

## PASSAGE 1

*Writing in The Times newspaper, Steven Johnson argues that valuable development in young people’s mental abilities can come from “popular culture” in general—and video games in particular.*

### MAKING OUR BRAINS SHARPER

Reading books enriches the mind; playing video games deadens it—you can’t get much more conventional than the conventional wisdom that kids today would be better off spending more time reading books, and less time zoning out in front of their video games.

5 For the record, I think that the virtues of reading books are great. We should all encourage our kids to read more. But even the most avid reader is inevitably going to spend his or her time with other media—games, television, movies, the Internet. Yet the question is whether these other forms of culture have intellectual virtues in their own right—different from, but comparable to, reading. Where most critics allege a

10 dumbing down, I see a progressive story: popular culture steadily, but almost imperceptibly, making our brains sharper as we soak in entertainment usually dismissed as so much lowbrow fluff. I hope to persuade you that increasingly the non-literary popular culture is honing different mental skills that are just as important as the ones exercised by reading books.

15 The most powerful example of this trend is found in the world of video games. And the first and last thing that should be said about the experience of playing today’s video games, the thing you almost never hear, is that games are fiendishly, sometimes maddeningly, hard. The dirty little secret of gaming is how much time you spend not having fun. You may be frustrated; you may be confused or disorientated; you may be

20 stuck. But when you put the game down and move back into the real world, you may find yourself mentally working through the problem you have been wrestling with, as though you were worrying a loose tooth.

In the typical game, the tasks themselves are more like chores than entertainment. And yet ironically the great bulk of the population performing these tasks every day is

25 composed of precisely the demographic group most averse to doing chores: kids whom you virtually have to lock in their room to get them to do their maths homework. You often hear video games included in the list of the debased instant gratifications that abound in our culture. But compared with most forms of popular entertainment, games turn out to be all about delayed gratification, sometimes so long delayed that you

30 wonder if the gratification is ever going to show.

So why does anyone bother playing these things? And why does a seven-year-old soak up, for instance, the intricacies of industrial economics in the game form of SimCity, when the same subject would send him screaming for the exits in a classroom? To date, there has been little direct research into the question of how games get children to learn

35 without realising that they are learning. But I believe a strong case can be made that the power of games to captivate largely involves their ability to tap into the brain’s natural reward circuitry. If you create a system in which rewards are both clearly defined and achieved by exploring an environment, you will find human brains drawn to those systems, even if they are made up of virtual characters and simulated sidewalks.

40 In the game world, reward is everywhere. The gaming universe is literally teeming with objects that deliver very clearly articulated rewards: more life, access to new levels, new equipment, new spells. Most of the crucial work in game design focuses on keeping players notified of potential rewards available to them, and how much these rewards are currently needed. Most games offer a fictional world where rewards are 45 larger, and more vivid, and more clearly defined than life.

You may just want to win the game, of course, or perhaps you want to see the game’s narrative completed, or in the initial stages of play, you may just be dazzled by the game’s graphics. But most of the time, when you’re hooked on a game, what draws you in is an elemental form of desire: the desire to see the Next Thing. After all, with the

50 occasional exception, the actual content of the game is often childish or gratuitously menacing. Much of the role play inside the gaming world alternates between drive-by shooting and princess-rescuing. It is not the subject matter that attracts; it is the reward system that draws those players in, and keeps their famously short attention spans locked on the screen.

55 Playing down the content of video games shouldn't be seen as a cop-out. We ignore the content of many other activities that are widely considered to be good for the brain. No one complains about the simplistic, militaristic plot of chess games. We teach algebra to children knowing full well that the day they leave the classroom 99 per cent of those kids will never again directly employ their algebraic skills. Learning algebra isn't about

60 acquiring a specific tool; it's about building up a mental muscle that will come in handy elsewhere. So it is with games. It's not what you're thinking about when you're playing a game, it's the way you're thinking that matters. Novels may activate our imagination and may conjure up powerful emotions, but games force you to analyse, to choose, to prioritise,

65 to decide. From the outside, the primary activity of a gamer looks like a fury of clicking and shooting. But if you peer inside the gamer's mind, the primary activity turns out to be another creature altogether: making decisions, some of them snap judgements, some of them long-term strategies.

## PASSAGE 2

Writing on his own website, the politician and journalist Boris Johnson blames video games for a drop in reading standards.

