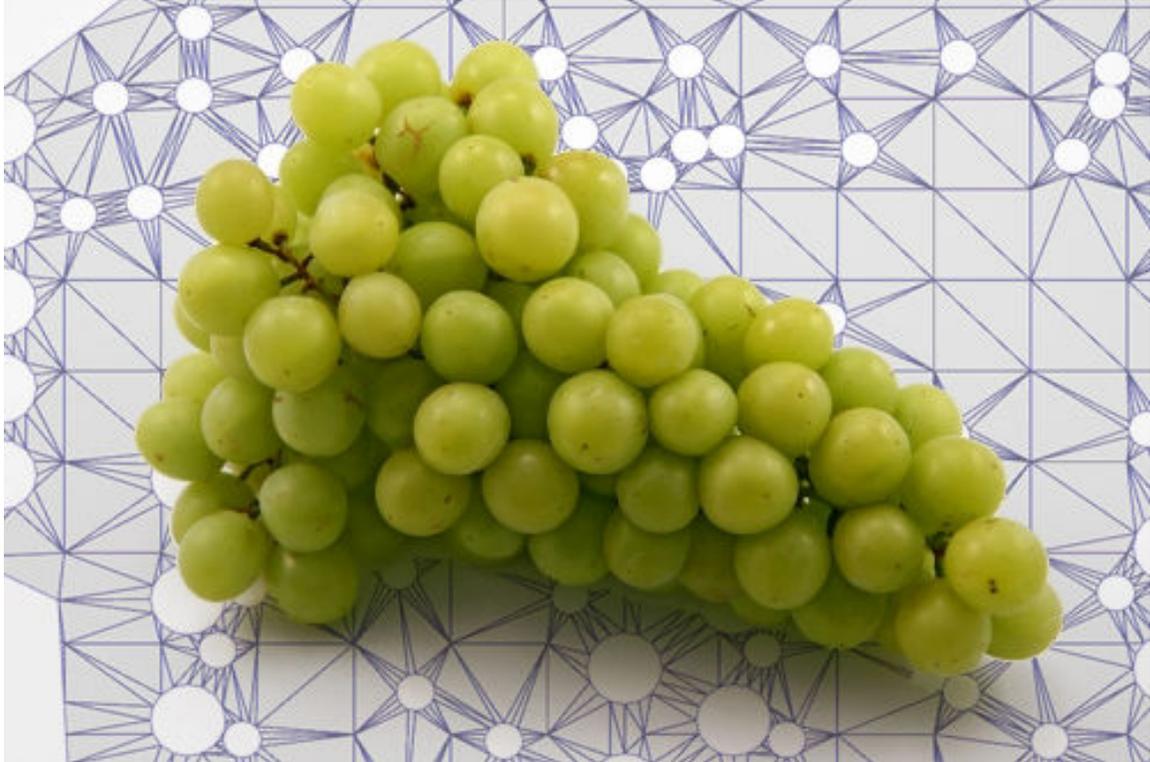


Pleasure Enhancement and the Abolitionists



Transhumans have a limited ability to experience pleasure. As enjoyable inputs increase, the pleasure does not increase as much and eventually plateaus. It also tends to habituate and fade. Even tasting has limits. Pleasure enhancement neural hacks try to fix this, enabling trans- and posthuman levels of hedonism.

There are four main versions:

Improved pleasure memories: The hippocampus-midbrain links are strengthened so that the pleasurable emotional content of memories can give a stronger signal. This can be done with bioware or neuralware. The result is usually rather benign in psychologically normal people and has been used to treat some forms of depression. In some people memory addiction occurs (a likely Trauma when something unpleasant happens), and people with this enhancement are particularly vulnerable to new addictions and tasting (-30 to resistance rolls). Removing the enhancement tends to produce depressive symptoms. SV: 1d10/2. [Cost: Bioware: Low, Neuralware: Moderate]

Removal of habituation: Pleasure does not fade or habituate as rapidly as normal. A popular version is the party drug Purrrfect, but it also exists as a neural hack of the forebrain. The overall effect is to make pleasant things improve mood and enjoyment for longer. There are reports that users become unmotivated and "too content" in their everyday lives (WIL -10 for purposes of doing something unrewarding when there is something nice to do). SV: 1 [Cost: Drug, Bioware, Neuralware: Low]

Enlargement: This bioware system allows radical hedonic enhancement. The VTA/mesolimbic bundle system is expanded so that greater magnitudes of pleasure can be experienced. Usually the VTA response function is also made more linear for pleasure, since otherwise it would be very hard to achieve extreme levels of ecstasy. People with this enhancement will feel enjoyment in pleasurable situations that is normally impossible to experience: they not just feel more when enjoying art, sex or doing something useful, but when it is really good it goes beyond normal limits of ecstasy. In fact, the implant deliberately has an autonomous system cut-off to avoid excessive autonomous responses - otherwise the user could get tachycardia and literally die from pleasure.

