"Zombies" and the Uncanny Valley

Are you familiar with "the uncanny valley"? The uncanny valley is a metaphor for the space that must be crossed to make artificial constructs appear non-artificial, particularly artificial human-appearing constructs to look really human.

For whatever evolutionary reasons, humans are very good at noticing when something is not quite right while looking at what is supposed to be another human. This is the great challenge by creators of animated humans and human-appearing robotics. As close as they've gotten to date, there's always something not quite right about either the placement or movement of various human features, such as the eyes or mouth.

Will imaginative creators ever, finally, cross the uncanny valley? Perhaps, but perhaps not. In any event, its a real phenomenon that we humans can tell when something is trying to pass as human. Personally, the feeling that is produced in me of what I'm viewing failing to cross the uncanny valley is annoyance. I feel annoyed to some degree that the attempt has failed. I much prefer animation and robotics that are obviously cartoonish and not trying to be realistic. Those sit better with me.

Why am I talking about the uncanny valley? Well, it occurred to me quite recently that this same phenomenon is at work when we see other people using their smartphones and tablets.

Standing up or sitting down, holding something close to our faces, head slightly bowed, and not moving much for extended periods of time is a seemingly unnatural position for human beings to take. There's something not quite right about it. From their perspective, they are actively and purposefully engaged in reading or watching or playing, but from a third party's perspective, it's inhuman.

It's reached a point where you'll often hear people in person and in media call people doing this "zombies". It's quite fashionable these days to jump on that bandwagon, at least as it concerns other people. I think it's all perfectly compatible with how we feel about it. We find, or at least I find it just a bit annoying, for the same uncanny valley reasons. Yet when I'm engaged in such a way, I'm not annoyed at all. I'm purposefully engaged in something.

We excuse ourselves because we know what we are doing on our devices, but we still find other people positioned in this and related ways annoying, and can't help but express that annoyance. I know my children are engaged, yet seeing them on the couch looking like "zombies" bothers me. Staring at a television is also inhuman, hence, "zombies".

But people aren't zombies. They are choosing in those moments to engage in certain activities to relieve felt uneasiness. That's what all purposeful human action is. There's

nothing wrong with that. It's totally healthy, in my opinion, despite how third parties feel about it.

Just wait until our screens are in our eyeballs and people everywhere are standing around looking forward completely still, since everything is being controlled by their minds. You think its uncanny now…