### STRIKE A BLOW FOR LITERACY

It's the snarl that gives the game away. It's the sobbing and the shrieking and the horrible pleading—that's how you know your children are undergoing a sudden narcotic withdrawal. As the strobing colours die away and the screen goes black, you listen to the wail of protest from the offspring and you know that you have just turned

5 off their drug, and you know that they are, to a greater or lesser extent, addicts. Millions of seven-to-fifteen-year olds are hooked, especially boys, and it is time someone had the guts to stand up, cross the room and just say no to Nintendo. It is time to garrotte the Game Boy and paralyse the PlayStation, and it is about time, as a society, that we admitted the catastrophic effect these blasted gizmos are having on the

10 literacy and the prospects of young males. We demand that teachers provide our children with reading skills; we expect the schools to fill them with a love of books; and yet at home we let them slump in front of the consoles. We get on with our hedonistic 21st century lives while in some other room the nippers are bleeping and zapping in speechless rapture, their passive faces

15 washed in explosions and gore. They sit for so long that their souls seem to have been sucked down the cathode ray tube. They become like blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing that they are still conscious. These machines teach them nothing. They stimulate no ratiocination, discovery or feat of memory—though some of them

20 may cunningly pretend to be educational. I have just watched an eleven-year-old play a game that looked fairly historical, on the packet. Your average guilt-ridden parent might assume that it taught the child something about the Vikings and medieval siege warfare. Phooey! The red soldiers robotically slaughtered the white soldiers, and then they did it again, that was it. Everything was programmed,

25 spoon-fed, immediate—and endlessly showering the player with undeserved praise, richly congratulating him for his bogus massacres. The more addictive these games are to the male mind, the more difficult it is to persuade boys to read books. It's not that these young people lack the brains; the raw circuitry is better than ever. It's the software that's the problem. They have not

30 been properly programmed, because they have not read enough. The only way to learn to  
 write is to be forced time and again to articulate your own thoughts in your own words, and  
 you haven't a hope of doing this if you haven't read enough to absorb the basic elements of  
 vocabulary, grammar, rhythm, style and structure; and young males in particular won't read  
 enough if we continually capitulate and let  
 35 them fritter their lives away in front of these drivelling machines.  
 So I say now: go to where your children are sitting in auto-lobotomy in front of the console.  
 Summon up all your strength, all your courage. Steel yourself for the screams and yank out  
 that plug. And if they still kick up a fuss, then get out the sledgehammer and strike a blow  
 for literacy.

## Passage 1 Questions

Marks

1. Re-read lines 1-14

- (a) Explain the "question" the writer asks in lines 8-9 about "other forms of culture". 2
- (b) Analyse how the writer's use of language in lines 9-14 emphasises the contrast between his positive view of "other forms of culture" and the negative view held by most critics. You should refer in your answers to such features as sentence structure, word choice, imagery, contrast, tone... 4

2. Show how, in lines 15-22, the writer conveys the difficulty of playing video games by his use of imagery. Refer to at least one example in your answer. 2

3. Re-read lines 23-30

What distinction does the writer make between video games and "most other forms of popular entertainment"? 2

4. Re-read lines 31-46

- (a) According to the writer, why is "reward" so important to the learning process involved in playing video games? 3
- (b) By referring to at least two features of language in lines 40-46 show how the writer conveys the excitement generated by rewards in the world of video games. You should refer in your answers to such features as sentence structure, word choice, imagery, contrast, tone... 4

5. Re-read lines 47-55

Give two criticisms the writer makes of the content of video games. 2

6. How does the example of algebra or of chess illustrate the point the writer is making in lines 56-62? 2

7. Re-read lines 63-69

(a) By referring to at least two features of language in lines 64-66, show how the sentence emphasises a contrast between novels and video games. 2

(b) Evaluate the final paragraph’s effectiveness as a conclusion to the passage as a whole. 2

(25)

**Passage 2 Question**

**Marks**

8. Both writers express their views on the effects of video games in today’s society. Identify keys areas of disagreement. In your answer you should refer in detail to both passages. 5

(5)

**MARKING SCHEME**

Question		Expected Response	Max Mark	Additional Guidance
1	a	<p>A full gloss of “intellectual virtues in their own right” will be sufficient for 2 marks, although many candidates will acceptably gloss “different from, but comparable to, reading” in dealing with the “in their own right” part.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p>Clear explanation: 2 marks; less assured explanation: 1 mark.</p> <p><i>Possible answer shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	2	<p>Possible answer: The writer is asking if these other forms of culture involve discreet thinking skills/qualities which benefit, stimulate, challenge, stretch our minds in ways which are different from - but just as important as - reading.</p>

