer to the page numbers generated by that system.

II. STANDARD OF REVIEW

“When a party against whom a judgment for affirmative relief is sought has failed to plead or otherwise defend, and that failure is shown by affidavit or otherwise, the clerk must enter the party’s default.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 55(a). “A defendant’s default does not automatically entitle the plaintiff to entry of a default judgment; rather, that decision is left to the discretion of the court.” *Educ. Credit Mgmt. Corp. v. Optimum Welding*, 285 F.R.D. 371, 373 (D. Md. 2012). Although “[t]he Fourth Circuit has a ‘strong policy’ that ‘cases be decided on their merits,’” *Choice Hotels Int’l., Inc. v. Savannah Shakti Carp.*, No. DKC–11–0438, 2011 WL 5118328, at *2 (D. Md. Oct. 25, 2011) (citing *United States v. Shaffer Equip. Co.*, 11 F.3d 450, 453 (4th Cir. 1993)), “default judgment may be appropriate when the adversary process has been halted because of an essentially unresponsive party[.]” *Id.* (citing *S.E.C. v. Lawbaugh*, 359 F. Supp. 2d 418, 421 (D. Md. 2005)).

“Upon default, the well-pled allegations in a complaint as to liability are taken as true, although the allegations as to damages are not.” *Lawbaugh*, 359 F. Supp. 2d at 422. Thus, the court first determines whether the unchallenged factual allegations constitute a legitimate cause of action. *Agora Fin., LLC v. Samler*, 725 F. Supp. 2d 491, 494 (D. Md. 2010). In determining whether the factual allegations constitute a legitimate cause of action, courts typically apply the *Iqbal/Twombly* pleading standard. See *Baltimore Line Handling Co. v. Brophy*, 771 F. Supp. 2d 531, 544 (D. Md. 2011) (finding *Iqbal* “relevant to the default judgment inquiry”). Under that standard, a complaint fails to state a claim entitling the pleader to relief if the complaint offers only “‘labels and conclusions’” or “‘naked assertion[s]’ devoid of ‘further factual enhancement.’” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555–57 (2007)). As the Fourth Circuit has recognized, “‘the court need

not accept the legal conclusions drawn from the facts, and [] need not accept as true unwarranted inferences, unreasonable conclusions, or arguments.” *Monroe v. City of Charlottesville*, 579 F.3d 380, 385–86 (4th Cir. 2009) (citation omitted), *cert. denied*, 559 U.S. 992 (2010); *accord Simmons v. United Mortg. & Loan Inv., LLC*, 634 F.3d 754, 768 (4th Cir. 2011). Indeed, “where the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged—but it has not ‘show[n]’—‘that the pleader is entitled to relief.’” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)).

If liability is established, the court then makes an independent determination of damages. *Agora Fin., LLC*, 725 F. Supp. 2d at 494. Fed. R. Civ. P. 54(c) limits the type of judgment that may be entered based on a party’s default: “A default judgment must not differ in kind from, or exceed in amount, what is demanded in the pleadings.” In entering default judgment, a court cannot, therefore, award additional damages “because the defendant could not reasonably have expected that his damages would exceed th[e] amount [pled in the complaint].” *In re Genesys Data Techs., Inc.*, 204 F.3d 124, 132 (4th Cir. 2000). While the court may hold a hearing to prove damages, it is not required to do so; it may rely instead on “detailed affidavits or documentary evidence to determine the appropriate sum.” *Adkins v. Teseo*, 180 F. Supp. 2d 15, 17 (D.D.C. 2001)) (citing *United Artists Corp. v. Freeman*, 605 F.2d 854, 857 (5th Cir. 1979)); *see also Laborers’ District Council Pension, et al. v. E.G.S., Inc.*, No. WDQ–09–3174, 2010 WL 1568595, at *3 (D. Md. Apr. 16, 2010) (“[O]n default judgment, the Court may only award damages without a hearing if the record supports the damages requested.”).

III. DISCUSSION

A. Liability

To establish liability for copyright infringement, a plaintiff must prove two elements: (1) ownership of the copyright; and (2) copying of original constituent elements by the alleged defendant. 17 U.S.C. § 501(a); *see also Feist Publ'ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340, 361 (1991). Because Defendant has failed to appear or otherwise defend, the Court accepts as true the well-pleaded factual allegations in the Amended Complaint. *See Ryan v. Homecomings Fin. Network*, 253 F.3d 778, 780 (4th Cir. 2001). Those allegations establish that Plaintiff owns the nine copyrights that Defendant downloaded, copied, and distributed using BitTorrent. ECF No. 9 ¶¶ 3, 22, 23, 30; ECF Nos. 9-1, 9-2. Defendant is therefore liable to Plaintiff for copyright infringement.

B. Relief

Having established Defendant's liability, the Court next considers Plaintiff's requests for statutory damages, injunctive relief, and costs.

i. Statutory Damages

Plaintiff requests statutory damages of \$1,500.00 per infringement, for a total of \$13,500.00. ECF No. 25-1 at 10. Under § 504(a) of the Copyright Act, a copyright infringer is liable for either: (1) the copyright owner's actual damages and any additional profits of the infringer; or (2) statutory damages as provided by § 504(c). Section 504(c)(1) provides:

[T]he copyright owner may elect, at any time before final judgment is rendered, to recover, instead of actual damages and profits, an award of statutory damages for all infringements involved in the action, with respect to any one work, for which any one infringer is liable individually, or for which any two or more infringers are liable jointly and severally, in a sum of not less than \$750 or more than \$30,000 as the court considers just.

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