Book Review: Everything Bad for You is Good For You

by Tyler Daniels

Almost immediately, Steven Johnson’s Everything Bad is Good For You presents a compendium of intriguing arguments and ideas. The title itself seems to promise a collection of contradictions and oppositions to a supposedly uniform state of thought. Instead of the typical argument against a two-sided issue (such as whether moral ambiguity is justified), Johnson changes the roles of the main separation of agreement between the evolution of popular culture and its effects on the mental capabilities of those who partake in such activities. He is quick to introduce the single most important idea found in his work: a concept of his own design: the Sleeper Curve. Essentially, Johnson’s Sleeper Curve proclaims that “the most debased forms of mass diversion - video games and violent television dramas and juvenile sitcoms - turn out to be nutritional after all.” Although the latest trends in youth culture are occasionally swathed in controversy and met with considerable opposition, they may ultimately be beneficial to our intelligence in ways otherwise impossible.

Though not explicitly stated, John also questions the use of rhetoric in society, and how it has the potential to be executed in a considerably biased manner. In the latest few decades, popular culture has evolved far beyond the point of knowing the latest music groups and movies. We have become a society that is constantly on the lookout for the latest video games and consoles, making sure we have the most intimidating character in an online fantasy world, and tuning in to discover who has betrayed whom on the latest television drama. All a select group is required to do when faced with a trend they deem unsuitable is establish a few choice groups to oppose said trend by means of exaggerating its flaws and potentially undesirable effects. Once this broad school of thought gains momentum, it usually does not take too much more for this information to become harbored, if not known to a larger audience. We, as a society, are somewhat predisposed to embrace an ideology without fully seeking out its veracity or weaknesses.

Johnson begins by analyzing one of the more disputatious pastimes of American youth culture: video games. From the anticlimactic Pong to the rich, creative Banjo-Kazooie (in which an anthropomorphic bear and bird must thwart an unscrupulous, caricatured witch), video games have been steadily rising in popularity, earning more capital annually than even Hollywood. The renowned World of Warcraft, for example, allows players to practically live in a world of digital sound and color, and experience countless interactions with others. The latter has been heavily criticized for allegedly blurring the lines between fantasy and reality and becoming addictive to the point of causing psychological problems and (in one rare instance) death. However, when observed from another perspective, video games may not be as detrimental as once thought. Johnson
introduces his beliefs perfectly when he states, “its not what you're thinking about when you're playing a game, its the way you're thinking that matters.”

One of the more allowable traits of video games is that they can teach our minds to think in different ways. The entertainment factor also enables children to learn without realizing that they are learning, so to speak. For example, games such as the aforementioned Banjo-Kazooie grant its players multiple opportunities to hone their abilities to problem-solve, navigate through mazes, solve complex puzzles, and even increase their mental processing speed in moments of physical combat. Johnson states that the reason this “learning” is more enjoyable than in a classroom is that the human brain intuitively gathers as much information and adapts to its environment in hopes of procuring some reward (in this case, access to an additional level, an extra life, etc.) in order to satisfy its pleasure receptors. Specifically, a naturally-produced opiate derived from a feeling of contentment. This in turn heightens our thought processes, as well as sharpening our senses, reflexes, and hand-eye coordination.

This is applicable to the debates of the ancient Roman philosophers who at one time debated which true concept was to be universal. Among the proposed schools of thought, hedonism maintained a steady credibility throughout. Hedonism (seeking only physical pleasure and gratification) still remains a viable quality open to exploitation by the media and businesses. Factoring in Johnson's description of how video games are held in such high regard toward entertainment and pleasure, a new question begins to present itself: have human beings begun to achieve an ideal balance between the pursuit of education (teaching our brains new ways to think) and biological stimulation (pleasure derived from digital media), or simply begun to devolve back to the hedonistic lifestyles of the pre-modern world?

Johnson suggests that one of the primary reasons for the harsh judgment of video games stems from the fact that video games were created after books, and will therefore always be the unwilling victim of a somewhat biased comparison. He elaborates this theory (and displays his impressive use of rhetoric) by asking the reader to visualize an alternate world in which video games were created before books. He then goes on to give a detailed, persuasive argument as to why video games are superior and deserving of more merit than their literary counterpart (which, in this parallel universe, understimulate the senses, do not allow for an interactive learning environment, etc). This also brings up an interesting concept about the adaptability of society. Johnson may mean to imply that another underlying reason the majority of a population is opposed to a new emerging trend is not primarily due to said trends causes and effects, but because any given culture instinctively faces some initial opposition to change. Just as games are becoming more complex and interactive, we as a society are forced to constantly reexamine our own prejudices and ideas regarding what is truly the most productive method to convey information and allow the brain sufficient growth. If a community is already set in its ways of education and mental stimulation, then any new school of thought would likely cause some uneasiness among the majority.

Johnson also turns his attention to television and how comparatively recent programs, though occasionally serving as outlets for violence and sexuality, also stimulate our minds in potentially beneficial ways. Johnson uses his Sleeper Curve to analyze the evolution of television programs, and their correlation to mental prowess. He specifically takes into account the rapidly increasing complexities of television show plots. The show “Dragnet,” for instance, almost never faltered from each of its basic, individual episodes premises: a crime is committed, the detectives find the culprit(s), and the familiar theme music plays over the end credits. This heavily contrasts to popular shows in today's culture such as “Lost” and “Monk,” in which the viewer is never quite sure how each episode will end. Since almost each episode employs a unique story and a resolution
that is difficult to predict, the promise of a “twist ending” ensnares the viewers attention and forces him or her to pay constant attention; the casual omitting of one seemingly insignificant detail may impact the episodes entire outcome. Johnsons Sleeper Curve essentially proposes that variety in any sense (but most familiarly in the media) allows the mind an endless supply of stimulation and teaches us to perceive information that is beyond the obvious.

The main point of Johnsons entire work is that new pastimes among the youth are only as damaging as their society warrants them to be. Just as no two human brains are exactly identical, playing a violent video game or being subjected to a show blatantly corrupted with sexual promiscuity does not guarantee a degradation of mental capabilities. Different minds are nurtured in different ways, and if we as a society truly want our community members to thrive intellectually, we should learn to let go of our preexisting prejudices regarding newer forms of entertainment and try to foster innovation to the best of our abilities.

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