

How We Got To Now Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *How We Got To Now explores the history of innovation, how innovations connect to one another, create an environment for change and where innovations come from.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Steven Johnson is a popular science author, who's written 10 books on topics like innovation, cognitive science and even video games, as well as host of the TV show of the same name as this book "How We Got to Know," which explores the history of innovations, how different innovations link to one another, and what the conditions are for us to create more of it.

It's often very hard to pinpoint the causes of huge innovations, like the internet, because they develop over a long time, with lots of input factors, like societal conditions, technological progress and of course the right person tinkering with the right thing at the right time.

Thanks to Steven Johnson, you can get a clearer picture of how we've arrived in our 21st century world, as well as learn how you can better understand other innovations in the future.

Here are my 3 main takeaways from *How We Got To Now*:

1. Innovations can create an environment for more change, rather than just a change on their own.
2. One innovation can act as a springboard for another, unexpected one, and even change the legal situation.
3. Some innovations highly depend on the person creating them and their rich background.

Would you like to pull back the curtain and take a look at the inner workings of innovation? Let's give it up for Steven Johnson!

Lesson 1: Sometimes innovations don't directly cause change, but create the right environment for it.

The Renaissance was one of the most innovative periods in history. Lasting from roughly the 14th to the 17th century, the density of innovations and technologies that allowed society to progress hasn't been as big again until 300 years later. Gunpowder, glasses, the printing press, the flush toilet, the microscope, the telescope, the submarine, matches, that's just a tiny selection of its accomplishments.

One thing you probably wouldn't think of as a crucial innovation in this era, or a crucial innovation at all for that matter, is the mirror. **Yet, without the mirror, we probably wouldn't have had a Renaissance in the first place.**

In the 1400s, glassblowing first came about, which made it easier to create glass mirrors at scale (though they were still very expensive). Before the mirror, people couldn't look at themselves. Imagine the feeling you'd get if you first looked at a mirror when you're 21.

The Renaissance was a period of introspection and self-awareness. People started to think and look inward. Self-portraits first came up, as did novels written in the first person. None of this would have been possible without people being able to look at themselves and *start reflecting*.

In this way, the mirror didn't exactly cause the renaissance, but it's impossible to imagine without it – because it created the right environment for this change.

Lesson 2: Innovations can lead to other, unexpected innovations, and even cause laws to change.

Sometimes, however, an innovation is of course *directly* responsible for a huge change. Like the light bulb, for example. Before artificial light, there were only candles. But they were expensive to make. Guess what they were made of.

The stuff that's in a sperm whale's head. It's called spermaceti and the only way to get it is, you guessed it, to hunt and kill whales, which is both a terrible and expensive endeavor. Luckily, Thomas Edison broke through before they went extinct, and gave people sustainable light whenever they wanted it.

The light bulb acted as a springboard for huge further innovations, that built upon it.

Flash photography, for example. First tested by Charles Smyth in the late 1800s by creating a mini-explosion to illuminate the King's Chamber inside the Pyramids of Giza and take a picture, it was later used by Jacob Riis to document the horrible living conditions in a New York neighborhood called Five Points.

Being visualized for the first time, the images garnered huge support for a new law to be passed, which effectively eliminated those conditions and greatly improved the situation.

And that's how one innovation can lead to another, and another, and another, and eventually even change things on a governmental level!

Lesson 3: Not all innovations are inevitable, some are very personal.

In case of the light bulb, it's actually not that self-evident that we think of Thomas Edison as the inventor. Around 20 people came up with very similar concepts and working prototypes at almost the same time, Edison was just the one to popularize it the fastest.

That means first, the desire to replace the candle was global, not just local and second the level of knowledge around the world was up to the challenge of creating something that did it.

This kind of innovation is different from one that seems to come out of the blue and is really the effort of a single individual. Like when Ada Lovelace wrote the first computer algorithm – in the 1840s. Charged with the task to translate a paper from French to English, she added notes to it, coming up with a step-by-step program to compute Bernoulli numbers, thus writing the first working piece of “software” ever.

Unlike the light bulb, this wasn't an urgent problem and nobody was working on this. It was much rather the result of her looking at math from a poetic angle, because she'd been educated in both fields and thus a heavily personally influenced innovation.

As you can see, there are many ways to change the world and it doesn't matter whether you're part of a huge team or work alone

How We Got To Now Review

What really makes *How We Got To Now* come to life is the vast number of examples it sheds a light on. Innovation is a complex, tricky process, and not easy to describe in a few words, but this makes it a lot of fun to learn about it!

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- How the hummingbird got its skill to hover mid-air
- What the long-zoom is and how it can help you understand history
- How frozen fish changed how we do family planning
- Why innovations sometimes go rogue

Who would I recommend the How We Got To Now summary to?

The 15 year old boy, who's favorite toys as a kid were LEGOs, the 32 year old photographer, who has a passion for her craft but hasn't studied the history of it too much, and anyone who feels like they can't change the world on their own.