

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Ronald Eugene James v. Mattel, et al.

Ronald Eugene James v. Mattel, et al. · No. 2:24-cv-1954 DAD AC PC · Decided September 23, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California recommends dismissing Ronald Eugene James’s copyright-infringement complaint against Mattel and other defendants without leave to amend. The court grants in forma pauperis status but concludes that the alleged use of characters depicting physical disabilities and visible differences concerns an unprotectable idea or concept under 17 U.S.C. § 102(b), rather than infringement of protected expression. The recommendation is subject to objections within 21 days.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Allison Claire
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	September 23, 2025
DOCKET	2:24-cv-1954 DAD AC PC
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	A pro se state prisoner filed a copyright-infringement complaint and sought leave to proceed in forma pauperis. The magistrate judge granted in forma pauperis status and issued findings and recommendations that the complaint be dismissed without leave to amend for failure to state a claim.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the court screens prisoner complaints and must dismiss claims that are frivolous, malicious, fail to state a claim, or seek monetary relief from an immune defendant. Failure to state a claim under § 1915A applies the familiar Rule 12(b)(6) standard, requiring sufficient factual matter to state a plausible claim for relief.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	nonprecedential
PARTIES	Ronald Eugene James v. Mattel, et al.

TOPICS

copyright infringement

copyright law

pleadings

civil procedure

PRACTICE AREAS

intellectual property

copyright law

civil procedure

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the complaint stated a federal copyright-infringement claim based on defendants' alleged use of a concept involving characters with particular physical disabilities and visible differences.
2. Whether any state common-law copyright claim was cognizable or was preempted by federal copyright law.
3. Whether the complaint should be dismissed without leave to amend because its defects could not be cured by amendment.
4. Whether plaintiff should be granted leave to proceed in forma pauperis.

HOLDINGS

1. The complaint failed to state a copyright-infringement claim because plaintiff alleged appropriation of an unprotectable concept rather than infringement of a protected expression or exclusive right under the Copyright Act.
2. Any state common-law copyright claims were preempted by federal copyright law, and there is no independent state copyright law claim on the allegations presented.
3. Leave to amend should be denied because amendment would be futile given the nature of plaintiff's allegations.
4. Plaintiff satisfied the statutory showing for in forma pauperis status, but remained obligated to pay the statutory filing fee through the installment procedures applicable to prisoners.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“This type of allegation, that a concept or principle was taken from a work and used in another form, is expressly not subject to copyright protection.” (Section IV)

“These physical traits are represented in the general community and are present in many illustrations, dolls, photographs, and advertisements.” (Section IV)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff alleged that he created and owned illustrated characters in a sixteen-book children's series called The Simplys, featuring characters with visible disabilities and physical differences. He alleged that Mattel created dolls depicting similar traits, including vitiligo, a peg leg, and wheelchair use, and that other defendants helped use or commercialize the alleged characters without permission. Plaintiff did not allege direct reproduction of his books, but claimed that defendants appropriated the concept of representing children with particular disabilities and visible differences.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed a complaint alleging that Mattel and other defendants used concepts and character traits from his children's book series, The Simplys, in creating dolls depicting children with disabilities and visible differences. The action was referred to the magistrate judge under Local Rule 302 and 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1). The court granted plaintiff's in forma pauperis application but recommended dismissal without leave to amend; the assigned district judge retained final authority and plaintiff was given twenty-one days to object.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Neitzke v. Williams, 490 U.S. 319, 325, 327 (1989)
- Franklin v. Murphy, 745 F.2d 1221, 1227-28 (9th Cir. 1984)
- Jackson v. Arizona, 885 F.2d 639, 640 (9th Cir. 1989)
- Lopez v. Smith, 203 F.3d 1122, 1130-31 (9th Cir. 2000) (en banc)
- Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555, 570 (2007)
- Conley v. Gibson, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)
- Wilhelm v. Rotman, 680 F.3d 1113, 1121 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)
- Hosp. Bldg. Co. v. Trs. of the Rex Hosp., 425 U.S. 738, 740 (1976)
- Jenkins v. McKeithen, 395 U.S. 411, 421 (1969)
- Best Carpet Values, Inc. v. Google, LLC, 90 F.4th 962, 974 (9th Cir. 2024)
- A&M Recs., Inc. v. Napster, Inc., 239 F.3d 1004, 1013 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Sony Corp. of Am. v. Universal City Studios, Inc., 464 U.S. 417, 432-33 (1984)
- Cato v. United States, 70 F.3d 1103, 1105-06 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Hartmann v. Cal. Dep't of Corr. & Rehab., 707 F.3d 1114, 1130 (9th Cir. 2013)
- Noll v. Carlson, 809 F.2d 1446, 1448 (9th Cir. 1987)
- Martinez v. Ylst, 951 F.2d 1153 (9th Cir. 1991)

