

Plato, e-Tourism and the Search for Knowledge

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Introduction:

Travelling since ancient times has served as a means of communication, as a means of education as well as for the pursuit of business. Travelling allows the meeting of new people, communicating and learning new ideas and the study of new cultures which leads to refining your own. Whether it leads to learning new ways of living, different philosophies of life, to bettering ourselves or simply experiencing adventures or relaxation, the travelling tourist lives within every one of us even more so today. In this paper tourism and e-tourism are linked to knowledge. The assumption here being that the traveller benefits from local knowledge. The benefits range from a relaxing weekend in a quiet country spot helping you to recover from noisy large cities and helping you put together your thoughts about your life and/or work, to an educational trip in Egypt to learn about the history and experience the way of life and values of the Egyptians. Tourism today as a sustainable business, is a means that is supposed to sustain this 'knowledge' transfer to the benefit of all parties involved in the process.

In ancient Greece, important wise men such as Solon the lawmaker travelled extensively during his life before he returned to set the laws of Athens. Learning from other city practices was considered as part of his educational experience. The assignment of gods protecting the traveller and hospitality indicates the importance of 'tourism' and the respect they paid for the traveller in ancient Greece.

The prime examples of tourism at Delphi and Olympia were visited for oracles and Olympic Games, and also the Parthenon in Athens to pay respect to the goddess of Athena

The Athenians and Lacedaemonians and their allies made a treaty, and swear to it, city by city, as follows:

Touching the national temples, there shall be a free passage by land and by sea to all who wish it, to sacrifice, travel, consult, and attend the oracle or games, according to the customs of their countries....[1]

No doubt it would have helped trade and it would have also been a profitable business.

It is even truer today, when travelling to other countries is widespread for education, visiting relatives and for holidays.

Most of us have at one or several points in our lives been a 'tourist' or a 'traveller'. However travelling was something only done by explorers, anthropologists or nomads until a century ago. During the last decades a tremendous development has occurred within the realms of travel.

Never before have so many people been on the move. We are witnessing the largest ever migration of people because of political or economical reasons. Boundaries are dissolving and are redrawn; countries disappear while new ones emerge. Cultures are integrating as an effect of global communication. Thousands of people are on the move, either as migrants of war, hunger, economy or as travellers through pre-planned routes as customers of huge organisations or independently. Plurality and globalisation are the keywords of our time and tourism is the worlds fastest growing business.

In most cases tourism caters for affluent people's moves. The tourist of today is financially stable and it is generally possible in the affluent Western World for most people to travel for tourism abroad.

In Plato's times, in general, only the rich would travel and it was an adventure, more than often dangerous, expensive, and time consuming. As a result, the affluent, the powerful and those who could afford education could also afford to become tourists. It was done on foot, by horse, and by sea.

Today travelling for tourism is possible by more people than ever before, via more alternatives than before (by road rail sea and air) and covering greater distances in shorter time scales than ever before.

Another significant development of recent years is the development of the internet, and the communications revolution. Unlike the ancient times communications without travelling is now possible and communications are accessible to anyone with a telephone line fixed or mobile and a computer or telephone.

The networking of computers via the internet allows people for the first time in our history to access information electronically from any place where information exists without having to physically travel to the place of location. It metaphorically also brings teaching and learning, and the 'old library', to the home and in not too distant future, it would be possible from anyplace. Information is possible for the first time to be truly distributed and accessed everywhere in the world. Even though half the world's population have never made a telephone call, it is the aspiration of the 'civilised and industrialised' world to be inclusive and make it possible for everybody to benefit from such developments.

The Knowledge Economy

We are told we live in a world of 'knowledge economy'. The developments in computer and communications have led to ease the data transfer around the world. In our universities we often claim that we prepare students to become '*knowledge workers*' who will create not just money capital but *intellectual capital*. Huge investment has been made annually to R&D programmes and for staff training. Because knowledge is intangible, it is poorly understood and hence an undervalued resource.

Therefore it is worthwhile to be able to know about knowledge itself, what it is, how to recognise it, the different types, how to acquire it and how to make use of it.

