

By: Mara X

I've become obsessed with a particular kind of hobby. These hobbies focus on an experience which has a consistent baseline and is usually engaged in casually. The hobby is in the optimization and customization of the experience, the expansion of its boundaries, and an increased awareness of the variations within them. This is all accomplished through the refinement of a few major variables.

First is the raw material which produces the experience. This material comes in a spectrum of minor variations which users can compare and contrast. Doing so increases their understanding of the possibility space, allowing them to form their own unique taste.

Next come the tools which allow one to convert that raw material into the experience itself. These tools should deliver consistency between uses, making it easier to detect variations. They should also allow for smooth execution of delivery, making the ritual of administration just as pleasant as its result.

Finally, there's the technique. Enthusiasts create a routine of administration and choose the tools which best facilitate it, often called a "setup". Then they develop a way of using that setup which produces the best results. This technique becomes more consistent over time, enabling the user to discern more and more granular differences in the material.

The end goal is to allow users to find the exact variation of an experience which brings them the most satisfaction, and to deliver it every single time. This is where enthusiast hobbies may seem unreasonable to the outside observer. It makes little sense to invest years of labor and thousands of dollars (more on that later) into the marginal improvement of an already pleasant experience. However, the enthusiasts real purpose is found in the journey towards perfection, the sense of struggle and discovery, and the ritual of iteration.

This is a journey greatly enhanced by the community of fellow enthusiasts who often guide it. A foundation of pre-existing knowledge enables users to accelerate the refinement of their tools and technique, while a shared language to describe the experience reduces trial and error in learning one's preferences. Once the user is caught up, they can begin expanding the group's knowledge through their own experiments, transforming a personal journey into a communal legacy.

This all sounds very positive, a natural human inclination towards improvement and community. So then why are these hobbies often seen as wasteful, bourgeois, or elitist? Audiophiles, specialty coffee enthusiasts, bicyclists, and even certain kinds of stoners are beginning to fall into this category, all due to the corrupting power of the market.

What once would have been an artisanal pursuit, the creation of new tools by building upon a base of knowledge, has been commodified. Instead of honing your own alchemical setup through the assistance of local glass blowers, the cultivation of an herb garden, and the development of a particular heating method, the steps of discovery are sold to you. The glass is made in a number of standard forms, with small differences contrived to compete for your money. The herbs are sourced and sold pre-packaged by a middle-man. A proprietary phone app lets you choose a preset on the electric vaporizer you're not allowed to repair.

You're being promised the fantasy of rapid innovation not only by companies happy to sell it to you, but by the forums of online converts who promise that you simply are not going to get an even espresso extraction unless you spend 100 dollars on the titanium version of needles in a wine cork. It's intoxicating. It's addictive. It's taking away the agency of those who can afford it, excluding those who can't, and pressuring those who still choose to create into marketing their creations for profit.

There is absolutely something to be said for a base of

enthusiasts who use their knowledge to craft a standard experience for the rest of us. That's the artisanal model. Advertisers turn this model predatory by marketing a false identity to consumers so that they'll overspend on marginal improvements, trapping would-be artisans and betraying the trust of patrons for profit.

So if you want to go all out, then do it. Put needles in a cork and stir your coffee grounds. Make your perfect bong out of scrap wood, decommissioned lab glass, and some silicone tubing. If you're going to buy pre-made, that's great too! Just don't let some asshole on Reddit give you a complex about it, huh?