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Articles ~ Ghost hunting and beyond ~The truth about ghost hunting, sorting the hobbyists from the amateur researchers

Hobbies are practiced for interest and enjoyment, rather than financial reward. Engaging in a hobby can lead to acquiring substantial skill, knowledge, and experience. However, personal fulfillment is the aim. Almost no one can make a living at stamp collecting, but many people find it enjoyable; so it is commonly regarded as a hobby. While some hobbies strike many people as trivial or boring, hobbyists have found something compelling and entertaining about them. Much early scientific research was, in effect, a hobby of the wealthy. Linux began as a student's hobby. A hobby may not be as trivial as it appears at a time when it has relatively few followers.

The popularity of paranormal shows such as the Medium and Ghost Hunters has brought Ghost Hunting into the mainstream. As a result, the hobby of researching paranormal activity has become common. For the adventurous, the hobby of researching paranormal activity can be an escape from the daily routine. So the simple truth about ghost hunting is that it is predominately a hobby, nothing more.

By contrast, an amateur is generally considered a person attached to a particular pursuit, study, or science, without **formal training or pay**. Research is defined as human activity based on intellectual application in the investigation of matter. The primary aim for applied research is discovering, interpreting, and the development of methods and systems for the advancement of human knowledge on a wide variety of scientific matters of our world and the universe.

Scientific research relies on the application of the scientific method, a harnessing of curiosity. This research provides scientific information and theories for the explanation of the nature and the properties of the world around us. It makes practical applications possible. Scientific research is funded by public authorities, by charitable organizations and by private groups, including many companies. Scientific research can be subdivided into different classifications according to their academic and application disciplines. (definitions from wikipedia)

However there is a large difference between participating in a hobby, taking a hobby seriously and doing actual research. There is nothing wrong with the hobby itself. However confusion is often created by the hobbyist groups claiming to be more than what they are (intentional or not). The focus of this article is to provide a guide to help the general public sort the hobbyists from the amateur researchers.

Ghost Hunting as a hobby

In many ways ghost hunting as a hobby may resemble trophy hunting. A group of individuals goes to a "haunted" place to collect photos and evp's which are then displayed in a gallery on their website. Some research may be done about the location's history as well.

Hobbyists can be identified by several factors;

1. Reliance on belief systems

The belief in ghosts and spirits is, of course, based on a belief system. Belief systems are influenced by a person's worldview, ideology, religion and philosophy. Belief systems are not always scientific and may include things such as demons, nature spirits, elementals, angels and the like. They can also be factors in determining the tools of the hobbyist (dowsing rods, ouija boards, tarot cards, etc..) Belief systems are detrimental to scientific method because they are a major cause of [bias](#). [This article](#) covers many of the problems with [belief systems](#) and "[paranormal research](#)".

2. Lack of or improper use of the Scientific Method.

Scientific method refers to bodies of techniques for investigating phenomena, acquiring new knowledge, or correcting and integrating previous knowledge. To be termed scientific, a method of inquiry must be based on [gathering observable, empirical and measurable evidence](#) subject to specific principles of [reasoning](#). A scientific method consists of the collection of data through [observation](#) and [experimentation](#), and the formulation and testing of [hypotheses](#) (from wikipedia).

Hobbyists often lack a hypothesis. When asked "What are ghosts?" they often reply;

"No one knows what ghosts are."

or

"There is much debate on what the right tools are, and what the right method is. The fact of the matter is plainly stated: No one knows... All we can do is search for answers to possible unanswerable questions."

So if you have no idea what they are, exactly how are you looking for them?

There are two important points to make here. The first is simple logic.

In order to claim that something is "paranormal" you must first know if the observed phenomena is normal (or explainable). This is where the hobbyist often fails. The cause of this failure is often the lack of continuing education in knowledge of what is normal (that is defined by knowledge acquired in the various fields of science).

Hobbyists learn about ghost hunting from books, predominately written by other hobbyists, and from watching television programs, which are intended as "entertainment" only. It is basically "monkey see, monkey do".

