

STEP CHILDREN THE LIFE OF FITBIT

AS JAPAN ENTERED the 1960s, everything seemed to be in motion. Construction swept through Tokyo as the city prepared to host its first Olympic Games. The Tōkaidō Shinkansen, the original bullet train, sped along the southern coast of Honshu. More cars filled the roads. The only thing *not* moving, it seemed, were people's legs.

Prosperity fostered convenience, which encouraged inactivity—or so a doctor reportedly told the founder of Yamasa Tokei Keiki. In response, the company released the world's first commercial pedometer, the *manpo-kei*. *Kei* means “meter,” and *manpo*, “10,000 steps.”

In East Asia, 10,000 had long been shorthand for plenty, or even infinite vastness, but affixed to a fitness gadget the number solidified. Once a medical researcher endorsed 10,000 steps as the threshold for being an “active” adult, *manpo* crossed from idiom to science and, in the process, became the best kind of goal: exact, plausible, and resettable. A wave of walking clubs overtook Japan.

Americans, wedded to their own conveniences, were slow to catch up. Sure, running took root as a pastime in the '70s, and an '80s fervor for “mall walking” led to hordes of retirees Rockporting their way through suburban gallerias. But quantified stepping didn't come to US shores until 2008, courtesy of entrepreneurs James Park and Eric Friedman. “I had been working like crazy at startups over the last three years and really let myself go in terms of fitness,” Park said at the time.

Not long after, he and Friedman released the Fitbit Tracker. It looked like a clothespin had mated with a stapler: a tiny matte-black pincer with an even tinier lowercase *fitbit* printed in light gray, a handy reminder when you inevitably found it in the dryer. (Googling “fitbit laundry” pulls up nearly 15 million results.) A single button cycled through the display so you could see your march toward that magical 10,000, rendered as a blue flower. “Keep moving to keep the flower growing,” read the user manual. A botanical Tamagotchi, feeding off your efforts.

There were numbers too—and oh, the numbers. They were our eyes turned inward, the power to see what our bodies had done and were doing. Metabolic rhythms, miraculous alchemies, made quantifiable for the first time outside our medical charts. We became mech pilots, armed with a brand-new instrument panel to steer our clumsy selves through the world. When you logged in to check your mech's maintenance records—*How many calories has it burned this week? How many times does it wake up on an average night?*—you saw those of your fellow pilots as well.

I remember the game. Not only did I have *manpo* to keep pace with, but mankind itself. The college buddy whose new role as father was snaring him 4,000 steps before the workday started. The colleague who walked to work while I took the bus like a sucker. Hell, I once strapped my tracker around

my ankle for a four-hour bike ride, spinning up a European vacation's worth of footfalls. The prize was an anguished email from a rival wondering how I'd juiced my total.

As Fitbit introduced new products, the deceptions diversified. One step-fluffer taped his tracker to an electric saw blade and left it on overnight. Others gave their Fitbits to their dogs. Compared to them, my favorite hack—brushing my teeth like a coke-addled drum major—seemed downright Calvinist.

By 2014, Fitbit had a 67 percent share of the activity-tracking marketplace. It sold 21.4 million devices in 2015, the year it went public, and 22.3 million in 2016. Then smartwatches happened. If you were a serious athlete, you upgraded to a serious device. If you weren't, something like an Apple Watch just looked a lot cooler and worked with the rest of your app-driven life. By 2017, Fitbit's stock price had tumbled by more than half.

It made sense. At first, being a mech was fun—the numbers, the feedback, the idea that you could use it all to make yourself healthier, *better*. But in the decade since the Fitbit was born, another feedback device emerged and demanded even more attention. It, too, showed you glimpses of other people's lives, or at least the lives they wanted you to think they led. But your smartphone didn't bother with flower power. It asked not for your effort but for your *time*, and there was little reward.

Spurred by sales of its own watch, Fitbit's stock has recently twitched back to life. Meanwhile, more and more people are taking steps to distance themselves from their technological dependencies. These aren't literal steps. But they might be the healthiest steps of all. **W**



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