



Video games as vitamins?

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Friday, July 15, 2005 -- **Everything Bad is Good For You** By Steven Johnson. Riverhead Books, 210pp., \$23.95

If you want to feel good about all the time you've wasted playing video games, watching reality shows and gorging on Sopranos video marathons, you should read Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad is Good For You*.

Johnson, who's written three previous bestsellers on culture and society, engaged me from the start when he talked about his childhood obsession with the baseball dice and data simulation game APBA (American Professional Baseball Association). Any American boy growing up in the Sixties can tell you about the hours spent locked away with those complicated sheets, calculating statistics, keeping records and creating a virtual world before anyone knew what that term meant.

"This book is ultimately the story of how the kind of thinking that I was doing on my bedroom floor became an everyday component of mass entertainment," writes Johnson. "Because the truth is, my solitary obsession with modeling complex simulations is now ordinary behavior for most consumers of digital-age entertainment. This kind of education is not happening in classrooms or museums; it's happening in living rooms and basements, on PCs and television screens."

Johnson challenges the reader with the assertion that the most debased forms of mass diversion - video games, violent television dramas and juvenile sitcoms - are mentally nutritious after all.

"For decades we've worked under the assumption that mass culture follows a steady declining path towards lowest-common-denominator standards but in fact, the exact opposite is happening; the culture is getting more intellectually demanding, not less."

Johnson calls this provocative thesis the "Sleeper Curve" - a nod to the classic scene in Woody Allen's sci-fi satire *Sleeper* where a team of scientists in 2029 are astounded that 20th century experts thought wheat germ and organic honey was healthy, and not steak, cream pies and hot fudge.

For an academic, Johnson writes in an easygoing manner, devoting chapters to video games, TV series, reality shows, the Internet and children's movies. His arguments are cogent and convincing.

A video game will never replace a book, Johnson admits, but latter-day games ranging from Tetris to SimCity to Grand Theft Auto have been shown to raise IQ scores and develop cognitive abilities. Likewise, certain television series make intellectual demands that would have been unheard of 30 years ago.

In the chapter on video games, Johnson brings in ideas from neuroscience and economics to explain the attraction and intellectual benefits of games like SimCity, in which players are not forced along a pre-ordained narrative line.

"It's not what you're thinking about when you're playing a game; it's the way you're thinking that matters," he writes, citing a concept called collateral learning. "Novels may activate our imagination, and music may conjure up powerful emotions, but games force you to decide, to choose, to prioritize."

MOVING ON to television - perhaps the most captivating chapter - Johnson compares and contrasts Sixties' cops-and-robbers shows like Dragnet and Starsky and Hutch with subsequent fare ranging from Hill Street Blues to 24 and The Sopranos.

He includes charts of a solid horizontal black line that display the simple shows of yore, presenting all information in a linear formula that starts at A and goes directly to B. Starsky and Hutch encounter a crime, and spend the show solving it in a natural progression. Occasionally, at the beginning or end of the show, they would engage in a comic subplot that had nothing to do with the bulk of the episode. Neat and simple, easy to digest, and no intellectual participation required from the viewer.

Johnson then presents the chart for a random episode of Hill Street Blues - the show he says launched the era of "multiple threads." It looks like a piece of Swiss cheese, as each thread is broken up with other plot lines, only to return intermittently through the episode.

"The narrative weaves together a collection of distinct strands - sometimes as many as 10 - and the episode has fuzzy borders, picking up one or two threads from previous episodes at the outset, and leaving one or two threads open at the end."

And Hill Street was only the beginning. Compared to the multi-thread, non-linear aspects of The Sopranos or West Wing, Hill Street seems sedate.

The upshot, Johnson concludes, is that we, as viewers, are forced to think more.

"Like those video games that force you to learn the rules while you're playing, part of the pleasure in these modern television narratives comes from the cognitive labor you're forced to do filling in the details. If the writers suddenly dropped a horde of 'flashing arrows' [obvious plot pointers used in old-styled linear shows] onto the set, the show would seem plodding and simplistic."

Even that lowest form of entertainment - the reality show - stimulates the intellect in a variety of ways, Johnson claims. Rather than being compared to documentaries - which they were when they first emerged - Johnson suggests that reality shows are this era's version of game shows.

"Reality programs may not be the most sophisticated offering on the televised menu, but neither are they the equivalent of junk food; they engage the mind - and particularly the social mind - far more rigorously than the worst shows of past decades. People didn't gather at the water cooler to second-guess the losing strategy on last night's Battle of the Network Stars, but they'll spend weeks on chat lines debating the tactical decisions and personality tics of the Apprentice candidates."

The one major flaw of Everything Bad is Good For You - even if you agree with the content - is the lack of other voices. If Johnson had actually done some reporting, interviewed gamers or reality-show addicts and recorded their feelings, which would theoretically back up his hypotheses, his claims would be more convincing. As it is, despite the convincing arguments stated within, they remain hypotheses, and lack the human element.

Despite his one-dimensional approach, Johnson succeeds in avoiding a textbook writing style; he's too immersed in pop culture to get in too deep for too long. Which is a good thing, because the final episode of The Models is beginning. So you'll excuse me...

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