Knowledge and Epistemology

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy focusing on understanding knowledge. Plato was concerned about it, studied knowledge extensively and influenced tremendously later philosophers. Plato disliked the *Sophists* who were practising the explanation of the universe from the way it appears, rather than trying to look for the underlying theories. Plato and later Aristotle both were highly critical of them since the Sophists concentrated in training students on verbal dexterity on how to show the right wrong and the wrong right for the purpose of business (law cases). Nowadays scepticism is an attractive doctrine by thinkers who are not interested in answers to deep questions and as a rhetorical device. Plato, a brilliant theoretician opposed them fiercely.

Knowledge and Plato:

In his philosophy Plato attempted to find a resolution between the Heraclitan view of the universe, that the world of appearances is constantly changing, with the Parmenidean notion that reality is one and unchanging.

Both Socrates and Plato insisted that right opinions are not enough. Opinion is useless unless it is turned into secure knowledge by a 'reckoning' of the reason. Plato's solution was based not on physics, but on logic, metaphysics and ethics. His search for knowledge began a search, which continues today.

A characteristic feature of Plato's philosophy is his dualism. This shows itself most obviously in his Psychology, where he distinguishes sharply between body and soul, and in his metaphysics, where he contrasts the world of appearances with the underlying reality which consists essentially of what he calls the Forms. These Forms are the proper objects of definitions, [2].

Plato's Theory of Forms

Plato's Theory of Forms has influenced the development of philosophy and the Christian religion to such an extent that the entire history of Western culture has been permeated by it, [2].

Plato believed that:

The world is divided into 'reality' and 'appearance' (the One and the Many).

Our information about the world is divided into 'knowledge and 'opinion'. Knowledge is what we seek, but opinion is usually all that we have. In 'The Republic', Plato advances the view that opinion usually passes for knowledge- Only what is beautiful to one person is ugly to another, and - what is just to one person is unjust to another.

Opinion, then, results from objects as presented to the senses. Two people may have different opinions, for example, about a painting or about a friend. Objects in the natural world therefore have a contradictory nature: opinions clash about them and it is impossible to have true, universal knowledge about them.

Plato went on to claim that the person who concerns herself with beautiful things has 'opinions' about them, but the person who concerns herself with Beauty itself can possess 'true knowledge'.

- *And those whose hearts' are fixed on the true being of each thing are to be called philosophers and not lovers of opinion? Yes, certainly...*

Plato therefore believed in:

- A visible world-the world of the senses, a world of opinions.
- An intelligible world-a world beyond the senses, a world of true knowledge.

He used a technical word for these ideas Beauty, Truth and justice: he called them 'Forms'.

He conceived them as having real existence, independent of the mental world of people's minds or of the natural world. These Forms were to him objects or shapes, though Plato defined them rather than described them. The Forms are universal. There may be particular instances of beauty in the world- a painting or a flower- but these and all beautiful things share in the universal Form of Beauty.

Plato's interest in mathematics, proportions and harmonies led him to believe that these universal Forms were connected. The highest Form of all is the Form of the Good.

The highest form of knowledge is knowledge of the form of the good, from which things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value.

The good, then, is the end of all endeavours, the object on which every heart is set...

Knowing the Forms, for Plato, is a kind of mental seeing, and philosophy is a vision of truth.

Knowing leads to discovering the Form of the Good and, consequently, philosophy makes you a better person. The Good in *The Republic*, is 'the greatest thing we have to learn'.

Plato's Theory of Forms is also important for classifying objects in the world and understanding their nature.

Plato sums up his Theory of Forms in the 'Allegory of the Cave' in *The Republic*. The character of Socrates gives a picture of people sitting in a cave, chained, their heads turned away from the cave mouth and the sunlight facing the wall at the back of the cave. There is a fire outside the cave. They can see the flickering shadows on the wall of the people passing outside and can hear their voices. The truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. "These prisoners would take the shadows for reality. Socrates imagines if one prisoner were set free and were suddenly blinded by the light outside and confronted with reality. This would be distressing at first but gradually the freed prisoner would be able to see things as they are, return to the cave, and teach the other prisoners the truth.

Plato has Socrates explain the allegory

- The prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and the journey upwards is the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world.

True knowledge, for Plato, meant abandoning the world of the senses and seeking by reason to discover the Forms or universals in one's own mind. Grasping these Forms leads to grasping true knowledge and, finally, to grasping the Good.

