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BEING A NOOB

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When I was young, I thought old people had everything figured out. Now that I'm old, I know this isn't true.

I constantly feel like a noob. It seems like I'm always talking to some startup working in a new field I know nothing about, or reading a book about a topic I don't understand well enough, or visiting some new country where I don't know how things work.

It's not pleasant to feel like a noob. And the word "noob" is certainly not a compliment. And yet today I realized something encouraging about being a noob: the more of a noob you are locally, the less of a noob you are globally.

For example, if you stay in your home country, you'll feel less of a noob than if you move to Farawavia, where everything works differently. And yet you'll know more if you move. So the feeling of being a noob is inversely correlated with actual ignorance.

But if the feeling of being a noob is good for us, why do we dislike it? What evolutionary purpose could such an aversion serve?

I think the answer is that there are two sources of feeling like a noob: being stupid, and doing something novel. Our dislike of feeling like a noob is our brain telling us "Come on, come on, figure this out." Which was the right thing to be thinking for most of human history. The life of hunter-gatherers was complex, but it didn't change as much as life does now. They didn't suddenly have to figure out what to do about cryptocurrency. So it made sense to be biased toward competence at existing problems over the discovery of new ones. It made sense for humans to dislike the feeling of being a noob, just as, in a world where food was scarce, it made sense for them to dislike the feeling of being hungry.

Now that too much food is more of a problem than too little, our dislike of feeling hungry leads us astray. And I think our dislike of feeling like a noob does too.

Though it feels unpleasant, and people will sometimes ridicule you for it, the more you feel like a noob, the better.

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