OPINION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 8 FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA 9 10 RONALD EUGENE JAMES, No. 2:24-cv-1954 DAD AC PC 11 Plaintiff, 12
v. ORDER and 13 MATTEL, et al., FINDINGS AND RECOMENDATIONS 14 Defendants. 15
16 Plaintiff, a state prisoner proceeding pro se, seeks relief for an alleged copyright violation 17
and has requested leave to proceed in forma pauperis pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915.

This 18 proceeding was referred to this court by Local Rule 302 pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)
(1). For 19 the reasons set forth below, the undersigned recommends that the complaint be

dismissed without 20 leave to amend. 21 I. Application to Proceed In Forma Pauperis 22 Plaintiff has submitted a declaration that makes the showing required by 28 U.S.C. 23 § 1915(a).

ECF No. 2. Accordingly, the request to proceed in forma pauperis will be granted. 24 Plaintiff is required to pay the statutory filing fee of \$350.00 for this action. 28 U.S.C. 25 §§ 1914(a), 1915(b) (1). By this order, plaintiff will be assessed an initial partial filing fee in 26 accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(b)(1). By separate order, the court will direct 27 the appropriate agency to collect the initial partial filing fee from plaintiff's trust account and 28 forward it to the Clerk of the Court.

Thereafter, plaintiff will be obligated for monthly payments 1 of twenty percent of the preceding month's income credited to plaintiff's prison trust account. 2 These payments will be forwarded by the appropriate agency to the Clerk of the Court each time 3 the amount in plaintiff's account exceeds \$10.00, until the filing fee is paid in full. 28 U.S.C. 4 § 1915(b)(2).

5 II. Statutory Screening of Prisoner Complaints 6 The court is required to screen complaints brought by prisoners seeking relief against a 7 governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity. 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(a).

The 8 court must dismiss a complaint or portion thereof if the prisoner has raised claims that are 9 "frivolous, malicious, or fail[] to state a claim upon which relief may be granted," or that "seek[] 10 monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief." 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b). 11 A claim "is [legally] frivolous where it lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact." 12 *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989); *Franklin v. Murphy*, 745 F.2d 1221, 1227-28 (9th 13 Cir.

1984). "[A] judge may dismiss... claims which are 'based on indisputably meritless legal 14 theories' or whose 'factual contentions are clearly baseless.'" *Jackson v. Arizona*, 885 F.2d 639, 15 640 (9th Cir. 1989) (quoting *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327), superseded by statute on other grounds as 16 stated in *Lopez v. Smith*, 203 F.3d 1122, 1130 (9th Cir. 2000).

The critical inquiry is whether a 17 constitutional claim, however inartfully pleaded, has an arguable legal and factual basis. 18 *Franklin*, 745 F.2d at 1227-28 (citations omitted). 19 "Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2) requires only 'a short and plain statement of the 20 claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief,' in order to 'give the defendant fair notice of 21 what the... claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.'" *Bell Atl.*

Corp. v. Twombly, 550 22 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (alteration in original) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). 23 "Failure to state a claim under § 1915A incorporates the familiar standard applied in the context 24 of failure to state a claim under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6)." *Wilhelm v. Rotman*, 25 680 F.3d 1113, 1121 (9th Cir. 2012) (citations omitted).

In order to survive dismissal for failure to state a claim, a complaint must contain more than “a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action;” it must contain factual allegations sufficient “to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555 (citations omitted). “[T]he pleading must contain something more... than... a statement of facts that merely creates a suspicion [of] a legally cognizable right of action.” *Id.* (alteration in original) (quoting 5 Charles Alan Wright & Arthur R. Miller, *Federal Practice and Procedure* § 1216 (3d ed.

2004)). 4 “[A] complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570). “A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Id.* (citing *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556).

