

# Virtual Everything

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When I was a kid, every year after Thanksgiving my mom would pull her address book out of the cupboard and begin to write Christmas cards to friends and relatives. Thankfully the address book had a wooden cover, as it was well used over the years. It was full of names and addresses of loved ones, along with countless return address labels cut off envelopes sent to our home and taped into the book.

Mom's address book was invaluable. If you ever borrowed it, it had better be returned unless you wanted to walk with a limp. Likewise, my dad had a day calendar that he carried in his suit coat pocket. He had his whole life in there – we couldn't plan on going to McDonalds unless he consulted it. If his day calendar was ever misplaced, everything was put on hold until we found it.

My sister's treasured possession was a diary that she kept well hidden in her room (but never well enough). A few weeks ago I wrote about my prized item, which was my stuffed Grover. I took him everywhere and cared for him as best I could.

Today all of our family's precious objects are antiquated. I could go to any mall in America and buy one digital device to hold a billion addresses, 10 years' worth of appointments and a journal that I can write all my most private thoughts into. I could also buy a digital stuffed animal that I can love and care for online.

It seems that everything today is electronic – but cigarettes?

One of the newest gadgets on the market today is electronic cigarettes. The cigarettes are marketed as a safe alternative to the real thing, to help smokers quit. Their manufacturers claim electronic cigarettes are smokeless, as the "smoker" is actually inhaling a vapor. The battery-powered cigarettes vaporize nicotine, so the user gets the nicotine hit without the toxic smoke, tar and other dangerous chemicals of a real cigarette.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, however, is not so sure electronic cigarettes are harmless. They are commonly manufactured in China and are not regulated by the FDA or any other governmental agency.

The FDA has no idea how much nicotine is in electronic cigarettes, how the nicotine is delivered to the user, or the contents of the vapor. The government and the medical community fear that smokers hoping to quit or teenagers attracted to smoking and/or electronic gizmos will seek out the electronic cigarette even though it hasn't been tested.

In addition, even though the cigarettes are smokeless, they still contain nicotine, a highly addictive substance. Therefore, electronic cigarettes may be a gateway to actual cigarettes, which would be a drag.

Experts still agree that the safest and most effective way to quit smoking is by setting up a plan with a physician. The plan would include nicotine replacement devices that are approved by the FDA, such as nicotine patches, gum or lozenges, in addition to behavior modification and counseling.

Given people's addiction to nicotine and hand-held electronic devices, combining them seems like a dangerous move. Hopefully the FDA will begin testing them so consumers really know whether electronic cigarettes are a safe alternative or not.