Plato believed that only the Forms could be 'known'. Mathematics could be 'understood', but the changing, physical world of nature could never be truly 'known' and was not fit subject for philosophical contemplation.

Plato concentrated in clarifying the distinction between *knowledge* and *belief*. Plato's thesis was that knowledge = belief + 'logos' (word). Knowledge is reliable but true belief is not. To have some confidence in your true beliefs you must give justification, which makes it reliable. This is often called today *Justified True Belief*, or JTB. There are major arguments and philosophical debates over the years as to the nature of the 'justified'.

Information Overload

The exponential increase in the quantity of data that we are creating and storing, and the decrease in storage cost with the advent of the internet and the web, we are faced with new problems which the old epistemology developed since Plato's time needs to address. In Plato's time the space to store a work written on scroll was large, and scrolls were very expensive to write and to reproduce. Books came along and libraries to store them, and now floppy, CD-ROM and magnetic storage. Combined with the internet and the world wide web, they brought about numerous opportunities to be explored. Although in the past the ordinary person could not access books and information easily, today anyone with a computer a telephone line and internet access has in hand a huge amount of information. This is a new phenomenon that we are not yet used to and it is *information overload*. There is no doubt that in time the way we extract information and knowledge out of the vast database of the web will change with new technologies such as XML, leading to a 'semantic web', [3]. Some do not consider the Internet as a significant change in technology to make it philosophically interesting. However the sudden increase in the available content coupled with the developments of new communication and computer technologies taken together could be very significant.

Knowledge and the Internet.

Information is transferable or it can be discovered via questions according to Plato. Is knowledge a psychological state done only by people? The JTB theory claims this is the case. Today, we teach students as Plato did and help them acquire knowledge. What we also do, which Plato could not do at that time, is to train engines to 'mimic' us. I wonder if in years to come we can have in classes, robots that sit side by side to humans to be trained. We have been able to master knowledge and make it useful for us. In this way we have tried to replicate knowledge successfully and created artificial machines to serve us. The machines provide us with data and via our knowledge and pre-programming provide us even with information which help us humans get new knowledge which we can believe and justify. I do not expect the machine to justify and hence to be knowledgeable as we can be. Useful knowledge therefore need not be justifiable. Machines offer us useful information, but they cannot believe it nor necessarily justify it as we are capable of. We programme the machines to do what we believe is true. We programme the rules and they follow them faithfully and we receive the results. It is our responsibility and not the machine's to create knowledge, which is not just useful but also justifiable, and aim for true knowledge, even though it sounds altruistic in the society we live in.

This leads me to the Internet first, which can be viewed as an artificial 'distributed engine' store of information. We store and retrieve and process information from the internet. The World Wide Web cannot 'believe' nor 'justify' knowledge it merely gives us what is stored in it if we 'ask' it appropriately. Since it is our 'creation' and we make into knowledge the information from it, hopefully because we can believe it and perhaps justify it. The internet is like a book that needs to be read in order to be converted knowledge in someone.

It is our responsibility to understand and learn the rules in order to programme the 'intelligent agents' to search the internet and bring us the information we need in order for us to convert it into knowledge. Plato said that we should be looking for the fixed truth, the fixed terms of reference as well, not just to understand the transient rules or changing world. This is a tall order for us, and this is the difference between 'true knowledge' and 'useful knowledge of which the latter may not last for more than a few years' to be replaced by a new useful knowledge at the time. Information can be useful to our lives but knowledge and wisdom is truly powerful. Once we have understood a type of knowledge then we are in a position to communicate it to others or to create machines (such as storing into the web) which obey our knowledge via programming rules and this way knowledge becomes useful and accessible by others, without necessarily being understood by them. They are not necessarily wiser but they can also benefit from the programmers knowledge.

By this reasoning, a tourism company may employ an expert (who can believe and justify his knowledge) with programming knowledge, to create an intelligent ticket issuing software. The company has now the expertise because he is employed with them. When the employee leaves the company, he leaves the software with them. The organisation does not need another expert because other employee's non-experts may use the software since it was developed to be used even by non-experts.

