Where Gardentrucking And ‘Geek Culture’ Meet

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I recently stumbled upon what I believe to be the most perfectly delightful hobby, something the experts call “gardentrucking.” Essentially, it’s to excavation what RC planes are to aviation. The hobby’s participants buy model bobcats and dumptrucks, build them, and put them to work.

It seems that some of these hobbyists have much larger visions for what their model trucks are capable of. I read an article [1] that outlines one man’s slow-moving effort to dig out more of his unfinished basement, with the idea that some time in the distant future, he’ll fix the place up and give it a proper finish.

And like other RC hobbies, gardentrucking isn’t cheap—these machines aren’t necessarily toys for the kids to play around with. After scoping around a bit on Gardentrucking.com [2], I’ve seen kits that run from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand.

To give you a better idea of what Joe does, and what gardentrucking is all about, take a look at the video below. He’s got a bunch more on YouTube, so click on through to see the project as it evolves over the years.

I found the gardentrucking hobby so endearing that I was a little hurt when I saw the level of criticism that people like Joe get for tinkering around in their basements. Joe himself says that he’s been called a “loser” too many times to count, and he’s probably fielded much worse, too, although he doesn’t seem to be affected by any of it in the least.

The criticism, of course, isn’t surprising. The internet anonymity is capable of revealing (with no small helping of irony) the worst in people. But I do think it’s indicative of a problem that this country has always had when it comes to hobbies and how they reflect on who we are, or what we want to do with ourselves. Playing a sport is perfectly acceptable, and yet, somehow, interest in electronics or engineering is equivalent to social suicide? It’s a situation that undergoes fluctuations based on prevailing societal conditions. I’ve seen it throughout my lifetime, and I’m sure those of other generations would agree.

I think this trend reached a peak somewhere in the last five years, and is improving little by little. But I’d like to see a day where people like Joe, and his basement excavation, are seen as perfectly normal in the eyes of the American public. There is progress: so-called “geek culture” is becoming mainstream, slowly but surely. Organizations like FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) are making significant progress in making robotics engineering more mainstream for high school students around the country. Video games are pretty much ubiquitous for the same group of kids, as are smartphones and extraordinarily complex computers. In fact, many now see as those “nerdy” tendencies to be avenues to making a large amount of money inSilicon Valley(see Mark Zuckerberg, et al).

Really, there’s no better time to be a geek than today. In a sense, I see the perception of Joe, and his hobby, as the progress of geeks everywhere. The more acceptance he gets, the more we, as a culture, are accepting of technically-curious people.

There’s a lot of rhetoric going around right now about increasingly the amount of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education that American children receive. We have this idea that forcing more science classes on children will make them go into engineering, or something equally technical. I don’t think that’s completely true in the least. They’re naturally curious, innately driven to seek out answers to the things they see in the world, but you know what stops them? Society — the chatterbox of adults who declare that some interests are avenues to being a “loser.”

So, if we want to influence a generation of Americans that will help us gain back the technical prowess we’ve

lost, we won’t get there through more mandated STEM education. The kids who love that kind of stuff will seek out the available resources. We just need to make it a normal and acceptable thing to do so, while investing more in making those resources as enlightening as possible.

And when it comes to gardentrucking, I can see the educational benefits. Start with building the trucks themselves — that would require technical skills, patience, and a steady hand. Each one has a number of sophisticated engineered systems involved, and there’s a wealth of learning that could be gleaned from an up-close analysis of each. Even the excavation itself requires logic and sophisticated planning — if Joe doesn’t plan ahead, he could find himself without a way to get the dirt out of his basement and into the backyard. Without cheating, of course, and grabbing a shovel.

I’ve always believed that any hobby — illegal ones aside — is a legitimate one when the participant has fun with it. By that standard, playing high school football with the dream of becoming the next Aaron Rodgers is as legitimate the FIRST participant who wants to be the next Mark Zuckerberg.

Personally, I wouldn’t mind if my future children wanted to pursue either. I know that I wouldn’t dream of criticizing them one way or another, and I hope that more people will someday think the same. I wouldn’t mind if they were interested in gardentrucking, either. I’d probably sit down in the dirt and help them out, too, provided they were smart enough to not smash that miniature $4,700 Peterbuilt dumper to bits. Plus, I’d get a finished basement out of it. Eventually.

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Links:
[1] http://carscoop.blogspot.com/2012/02/canadian-digs-out-basement-using-only.html
[2] http://www.gardentrucking.com/