The second point evolves around scientific method itself. You observe the phenomena and then formulate a hypothesis. In other words, at some point you are going to have to take a guess. Your hypothesis will describe what you are searching for and determine the tools that you will need to detect and measure it. The information you receive either supports the hypothesis or suggests that it is incorrect. Basically it is learning by "trial and error".

Amateur researchers, at a minimum, will list a short description of their hypotheses in a document or web page on their website. another major difference is the use of [scientific controls](#) to ensure that the data collected is tangible and "clean".

3. Inflating credentials

The hypotheses on what ghosts may be differ greatly from one group to another but more importantly, ghosts haven't be proven to exist yet. So how can someone be a "certified ghost hunter" when there is no tangible data or evidence to base that certification on? This topic is covered in more detail in [this article](#). The only honest credentials a ghost hunter/paranormal investigator can have are training and education in things that are normal (in other words a degree or continued education in physics, psychology, etc..). It is only through the knowledge of "what's normal" that one can determine if something is paranormal.

4. "Evidence"

"Unexplainable" photos, video and sound recordings that are collected at a haunted location are often called evidence by the hobbyist. The use of this word is actually misleading. The definition of the word from wikipedia follows;

Evidence in its broadest sense includes everything that is used to determine or demonstrate the truth of an assertion. Giving or procuring evidence is the process of using those things that are either a) presumed to be true, or b) were themselves proven via evidence, to demonstrate an assertion's truth. Evidence is the currency by which one fulfills the [burden of proof](#).

Despite decades of unusual photos, videos and evp's, nothing presented as evidence has fulfilled the burden of proof and never will. The lack of a testable hypothesis, proper instrumentation (and proper use of that instrumentation) sufficient knowledge, proper analysis and validation of the collected data prevents these submissions from any serious consideration by the scientific community. The financial requirements needed to obtain what is needed is often beyond the reach of people interested in paranormal phenomena. At best, "evidence" collected by hobbyists is nothing more than a validation of their own belief system (this place is haunted and ghosts do exist).

Understanding these problems, amateur researchers refer to the gathered information as data.

from wikipedia;

Data refers to a collection of facts usually collected as the result of experience, observation or experiment, or processes within a computer system, or a set of premises. This may consist of numbers, words, or images, particularly as measurements or observations of a set of variables. Data is often viewed as a lowest level of abstraction from which information and knowledge are derived.

Data is the fuel that drives a hypothesis or destroys it. The knowledge gained by it is only as good as the data itself (collection techniques, proper analysis and verification).

5. Equipment and instrumentation

One of the primary ways to identify hobbyists is by the equipment that they use. Skeptics of ghost hunting make several valid points;

".... using equipment for a purpose for which it was not made and has not been shown to be effective. They're trying to use the respect of science — hey, look at this fancy equipment — to justify their superstitious beliefs. If they get a reading on their EMF meter," said Nickell, "or they get a picture of an orb on their camera — and because they don't know what's causing that — they say, 'Therefore it must be a ghost.' This is a logical fallacy. ... They're ghost buffs, they're enthusiasts, and yes, they read stuff off the Internet, but they're not trained. You don't want people just reading the occasional medical article and going to practice medicine." ([Joe Nickell](#))

Before I elaborate on this, there is an important issue that needs to be mentioned. Instruments are "graded" based on their degree of resolution and accuracy. Scientific grade or high grade instrumentation is a standard and requirement of the Scientific method. Instruments of this nature require [calibration](#) to ensure the quality of their measurements. Equipment that is not "scientific grade" is subject to providing false or inaccurate measurements. All of the equipment listed below **are not** scientific grade.



EMF Meters

The most common tool of the hobbyist is the EMF meter.

These meters measure the electromagnetic radiation flux density, which is the amplitude of any emitted radiation. Other meters measure the change in an electromagnetic field over time.