Does the organisation have the knowledge now that the expert developer has gone? The software runs well without the expert, the company survives and continues to make money without him. In my view the company does not have the expertise but they are users of someone else's product of knowledge. The company may believe in the software but they cannot justify the knowledge since they do not have an expert. They are simply users of a machine.

There is a difference therefore between knowledge and useful information products. Knowledge in the Platonic sense demands the ability to distinguish the changing physical world and the strife for fixed underlying forms of knowledge. Naturally approximate knowledge as well as artificial products of knowledge which 'externalise' knowledge are very useful but knowledge is 'materialised' in our brains while processes and products of knowledge need not.

Today, 'knowledge' has taken a more prosaic meaning, and the driving force behind the quest for knowledge is the economic benefits of the products of some basic knowledge. Knowledge has an economic value and a price associated with it. It has become a commodity and has a lifetime. The *justification* of knowledge (as in JTB) is less important or it is replaced by the financial justification of this knowledge, based on the exploitation of various '*knowledge products*'.

Even *true knowledge* (in JTB) is not as important and approximate knowledge, has a value attached to it as well. Let us not forget that the engineering discipline is a master of approximations!

Knowledge competes against knowledge today. For example, a communication link can be achieved with copper technology and can achieve the same performance as a competitive product using fibre optic cable.

Two technologies solve the same problem and can compete for the same market.

This is so similar to the early Sophists the very people Plato and later on Aristotle has criticised for training people in order to make making money! I do not think that the reason Plato disagreed with the Sophists was that he was afraid that he was losing students to the Sophists. Plato realised that the Sophist route was not simply the correct one. He realised that there is a downward spiral in this approach. Plato also developed a set of Ethics. The Ethics of Knowledge are more than often secondary today compared to the 'glare of hidden gold of knowledge commercialisation'. It is an inevitable conclusion that we have a major ethical responsibility not only for the search for knowledge, but for the improper use of the products generated by the knowledge. (For example, we have the responsibility for the effects of pollution in the atmosphere from car emissions, to the use of atomic weapons etc.). Therefore, although we are capitalising and often via unethical ways knowledge and knowledge products of any form, the value of knowledge as JTB is still in my view holding true and it is more important than ever. The reason is as follows: It is scientists who create theories explaining and predicting natural phenomena and they who create new knowledge, and not those who use it. The scientist can and do apply JTB in the creation of new knowledge. The internet and other knowledge products are useful without a doubt. Knowledge generated in our society today is used extensively and systematically in engineered products as never before in the past, as we live in a knowledge economy. The effective and ethical use of knowledge is just as important as knowledge itself. It has created new challenges and new questions as we have mastered knowledge gained with development of technology for the benefit of people within our capital driven societies. There would always be a problem in finding absolute points of reference (truths) in science, and although we can predict the natural phenomena we cannot always know the true reasons behind them. Plato wants us to always strive for higher truths, even if they are true to us until a better truth comes along to replace the old one.

I do not think Plato would be unhappy about the exploitation of knowledge by society, however he may be concerned with the ethical issues of knowledge exploitation today.

e-Tourism – A knowledge experience:

The Internet child of Tourism, *e-Tourism*, is said to be the fastest growing e-commerce sector, [4].

E-Tourism currently develops interdisciplinary knowledge to facilitate the flow of tourists and deliver the tourist to the 'product' in an efficient and cost effective way. The application of the internet, the world wide web, and multimedia information in web pages have facilitated the tourism process, by making it more efficient and effective financially. Technological products have transformed the efficiency of operations. The internet and e-commerce have been adopted extensively by the tourism product. The combination of internet technologies business principles and tourism can be viewed as the elements of e-tourism today. The use of web site technologies, communications technologies (e-mail, telephone, computers, fax, video clips brochures), search engines, secure electronic payment systems, combined with electronic booking systems are some examples of the extent of technology penetration in traditional tourist businesses.

What is the effect of the internet as a whole and multimedia information on e-tourism?

Tourism can be considered as an *information product*, which propels it into the e-commerce realms. At the point of sale, during the period leading to the time the product is actually consumed and at delivery, tourism has information intensive components.

If we just concentrate at the delivery, the information components can be for example, learning about the visiting place history, interacting with the indigenous communities and learning about their culture. The success of the tourism product may be judged successful depending on how good was the total experience of the tourist. In many ways it is a 'learning experience'.