In reviewing a complaint under this standard, the court must accept as true the allegations of the complaint in question, *Hosp. Bldg. 10 Co. v. Trs. of the Rex Hosp.*, 425 U.S. 738, 740 (1976), as well as construe the pleading in the light most favorable to the plaintiff and resolve all doubts in the plaintiff’s favor, *Jenkins v. McKeithen*, 395 U.S. 411, 421 (1969) (citations omitted).

13 III. Complaint 14 Plaintiff sues for Copyright Infringement, alleging that defendants infringed on the 15 plaintiff’s copyrighted illustrated characters in his children’s book series called “The Simplys,” 16 which uses the catchphrase “We are Simply Who We Are.” ECF No. 1 at 1. Plaintiff wrote “The 17 Simplys” and created a copyright notice on November 11, 2017.

Id. at 3. Plaintiff first used “The 18 Simplys” in commerce on October 15, 2019. *Id.* The motto of “The Simplys” is “Our normal is 19 not your normal, but we’re still normal kids.” *Id.* at 4. The Simplys are a unique set of characters 20 with visible disabilities. *Id.* For example, “Brooklyn” has vitiligo and is visually impaired; 21 “Sassy” has a peg leg; “Kimiko” was hit by a drunk driver and uses a wheelchair; and so forth.

22 *Id.* Plaintiff wrote sixteen books in “The Simplys” series. *Id.* at 5. 23 Defendant Mattel has a new line of dolls with different physical impairments, including a 24 doll with vitiligo, a doll with a peg leg, and a doll in a wheelchair, and plaintiff alleges that these 25 dolls are based on the illustrations in The Simplys books. *Id.* at 6-7. Plaintiff did not give Mattel 26 permission to turn his characters into dolls.

Id. Plaintiff alleges that defendant Stacey Rene 27 James (Carson), his ex-wife, conspired with her cousin defendant Rhonda Valdry, to use and 28 profit from plaintiff’s copyright by making a deal with Mattel, for which plaintiff has not received 1 any profit. *Id.* at 8. Defendant Carl Tenbrink is alleged to have willfully infringed on plaintiff’s 2 copyright by producing and manufacturing dolls substantially similar to The Simplys characters.

3 Id. at 9. Plaintiff was able to confirm the unauthorized production of the dolls in 2023 by viewing 4 a segment on Good Morning America with Robin Roberts, and he was told his character 5 illustrations were being sold in stores around April of 2020, though he cannot confirm or deny 6 that due to his incarceration; he notified Tenbrink of the infringement, but Tenbrink did not 7 respond.

Id. at 9. Plaintiff has been unable to negotiate a reasonable license for creating dolls 8 based on his illustrations. Id. at 10. Plaintiff alleges defendant Sonos Product Development 9 infringed on his copyrights by using his images for commercial use in furtherance of its doll 10 business. Id. 11 IV. Failure to State a Claim 12 Plaintiff's sole cause of action is for Copyright Infringement under federal law and state 13 common law.

ECF No. 1 at 1. As a preliminary matter, the court notes that there is no state 14 copyright law, and any common law claims are preempted by federal copyright law. *Best Carpet 15 Values, Inc. v. Google, LLC*, 90 F.4th 962, 974 (9th Cir. 2024).

In order for a plaintiff to state a 16 federal Copyright Infringement claim, “(1) they must show ownership of the allegedly infringed 17 material and (2) they must demonstrate that the alleged infringers violate at least one exclusive 18 right granted to copyright holders under 17 U.S.C. § 106. See 17 U.S.C. § 501(a).” *A&M Recs., 19 Inc. v. Napster, Inc.*, 239 F.3d 1004, 1013 (9th Cir.

2001). 20 Copyright protection ‘subsists... in original works of authorship fixed in any tangible medium of expression.’ 17 U.S.C. § 102(a). 21 This protection has never accorded the copyright owner complete control over all possible uses of his work. Rather, the Copyright Act 22 grants the copyright holder “exclusive” rights to use and to authorize the use of his work in five qualified ways, including reproduction of 23 the copyrighted work in copies.

Id., § 106.14. 24 *Sony Corp. of Am. v. Universal City Studios, Inc.*, 464 U.S. 417, 432–33 (1984). The 25 Copyright Act expressly states that “[i]n no case does copyright protection for an original work of 26 authorship extend to any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, 27 principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or 28 embodied in such work.” 17 U.S.C. § 102(b).

