The Case Against Reading

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Some paragraphs in Steven Johnson’s *Everything Bad is Good for You* imagine what the conventional wisdom about reading might be, had computer games been invented first:

“Reading books chronically understimulates the senses. Unlike the longstanding tradition of gameplaying – which engages the child in a vivid, three-dimensional world filled with moving images and musical soundscapes, navigated and controlled with complex muscular movements – books are simply a barren string of words on the page. Only a small portion of the brain devoted to processing written language is activated during reading, while games engage the full range of the sensory and motor cortices.”

“Books are also tragically isolating. While games have for many years engaged the young in complex social relationships with their peers, building and exploring worlds together, books force the child to sequester him or herself in a quiet space, shut off from interaction with other children. These new ‘libraries’ that have arisen in recent years to facilitate reading experiences are a frightening sight: dozens of young children, normally so vivacious and socially interactive, sitting alone in cubicles, reading silently, oblivious to their peers.”

And also this:

“But perhaps the most dangerous property of these books is the fact that they follow a fixed linear path. You can’t control these narratives in any fashion – you simply sit back and have the story dictated to you. For those of us raised on interactive narratives, this property may seem astonishing. Why would anyone want to embark on an adventure utterly choreographed by another person? But today’s generation embarks on such adventures millions of times a day. This risks instilling a general passivity in our children, making them feel they’re powerless to change their circumstances. Reading is not an active, participatory process; it’s a submissive one. The book readers of the younger generation are learning to ‘follow the plot’ instead of learning to read.”

Johnson is not endorsing these arguments, but encouraging us to be more open-minded about computer games. And yet I’ve heard people seriously express variants of all the above propositions. I once read, in a computer gaming magazine, the argument that a book’s narrative linearity is somehow a flaw. Once, when I proposed that books are better than movies because there’s so much more activity going on in my brain when I’m reading than when I’m watching a movie, a friend said he felt that for him it was the other way around.

That the conventional wisdom has become so pro-reading is a major reason to fear that too few people nowadays are addicted to this activity. Mikita Brottman, in her book *The Solitary Vice*, writes that in Victorian times, “too much reading was considered an impediment to living a full life; people believed that reading novels would fill your head with dreams, leaving you unprepared for the disappointing bleakness of the real world.”