- If we now accept that tourism is 'learning', it is 'discovering' and an 'experience', then can we say that tourism is a form of dissemination of knowledge?
- If Plato thinks that the best way to teach knowledge is via dialogue, what are the implications of the internet technologies and multimedia on tourism?
- Finally having revisited Plato's teachings, what can we learn from his wisdom in terms of the Ethics and responsibility of knowledge, and finally can we get pointers into what directions to take for a JTB Knowledge-based e-tourism of the future?

Written-Dialectics circa 360 B.C.

Plato's favourite way of teaching in his Academy was *dialectic*. He was a prolific writer in dialogue style and interestingly he believed that writing was a degenerate form of communication, and this no doubt influenced his adoption of the dialogue form. In the *Pbaedrus*,

Socrates says:

Writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offspring of painting stand there as if they were alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they are solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it gives just the same message over and over. Once it has been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching just as much those with understanding as those who have no business with it, and it does not know to whom it should speak and to whom not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it cannot defend itself or come to its own support, [5].

Students have always studied and learned in places geographically separated from their lecturers. And lecturers have always provided the means for them to do so, even as they warned that this is not the best way to acquiring an education. The technology that made this possible was the written word. The first significant use of the new technology to make course materials available to students came with the Plato's publication of Socrates' Dialogues. Ironically it is in the Dialogues that we find the first hints of discomfort from the faculty "rear-guard action to try to slow down or stop the inevitable."

In *Pheadrus*, Plato's Socrates challenges the new technology head on, questioning whether the mythical discovery of the written word served any useful purpose. Socrates describes the demon Theuth presenting the King of all Egypt with the arts of calculation, geometry, astronomy, games of dice, and the written word. Theuth argues the merits of each of the arts, asking that they be given out to all Egyptians. The written word, Theuth claims, would "make Egyptians wiser and provide them with better memory". The King demurs, insisting that that just the opposite will follow:

"this will provide forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it You have found a drug not for memory but for reminding. You are supplying the opinion of wisdom to students, not truth. For you'll see that, having become hearers of much without teaching, they will seem to be sensible judges in much, while being for the most part senseless, and hard to be with, since they've become wise in their own opinions instead of wise".

In the end, Socrates acknowledges that writing does serve some useful functions in poetry, speech writing, and the writing of laws, but, he insists, it is not the medium for instruction and for those who seek the truth through philosophy. There is much irony here. What Socrates says is entirely consistent with his own approach to teaching. But why does Plato have Socrates say these things? Maybe students were cutting his classes, depending on the lecture notes Plato had written to make for what they missed. After all, why should a student attend the Academy when the best teachings are already written down?

The primary fault Socrates finds in the written word, and what distinguishes it from good teaching practice, is that it is fixed, it says the same thing to all who read it. The best way to learning Socrates is arguing, comes not from a fixed presentation but from an interactive and dynamic dialogue.

Multimedia-dialectics circa 2060:

Many of the predictions that the Internet will bring major change to higher education fail to describe just how digital distance education will differ from the distance education that has been available to students through the printed medium for the past two millennium. Let us not forget that libraries and bookstores are full of books that offer to teach readers the same material educators present in their classes. Lecturers have always found useful roles to perform despite this. They also do not clarify just what kind of teaching the Internet is most likely to replace.

Multimedia information however does differ from written text in that it is richer information since it involves audio and video means of presentation which is missing from text. When done intelligently it is by far superior in conveying a message across, as well as to sustaining the attention and interest of people than merely written text. Libraries do not have (as yet) multimedia teaching aids. Multimedia is therefore a new technology which is potentially more valuable than text, since it adds to text new media for human communication.

We can simulate the physical laws of our universe in a *virtual reality* simulator where a student or a 'tourist' can learn by experiencing and by experimenting in a controlled manner with those laws.

We can simulate imaginary physical laws or physics or laws of other universes in virtual reality simulators and teach those in a way that it was never possible before.

This was not possible at the time of Plato's Academy. However, written text at that time was just as innovative to them as multimedia is to us today. However learning today with multimedia is better than learning with just text.