Electromagnetic fields can be either AC (Alternating current) or DC (Direct current). An EMF meter can measure AC electromagnetic fields, which are usually emitted from man-made sources such as electrical wiring, while Gauss meters or magnetometers measure DC fields, which occur naturally in the earth's geomagnetic field and are emitted from other sources where direct current is present.

The problems with these meters are many. First of all an electromagnetic field or wave is characterized by two properties, its' frequency and waveform. These two properties are needed to measure the field so you can identify what it is (it's likely source). EMF meters do not provide this information. The low quality of these meters are also subject to erroneous readings, especially EMR sources like ham radio, CB's and other transmitted signals. Power surges from power lines can affect the meters from distances up to 200'. Building wiring or appliances will also be detected. An example of this can be seen at [this website](#). Once again, before you can claim that something is paranormal, you first have to know if it's normal and these meters cannot do that.



Infrared Thermometers

Infrared thermometers work by emitting an IR beam of light. When this light reaches an object, the temperatures of the object affects the IR beam. The instrument is able to measure the variance of the emitted beam and converts it to temperature. Ghost hunters use these devices to detect what they believe are cold spots in rooms.

The problem here is that IR thermometers are not capable of detecting something without a visible surface, so they cannot measure a "cold spot" in the center of a room. Additionally they are designed to be used at a specified distance, generally 6" to 3' (depending on the model).

This is a classic example of Nickell's argument. It is not designed for what ghost hunters are using it for.



Ouija boards and dowsing rods

These are probably the most controversial of ghost hunting tools, in that increasingly few people accept that they have any useful function. Yet ghost hunters still employ them. And why not? A self-described psychic's untestable verbal reports are under the psychic's complete control. They cannot be tested, measured, or duplicated by others ,they say only what the psychic/user wants them to say.

Dowsing rods simply give the dowsers another way to communicate whatever they choose to communicate. Since the rods are held in the dowser's own hand, they move only when the dowser wants them to move, and do not move when the dowser doesn't want them to. No form of dowsing has ever passed any type of controlled test, and no dowser has ever proposed any plausible hypothesis suggesting that dowsing might be an actual phenomenon. It is among the most childish of pretended ghost detection methods. The only thing you can learn from dowsing is which way the dowser wants to swing his dowsing rods. (source: <http://skeptoid.com/>)

By contrast, amateur researcher will often not have a page listing all of their "equipment". Their instrumentation is often research specific and rented. Instead, any instrumentation used in research is listed in a document reporting their findings.

6. Website

A group's website can provide allot of information to ascertain exactly what they are. In addition to the topics listed above, here are a few other things that divide the hobbyist from the amateur researcher.

A.) Investigation reports/findings: A typical sign of a hobbyist website is a "gallery" of photographs, video and evp. Details of the collection methods, how the findings were recorded and what the data may represent are an important part of research and are often ignored. Scientific method demands that all results be reported, both positive and negative. Hobbyists often neglect to report negative results or may by-pass the reporting process all together. This is the data that drives a hypothesis.

Hobbyists often visit a location a few times before moving on to other "hunting grounds". Amateur researchers will perform repeat visits to the locations they believe are active because they are studying the phenomena occurring there.

Investigation reports can also provide credence to the experience of a group. If a group claims to be twenty years old, do they have reports going back twenty years?

How active is the group? How many hunts (investigations, research projects) a group does in a year may offer other clues. The proper analysis of collected data can take weeks, even months, to complete. So if a group is small and doing dozens of hunts/investigations in a single year, they are probably hobbyists.

Groups that are claiming to be researchers should have their research findings visible to the general public.

B.) The name game; Groups will often identify themselves by their geological location followed by Ghost Hunters, paranormal investigators, paranormal/ghost research, etc. There is nothing wrong with that. The only difference is that paranormal organizations often look into things other than ghosts (bigfoot, UFO's, etc.) However when words such as "advanced" or "scientific" are used in a name, it is best to look with scrutiny. With the information you just read, [look here](#) and see what is meant.

Sources and references:

<http://skeptoid.com/>

<http://wikipedia.org>

[Back to SGHA articles](#)