An obvious downside is that this level of happiness is very addictive: characters experiencing ecstasy will develop a minor addiction to their source if they fail a WILx3 roll (and a critical failure produces moderate addiction). Note that they can develop addictions to any pleasure source as long as it is equally good, and that they all substitute for each other. For example, after the user has experienced sex with enlarged pleasure, they may become addicted to the experience. However, having an ecstatic athletic experience can also cause addiction - and now the character will crave sex or sports equally. Taspung will risk major addiction directly: it is the only way of reaching the full potential of pleasure. It is possible to add an anti-addiction bioware hack that temporarily blocks nucleus accumbens plasticity (cost: [Moderate]) that removes this risk, but this protection (somewhat crudely called an accumbens condom) must be deliberately activated during the experience - forgetting it will risk addiction (and who can remember such small things when heavenly experiences are about to happen?) Removing the bioware will cause 3d10 SV and very likely extreme depression as a Trauma.

There are rumours of hedonistic exhumans who have added multiple banks of mesolimbic bioware, reaching truly posthuman levels of enjoyment. They might even be permanently taspung some banks, while leaving others free to motivate action. However, it is unlikely they are able to (or would ever want to) live any kind of normal, useful life.

SV: 2d10 Cost: [High]. Illegal or restricted in most inner system habitats.

Modifiable motivation: What is enjoyable or not depends to a large degree on the connectivity of the VTA with the rest of the brain. Change that, and the pleasure of (say) music, sex, a particular painting or doing maths can be changed. While such motivator levels can be changed using Psychosurgery (as system as emotional control), it is possible to make a nanotech implant that allows direct manipulation of afferent strength. When in use, the owner (or somebody controlling the implant) can regulate the level of pleasure produced by the current input-pattern, essentially deciding how much to like it or not in the future. To prevent autotaspung the total effect is kept constant; making yourself love classical music ecstatically will slightly reduce the enjoyment of everything else. This allows a character to change their values and motivations on the fly. A simple shift (such as liking/disliking a person, a kind of food or exercise) is nearly instant, while shifting political or sexual preferences may take a week of adjustment in different situations and may require a WIL roll.

Cost: [High] Stress value: nothing for implanting the system, but once the character starts to realize the total arbitrariness of their values and motivations, roll for a SV 2d10 philosophical crisis. Radical shifts in motivation (or the occurrence of fundamental contradictions in value,

behavior or social situation) may cause further 1d10 stress... unless the character decides to not care about being inconsistent.

{See Greg Egan's short story "Reasons to be cheerful" for a fantastic writeup of how this implant works}

Note that it is entirely possible (though very, very inadvisable!) to stack these enhancements.

Abolitionists

Abolitionists is a faction that want to abolish suffering and maximize pleasure. Once suffering had an evolutionary purpose but in this era of self-modification and artificial environments it can be replaced with something more suited for rational beings. There should not be any trade-off between motivation and pleasure: while passive enjoyment has its place, so does life in dopaminergic hyperdrive.

Abolitionists are not just hedonists enjoying what they have, but strive for opening the gateway to ecstasy for all of transhumanity. They are generally in favor of radical human enhancement, yet interested in keeping the best results of the old culture around. They tend to get along with all but the most bioconservative, duty-oriented and militant groups - and of course, their parties are legendary.

There is a split between the "dark" abolitionists who focus on ameliorating suffering, even to the extent of preventing suffering beings from coming into existence (or maybe staying in existence) and the "light" abolitionists who think a bit of pain is acceptable as long as there is much more pleasure. There are also "green" abolitionists who emphasize the abolishment of suffering in animals and "lower" lifeforms - which may require some heavy ecological and biological re-engineering. Some of the most radical green abolitionists want to - in the long run - get rid of all forms of predation from the universe.

Advantages: +20 Interest [Partying], +10 Protocol, +10 to Kinesics, Medicine or Psychosurgery, +10 Networking: Media

Disadvantages: None

Common morphs: Exalts, Sylphs, Pleasure Pods, Synthmorphs (due to their natural pain control), Infomorphs

Obligatory reference: <http://www.hedweb.com/>