

Wonderland Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Wonderland shows you that much of societal and technological progress actually originates from people playing and just following their curiosity, as it takes you on a tour of history's greatest dabblers and how they helped build the future.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



We know that coincidence plays a huge role when it comes to discovery. Penicillin was the result of a petri dish left in the lab over vacation, velcro was the result of a dog full of burrs and the post-it glue was a failed product looking for a use case for 12 years. However, where we're often mistaken is in seeing these events as lucky breaks for people toiling away behind closed doors.

Steven Johnson suggests that actually, many of our greatest achievements happened precisely *because* innovative spirits were playing around, hoping to find something interesting. In *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World*, he takes us on a tour of unlikely origins, shedding light on how some of history's most important moments really came to be.

Here are 3 of my favorite stories:

1. The predecessor of the computer was invented in the 9th century.
2. One of today's biggest industries, movies, emerged solely from our fascination with optical illusions.
3. Societal progress is often influenced by the types of games we play in our homes.

Are you ready to discover an entirely new side of innovation? Let's see how far fun can really get us!

Lesson 1: Three brothers invented a device similar to a computer over 1,000 years ago.

The oldest musical instrument in the world is the Aurignacian flute, which was found quite recently in Germany and is about 40,000 years old. Obviously, we've been tinkering with sounds for quite some time. This makes sense, as it was important in our development of language, but when you think of why you listen to music, we mostly do it to enjoy.

In 9th century Persia, the Banū Mūsā brothers, three scientists and scholars, created one of the world's greatest inventions for the same reason: to enjoy more music in their lives. In their Book of Ingenious Devices, they describe "the instrument that plays by itself."

It was a flute with a rotating cylinder inside, which had pins that opened and closed the holes of the flute, thus leading to different notes and, ultimately, melodies. **Besides the staggering fact that it was automated, it was also programmable.** If you swapped the cylinder for a different one with pins in new places, you'd get a different song. When the first computers came to be, they too had swappable punch cards, which would set the program, so in essence, the brothers had come up with the first algorithmic machine over 1,000 years ago.

Incredible, isn't it?

Lesson 2: The world's biggest entertainment industry, films, has its roots in our obsession with optical illusions.

One part of why the brothers were able to come up with so many brilliant discoveries is that our brain is primed to look for innovation when we play. Two reasons:

1. Every time we are surprised or find something new, we get a little hit of dopamine, which prompts us to want more surprises. Curiosity is addicting, and for once, that's a good thing.
2. Our minds are much more open when we play. We're not as skeptical and put more trust into people and events, which allows our brains to make new connections in unknown ways.

An industry that has benefitted tremendously from these two facts is the show business, specifically, the movie industry, since it developed out of our fascination with one of the many little errors in our brain: persistence of vision. Sometimes, when you stare at an object long enough, you can still see its frame or shadow for a while after it's been removed.

In the 19th century, the thaumatrope was created with this in mind. It's a round piece of paper with two pictures that complement each other, one on each side, for example, a bird on the front and a cage on the back. If you attach a piece of string left and right, then wind up the paper by turning it several times, and spin it, the switching images will make it seem like the bird is inside the cage.

Later, this turned into the zoetrope, which has more pictures and spins longer, allowing for bigger sequences, ultimately leading to movie projectors and later, film tapes!

Lesson 3: Societal change can be the result of the types of games we play with friends and family.

In a way, we play games all day long. There's the family game, the work game, the finance game, the career game, the love game, and so on. In each of these games, we have a certain role to fulfill, certain variables to set and choices to make, which ultimately determine whether we win or lose.

That said, there are also a lot of *actual* games in our lives. Just think about sports, competitions and the games we play with our friends and family. From a cultural point of view, different games have greatly influenced different nations. For example, in Medieval Europe, chess represented the societal hierarchy in its figures: there's a king and a queen, a bishop, knights and many pawns, with the king and queen being the most powerful of them all.

However, when chess started spreading, it also disrupted the idea that the king ruled over all the other characters, because all figurines could still move independently, in spite of having to follow certain rules. This may have contributed to the slow rise in upheaval and unrest, which ultimately led to a change from monarchies to more democratized systems.

The next time you play a game with your friends, think it through. How does it affect the way you view the world?

Wonderland Review

Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World is a fun, out-of-the-box read. It won't flip your world view upside down, but make for lots of 'oohs' and 'ahhs,' while keeping you curious. A nice project to get familiar with if you're looking for new creative input.

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What else can you learn from the blinks?

- Why early exploration of the sea had nothing to do with geography
- What fashion trend sparked the Industrial Revolution
- How Venice became the richest city in the world
- Why Monopoly wasn't always a game about capitalism
- The important role of bars in the Boston Tea Party incident

Who would I recommend the Wonderland summary to?

The 27 year old scientist, who considers her work as a tough job, the 43 year old history teacher, who's looking for a creative lesson to teach his students, and anyone who loves random facts.