



Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter

By Steven Johnson

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From the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Mind Wide Open* comes a groundbreaking assessment of popular culture as it's never been considered before: through the lens of intelligence.

The \$10 billion video gaming industry is now the second-largest segment of the entertainment industry in the United States, outstripping film and far surpassing books. Reality television shows featuring silicone-stuffed CEO wannabes and bug-eating adrenaline junkies dominate the ratings. But prominent social and cultural critic Steven Johnson argues that our popular culture has never been smarter.

Drawing from fields as diverse as neuroscience, economics, and literary theory, Johnson argues that the junk culture we're so eager to dismiss is in fact making us more intelligent. A video game will never be a book, Johnson acknowledges, nor should it aspire to be-and, in fact, video games, from Tetris to The Sims to Grand Theft Auto, have been shown to raise IQ scores and develop cognitive abilities that can't be learned from books. Likewise, successful television, when examined closely and taken seriously, reveals surprising narrative sophistication and intellectual demands.

Startling, provocative, and endlessly engaging, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* is a hopeful and spirited account of contemporary culture. Elegantly and convincingly, Johnson demonstrates that our culture is not declining but changing-in exciting and stimulating ways we'd do well to understand. You will never regard the glow of the video game or television screen the same way again.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In his fourth book, *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, iconoclastic science writer Steven Johnson (who used himself as a test subject for the latest neurological technology in his last book, *Mind Wide Open*) takes on one of the most widely held preconceptions of the postmodern world--the belief that video games, television shows, and other forms of popular entertainment are detrimental to Americans' cognitive and moral development. *Everything Good* builds a case to the contrary that is engaging, thorough, and ultimately convincing.

The heart of Johnson's argument is something called the Sleeper Curve--a universe of popular entertainment that trends, intellectually speaking, ever upward, so that today's pop-culture consumer has to do more "cognitive work"--making snap decisions and coming up with long-term strategies in role-playing video games, for example, or mastering new virtual environments on the Internet-- than ever before. Johnson makes a compelling case that even today's least nutritional TV junk food--the *Joe Millionaires* and *Survivors* so commonly derided as evidence of America's cultural decline--is more complex and stimulating, in terms of plot complexity and the amount of external information viewers need to understand them, than the *Love Boats* and *I Love Lucys* that preceded it. When it comes to television, even (perhaps especially) crappy television, Johnson argues, "the content is less interesting than the cognitive work the show elicits from your mind."

Johnson's work has been controversial, as befits a writer willing to challenge wisdom so conventional it has ossified into accepted truth. But even the most skeptical readers should be captivated by the intriguing questions Johnson raises, whether or not they choose to accept his answers. --*Erica C. Barnett*

From Publishers Weekly

Worried about how much time your children spend playing video games? Don't be, advises Johnson—not only are they learning valuable problem-solving skills, they'd probably do better on an IQ test than you or your parents could at their age. Go ahead and let them watch more television, too, since even reality shows can function as "elaborately staged group psychology experiments" to stimulate rather than pacify the brain. With the same winning combination of personal revelation and friendly scientific explanation he displayed in last year's *Mind Wide Open*, Johnson shatters the conventional wisdom about pop culture as pabulum, showing how video games, television shows and movies have become increasingly complex. Furthermore, he says, consumers are drawn specifically to those products that require the most mental engagement, from small children who can't get enough of their favorite Disney DVDs to adults who find new layers of meaning with each repeated viewing of *Seinfeld*. Johnson lays out a strong case that what we do for fun is just as educational in its way as what we study in the classroom (although it's still worthwhile to encourage good reading habits, too). There's an important message here for every parent—one they should hear from the source before savvy kids (especially teens) try to take advantage of it. *Agent, Lydia Wills at Paradigm. (May)*
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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—Johnson puts the much-maligned pastime of playing video games under the microscope and comes up with some startling conclusions concerning the intellectual value and cognitive demands of this pop-culture activity. He argues that it isn't the content of today's games that engages the mind and makes one smarter; rather, it is their ever-increasing level of complexity and sophistication that challenges the mind to grow neurologically. One only comes to understand how to play a game by probing the complex interfaces

within its levels to see what works as one goes along. Johnson observes that this is much like real life. He urges parents to sit down with their children and play in order to understand just how mentally challenging the games can be. He extends his argument to TV series such as *The Sopranos*, *24*, *Six Feet Under*, and *Law and Order*, all of which, he argues, are multi-threaded and require viewers to think in order to follow the increasingly complex character and plot developments. While the book and its arguments endorsing the cognitive challenges of video games and other mass media are thought-provoking and somewhat convincing, Johnson is less successful in convincing readers that video games—especially the more violent ones—are good for a player's mental health. While the book should be of value for reports, don't be surprised if many students can't resist citing it the next time their parents ask why they haven't finished their homework.—*Catherine Gilbride, Fairfax County Public Library, VA*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Donna Casey:

Do you have favorite book? In case you have, what is your favorite's book? Publication is very important thing for us to learn everything in the world. Each reserve has different aim or maybe goal; it means that guide has different type. Some people truly feel enjoy to spend their the perfect time to read a book. These are reading whatever they take because their hobby is actually reading a book. How about the person who don't like studying a book? Sometime, man feel need book if they found difficult problem as well as exercise. Well, probably you'll have this *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*.

Andrew Martin:

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