However, what can we say about dialectics? The points made above on dialectic teaching are just as valid today. Multimedia and Simulators do have similar problems to what text has. It does not reply when asked unless the programmer has guessed the question and it has been included in the simulator design. In that respect simulators take us no further to new knowledge than books do. They are just as specific, although better in communicating knowledge.

Does the internet make a difference? The internet as a means of communication ideally eliminates communication distance. High bandwidth internet communications and networking allows geographically dispersed groups of people to communicate in real time using multimedia. This is technically possible today even if it is not yet widely available. The implication is that students geographically dispersed from the lectures can have a real time dialogue with the professor and maintain a 'dialectic' form of communication, which is the ideal means for learning and more importantly generating new knowledge. This was not possible in Plato's time, and we are fortunate to live at a time when this is possible and happening.

Platonically speaking the value of the internet as a means of accessing existing knowledge stored in the network of databases is in my view inferior to the value of the internet in assisting real time dialectics which is the best way for gaining new knowledge. This can be justified because only new knowledge maintains the momentum of change and fuels the improvement of our society. Looking at it commercially, since knowledge has a lifetime and it has become a commodity today, only new knowledge will sustain a business to survive. There is no doubt however that both are needed.

e-Tourism dialectics circa 2060:

Global tourism is said 'to threaten indigenous knowledge and intellectual property rights, the technologies, religions, sacred sites, social structures and relationships, wildlife, ecosystems economies and basic rights to informed understanding; reduces indigenous peoples to simply another consumer product that is quickly becoming exhaustible'.

'Tourism may introduce a consumer culture into communities whose societies and values may not be based on economic power of the individual. The quest for authenticity often leads to prostitution of the local culture for the demand and enjoyment of the tourist'.

These are some of the allegations and dangers of the world's largest industry.

Far sighted tourism has interests in maintaining the diversity of the world we live in, in maintaining the endangered and the microcosm from the 'machination' which causes loss of enchantment with the world and loss of alternative styles of disclosing and learning the world, [6],[7],[8],[9],[10].

How can e-Tourism contribute positively to the above problems?

There is no doubt that the current trend in tourism is to facilitate the tourist to visit the real product wherever in the world this is located. In an efficient and effective application of a multitude of technologies we use the internet to make this possible.

This trend fundamentally does nothing to alleviate the above problems. We are in practice accentuating the problems, by perturbing and hence altering the very product we are wish to study and pay for. Eventually we will destroy it and hence move to another place, which has not been developed yet, develop it and repeat the cycle. This may sound extreme and unfair, but it is happening in many places.

The challenge to maintain the 'indigenous society' (the product) and values while still being possible for the tourist to 'visit' and interact with the locals.

It is interesting to realise that it is now becoming possible with the advent of the Internet technologies to consider alternatives, which were never possible in the past.

It may be appropriate to consider a new approach, to consider the experiment of moving the product to the tourist, hence reverse the trend of moving the tourist to the product facilitated by at least two technologies:

1. The internet and advanced communications can be used to bring to the tourist the experience of being there. The use of multimedia allows very rich forms of information to be transmitted to the tourist who maybe is at home. The use of real time video and video clips can be used to convey to a virtual tourist a sense of 'being there', a sense of presence, without having to travel there. Learning about the culture of the people whom we visit virtually can be enhanced with internet dialectics, e-tourism dialectics, since we can have real time communication with anyone in the world, and we can learn and converse with the local people and enquire them remotely. We can therefore develop technologies for e-Tourism, which can create real time communications with remote parts of the world, which allows us to observe, listen, discuss, even interact and experiment 'remotely'. This gives us an opportunity to create a valuable sustainable product with minimum perturbation from the tourist observer, and attempts to alleviate the above problems.

2. The use of virtual reality can have a profound effect on recreating as faithfully as possible 'lost' civilisations and places of interest to tourists allowing them to participate and virtually interact with the environment. Via the internet which as a huge repository of knowledge and experience can be delivered to the home.

The new opportunities available to us via virtual tourism have not yet been developed nor exploited.

The internet and e-Tourism technologies of the future allow us to attempt the reversing of the tourism momentum of taking tourists to the product and creating the opposite. Such a project would solve some of the problems raised above, minimising the interference with the very product we wish to learn and experience.

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