The Attention-Span Myth
By Virginia Heffernan
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We seem to know a great deal about attention spans, those constituents of character that have become the digital-age equivalent of souls.

Everyone has an attention span. It can be short or long. Long is good. Good scholars, good citizens and good children have long attention spans. Attention spans used to be robust; now they are stunted. Technology — MTV, the Internet, the iPhone — shriveled them. Nicholas Carr, who argued in “The Shallows” that Web use practically causes brain damage, told PBS that technology is “pushing even more distractions and interruptions on us” and thus will never “return to us our attention span.”

At the same time, there is a pro-technology view of attention spans — rarer, but no less confident. Science writers like Jonah Lehrer have pointed to studies that seem to demonstrate perfectly respectable attention spans in gamers and Web users.

And so polemicists of various stripes continue to calibrate the effect of technology on attention spans. But I’m surprised that anyone ventures so far into this thicket of sophistry. I get stuck much earlier in the equation. Everyone has an attention span: really? And really again: an attention span is a freestanding entity like a boxer’s reach, existing independently of any newspaper or chess game that might engage or repel it, and which might be measured by the psychologist’s equivalent of a tailor’s tape?

Maybe my own brain is faltering in a Web wasteland, but I don’t get it. Whether the Web is making us smarter or dumber, isn’t there something just unconvincing about the idea that an occult “span” in the brain makes certain cultural objects more compelling than others? So a kid loves the drums but can hardly get through a chapter of “The Sun Also Rises”; and another aces algebra tests but can’t even understand how Call of Duty is played. The actions of these children may dismay or please adults, but anyone who has ever been bored by one practice and absorbed by another can explain the kids’ choices more persuasively than does the dominant model, which ignores the content of activities in favor of a wonky span thought vaguely to be in the brain.

So how did we find ourselves with this unhappy attention-span conceit, and with the companion idea that a big attention span is humankind’s best moral and aesthetic asset? In other eras, distractibility wasn’t considered shameful. It was regularly praised, in fact — as autonomy, exuberance and versatility. To be brooding, morbid, obsessive or easily mesmerized was thought much worse than being distractible. In “Moby-Dick,” Starbuck tries to distract Ahab from his monomania with evocations of family life in Nantucket. Under the spell of “a cruel, remorseless emperor” — his own single-mindedness — Ahab stays his fatal course. Ahab’s doom comes from his undistractibility.

In 19th-century American literature, the resting state from which characters seek distraction is sorrow or fury. No wonder distraction seems kind. In “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” Tom, the prototypical hyperactive rascal who plays with a beetle rather than sit still in church, resists
sadness “not because his troubles were one whit less heavy and bitter to him than a man’s are to a man, but because a new and powerful interest bore them down and drove them out of his mind for the time — just as men’s misfortunes are forgotten in the excitement of new enterprises.”

In the 1920s, a decade before T. S. Eliot recognized being “distracted from distraction by distraction” as part of the modernist plight, Bertolt Brecht made the case for a “smokers’ theater,” which encouraged the audience to light up cigars during plays. Condemning his fellow Germans for being “uncommonly good at putting up with boredom,” he hoped that by smoking during a play — or pacing, talking, walking out — they could also cultivate individuality and ideally an immunity to tyranny. A healthy fidgetiness would keep them from sitting silently, sheepish and spellbound.

And speaking of sitting silently without fidgeting: that’s essentially what we want of children with bum attention spans, isn’t it? The first sign that a distractible child is doing “better” — with age or Adderall, say — is that he sits still. This is why the A.D.H.D. diagnosis, which popularized the idea of an “attention span” that can be pathologically short, grew out of the old “hyperactive” diagnosis. The hyperactive child squirmed at church and at the dinner table, embarrassing his mother.

At some point, we stopped calling Tom Sawyer-style distractibility either animal spirits or a discipline problem. We started to call it sick, even after an early twin study showed that a relatively short attention span is virtually synonymous with standard-issue irritability and distemper. But the fact that the attention-span theory makes news of what was once considered ordinary or artistic behavior is not what’s wrong with it. These cultural transitions — disruptive as they are — happen all the time as society’s demands on individuals change.

Instead, the problem with the attention-span discourse is that it’s founded on the phantom idea of an attention span. A healthy “attention span” becomes just another ineffable quality to remember having, to believe you’ve lost, to worry about your kids lacking, to blame the culture for destroying. Who needs it?