1 Here, even if the court were to assume that plaintiff's copyright is valid and that the facts 2 he alleges are true, his claim necessarily fails because the use he alleges is expressly excluded 3 from copyright protection. Plaintiff is not challenging the direct reproduction of his books; 4 instead, he asserts that his concept – representing children with specific physical disabilities 5 and/or visible differences – was stolen by defendants, who sold dolls with those same physical 6 characteristics.

This type of allegation, that a concept or principle was taken from a work and 7 used in another form, is expressly not subject to copyright protection. 17 U.S.C. § 102(b). 8 Further, the fact that plaintiff created and/or owned illustrations of characters with physical traits 9 shared by many

people (vitiligo, wheelchair use, limb differences, etc.) and Mattel also created 10 dolls with these physical traits, plainly does not give rise to an inference that Mattel utilized 11 plaintiff's intellectual property in any way in creating its dolls.

These physical traits are 12 represented in the general community and are present in many illustrations, dolls, photographs, 13 and advertisements. The facts alleged by plaintiff are, on their face, insufficient to state a claim 14 for copyright infringement.

Accordingly, the complaint must be dismissed. 15 V. Leave to Amend Should Not be Granted 16 If the court finds that a complaint should be dismissed for failure to state a claim, the court 17 has discretion to dismiss with or without leave to amend. *Lopez v. Smith*, 203 F.3d 1122, 1130 18 (9th Cir. 2000) (en banc). Leave to amend should be granted if it appears possible that the defects 19 in the complaint could be corrected, especially if a plaintiff is pro se.

Id. at 1130-31; *Cato v. 20 United States*, 70 F.3d 1103, 1106 (9th Cir. 1995) ("A pro se litigant must be given leave to 21 amend his or her complaint, and some notice of its deficiencies, unless it is absolutely clear that 22 the deficiencies of the complaint could not be cured by amendment.") (citing *Noll v. Carlson*, 809 23 F.2d 1446, 1448 (9th Cir. 1987)).

24 However, if, after careful consideration, it is clear that a complaint cannot be cured by 25 amendment, the court may dismiss without leave to amend. *Cato*, 70 F.3d at 1105-06. Plaintiff's 26 allegations do not state viable claims for relief and, given the nature of the claims, leave to amend 27 would be futile and it will therefore be recommended that the complaint be dismissed without 28 leave to amend.

Hartmann v. Cal. Dep't of Corr. & Rehab., 707 F.3d 1114, 1130 (9th Cir. 2013) 1 | ("A district court may deny leave to amend when amendment would be futile." (citation 2 || omitted)). 3 VI. — Plain Language Summary of this Order for a Pro Se Litigant 4 Your request to proceed in forma pauperis is granted and you are not required to pay the 5 || entire filing fee immediately.

However, the facts of your case make it clear that you do not have 6 || a claim for a copyright violation. There is no copyright protection for ideas or concepts. Because 7 || of this, it is being recommended that your complaint be dismissed without leave to amend. You 8 | may object to this recommendation within 21 days.

The District Judge will make the final 9 || decision. 10 V. Order and Recommendation 1] In accordance with the above, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that: 12 1. Plaintiff's request for leave to proceed in forma pauperis (ECF No. 2) is granted. 13 2. Plaintiff is obligated to pay the statutory filing fee of \$350.00 for this action. Plaintiff 14 || is assessed an initial partial filing fee in accordance with the provisions of 28 U.S.C. 15 | § 1915(b)(1).

All fees shall be collected and paid in accordance with this court's order to the 16 | Director of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation filed concurrently 17 || herewith. 18 IT IS FURTHER RECOMMENDED that the complaint (ECF No. 1) be dismissed 19 | without leave to amend for failure to state a claim. 20 These findings and recommendations are submitted to the United States District Judge 21 || assigned to the case, pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1).

Within twenty-one days 22 || after being served with these findings and recommendations, plaintiff may file written objections 23 || with the court. Plaintiffis advised that failure to file objections within the specified time may 24 || waive the right to appeal the District Court's order. Martinez v. Ylst, 951 F.2d 1153 (9th Cir. 25 | 1991). 26 || DATED: September 22, 2025 4 eps — Mf, 27 ALLISON CLAIRE UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE