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Obsessed with smartphones, oblivious to the here and now

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By Michael S. Rosenwald
Washington Post Staff Writer

Jay Ferrari was squatting on a step-stool next to the bathtub, which held his 4-year-old daughter and a rising tide, when he sensed an opening to use the Sicilian Dragon defense in his iPhone-to-iPhone chess match against his neighbor.

"Why do my feet feel wet?" he thought. He looked down. His feet were soaked. He turned and saw an ecstatic little girl enjoying her first tsunami.

"Oh, no," Ferrari said. He didn't flinch. With one hand, he executed the chess move; with the other, he turned off the faucet. The absurdity of the moment was not lost on him -- or his wife. "Dude," he told himself, "this is not appropriate. What are you doing?"

Physically, Ferrari resides in the Manor Park section of Northwest Washington, but his wife would say he really lives in a digital world, where smartphones are more stimulating to some people than the life unfolding around them.

You see these tethered souls everywhere: The father joining in an intense Twitter debate at his daughter's dance recital. The woman cracking wise on Facebook while strolling through the mall. The guy on a date reviewing his fish tacos on Yelp. Not to mention drivers staring down instead of through their windshields.

Physically, they are present. Mentally, they are elsewhere, existing as bits of data pinging between cellphone towers.

"My wife has physically pulled the thing out of my hands a couple times," said Ferrari, who has been nabbed checking his Twitter feed at, among other places, his in-laws' dining room table. "She says it's like I'm picking my nose in public."

Doomsayers have long predicted that technological progress would turn us into shut-ins who rarely venture from our game-playing, IM-ing digital cocoons out into the physical world. But the stereotype of the computer-addicted recluse in the basement has been blown away; smartphones make it possible to turn off the physical world while walking through it.

A recent Pew Research Center study found that "a significant proportion of people who visit public and semipublic spaces are online while in those spaces." Parks. Libraries. Restaurants. Houses of worship.

'Checking out'

The doomsayers didn't foresee the portability that smartphones bring to digital obsession. Nor did they foresee app stores. More than 2 billion applications have been downloaded for iPhones, and the Yankee Group, a Boston research firm, expects 7 billion app downloads via all mobile devices by 2013 -- an overwhelming new universe of diversion.

The competition this digital world poses stretches into life's most intimate places. Elizabeth Sloan, a local marriage counselor, worked with a couple after the husband began surfing his smartphone during sex.

"I wish I was joking," Sloan said. "This is a real hot topic right now for marriage counselors -- and the complaints are coming from men and women. You hear this a lot: 'I can't reach you. I can't find you. You can be sitting two inches from me, but you are not there. Where are you?' Spouses are checking out at dinner, on vacation. It's really become a 24-7 thing."

To understand why, consider how life has changed for Ferrari and Mike Granetz, who have created PeakTwo, a marketing firm. When Ferrari, 40, and Granetz, 36, were growing up, the acquisition of information happened at a particular place at a particular time. The newspaper delivered box scores to the front yard. The evening news delivered the world to the living room TV. When someone called, the phone rang in the house, not at Pizza Hut.

"We put up with taking longer to get information for one reason: because we had to," said Paul Levinson, a professor of media studies at Fordham University.

Now Ferrari, who works at home, strolls around his house with his iPhone attached to a sling holding his 3-month-old daughter, Violet. Granetz's iPhone is in his hands within seconds after he wakes up. Ferrari and Granetz live for when they get an alert from their iPhones about new information or a new version of an app. The flow of information never ceases. Neither does the thrill of anticipation.

"You have no idea what's going to show up next," said Granetz, who lives in South Riding. "You crave it. Is it going to show up on Facebook? On ESPN? Did the price of a house I've been watching for two years suddenly drop? I don't think the topic even matters. And yeah, I know this makes me sound crazy."

Can't resist the high

Gravity Tank, a Chicago consulting firm, recently studied app users. The smallest group, "recent converts," just dabble in apps. "Life optimizers" use apps as an extension of their brain, organizing every minute of their day. Then there's the largest group, the "constantly entertained," such as Ferrari and Granetz, who covet data and fear boredom.

Their age is about 30. Sixty-eight percent are men. Nearly half are married. Average number of apps on their phones: 21. Seventy-three percent said they use apps "all the time." Top reason: "It seems like a fun and entertaining escape."

Why is the seemingly random -- and admittedly often meaningless -- information that Ferrari and Granetz crave more compelling to them than playing pony with their children? It is not because they are bad parents, psychologists say. It is not because they are men. (Sorry, ladies.) It is because they are human, and

human beings tend to repeat actions that are pleasurable and rewarding, particularly if they get our endorphins flowing. The complication is that we devalue delayed rewards -- the feeling, for instance, of looking back on lovely moments with family -- in favor of the immediacy of the new. In this case, it's data. It makes us high.

Try this, said Tom Stafford, a cognitive neuroscientist in Britain: Get some friends together and tell them you will give them $100 now or $200 next year. Most of them, he said, will take the $100. Now tell them they can have $100 in 10 years or $200 in 11 years. Most will take the $200 because there is nothing immediate, or more exciting, fogging up their calculation about which is the greater reward.

"Smartphones capitalize on the weaker, short-term version of ourselves rather than helping us focus on the long view," Stafford said.

They also help fill in the silent gaps in relationships, said Naomi Baron, an American University linguist who studies digital communication. "You can't assume we always have something to say to each other," she said. "Why do restaurants play music in the background? Because otherwise there's the uncomfortable dead silence."

So the dead space fills with more silence, and the intimacy that should be happening face-to-face now occurs between cellphone towers. A brief check on Facebook to fill silence with the missis turns into a 20-minute digital conversation. And a spouse watches her loved one slip away.

"This is not always the issue that brings couples to counseling, but eventually it comes out," said Erin Morey, a family therapist in McLean. "There's this isolation, the feeling that their partner is more connected to the gadget."

Nobody knows where this is all headed. Jaron Lanier, one of the creators of virtual reality technology and author of "You Are Not a Gadget," hopes all these advances will create greater appreciation of the physical world. "It might take a while," he said, "but one day, I hope we notice that reality is much more textured and interesting."

That horizon seems far off. Apple recently unveiled its iPad, giving users a bigger and faster way to make data portable. Cellphone developers are working to significantly increase download speeds. The prospects both excite and frighten Granetz.

"I don't know how we turn this off," he said.

Capitalism smells an opportunity: There's now a 99-cent iPhone app, "Type n Walk," that uses the device's camera to display on screen what is happening in the physical world, giving users the confidence, if not the ability, to walk and type at the same time. One user offered this review in the iTunes store: "It refreshed my faith in mankind."