1	b	<p>Candidates should analyse how the language emphasises the contrast between his positive view of “other forms of culture” and the negative view “held by most critics”.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on appropriate language feature(s).</p> <p>2 marks may be awarded for reference plus detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for reference plus more basic comment; 0 marks for reference alone.</p> <p><i>Possible answers shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	<p>4</p> <p>Possible answers include:</p> <p><b>Imagery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “(progressive) story”: story suggests a developing, organised narrative: the writer sees the positive influence of popular culture as gradual, logical, coherent, interesting... “Story” might also be linked to the idea of a news story: just as a news story is something important, topical, developing which people should know about, the writer sees the positive influence of popular culture as something of ongoing importance which he wants to make people aware of.</li> <li>• “our brains sharper”: just as sharpening involves cutting tools a better edge, this suggests making our brains keener, more accurate...</li> <li>• “we soak in”: soaking is a process of absorption, of taking in as much liquid as possible; this suggests we become immersed in popular culture, that its influence is natural, irresistible, all-consuming, profound, deep...</li> <li>• “lowbrow fluff”: fluff is a light, downy material (for example, small pieces of wool); its use suggest critics believe popular culture is light, trivial, worthless, superficial, irrelevant, trifling...</li> <li>• “honing”: just as honing is a process of giving tools a perfect edge, this suggests gradually making our brains as sharp as possible, more and more precise, accurate, productive...</li> </ul> <p><b>Word Choice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “allege”: casts doubt on, calls the critics’ views into question</li> <li>• “dumbing down”: suggests popular culture offers people a reduced intellectual challenge or is responsible for making people less educated, less intelligent, more lowbrow</li> <li>• “progressive”: developing, advancing, moving forward steadily, leading to improvement</li> <li>• “story”: something that is developing and interesting; something that people should know about</li> <li>• “steadily”: reliable, consistent progress</li> <li>• “imperceptibly”: change is gradual, subtle</li> <li>• “sharper”: keener, more precise, more accurate</li> </ul>
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<p>2</p>	<p>Candidates should analyse how their chosen image emphasises the difficulty of playing video games.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment. A detailed/insightful comment will be worth 2 marks; a more basic comment will be worth 1 mark. Mere identification of an image will be 0 marks.</p> <p>When dealing with imagery answers must show recognition of the literal root of the image and then explore how the writer is extending it figuratively.</p> <p><i>Possible answers shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	<p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “stuck”: to be stuck is to be fixed immovably; it suggests being trapped in a situation which offers no escape</li> <li>• “wrestling”: wrestling involves close, physical combat with a single opponent; it suggest a demanding, exhaustive battle with an unforgiving enemy</li> <li>• “worrying a loose tooth”: involves the constant working away at a persistent physical annoyance; it suggests that the difficulties presented by video games are nagging frustrations that constantly prey on one’s mind</li> </ul> <p>NB Comment could possible be made on “dirty little secret”, but it will be hard to relate this convincingly to the “difficulties of playing video games”. It could be argued that the expression is usually used in realms of ethics or morality, a deliberate attempt to hide the truth, a cover-up of some sort, a hidden scandal; used in relation to the difficulty of video games, it heightens the potentially damaging nature of this feature, suggests it’s a very negative feature that is deliberately glossed over</p>
<p>3</p>	<p>Candidates should show an understanding of the distinction between “delayed gratification” (video games) and “instant gratifications” (most forms of popular entertainment). If a full gloss of one term suggests a clear understanding of its converse, full marks should be awarded.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>Possible answer shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	<p>2</p> <p>Possible answer: Most forms of popular entertainment off quick, immediate, easily gained pleasure, reward, satisfaction but the pleasure reward, satisfaction from video games is very slow in coming, takes a long time to achieve, seems as though it will never come</p>

4	a	<p>Candidates should identify three reasons why rewards benefit the learning experience. Explanation of what the rewards are is not enough.</p> <p>Candidates should use their own words as far as possible. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>For 1 mark, answers must cover key point 1. The other two marks will come from the "Additional Guidance" column points 2-9 for 1 mark each.</i></p>	<p><b>3</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People are hard-wired to respond strongly to rewards; people's brains are created in such a way that they find rewards a great stimulus to action, learning etc.</li> <li>2. Video games are designed to be full of rewards</li> <li>3. Rewards in video games are precise, with clear outcomes (gloss of "clearly defined")</li> <li>4. The rewards are attractive</li> <li>5. The rewards are presented in a variety of forms</li> <li>6. Players are constantly reminded about the rewards</li> <li>7. The rewards are vitally important to achieving success in the games</li> <li>8. The rewards are more intense, striking, colourful than in real life</li> <li>9. Players aren't always aware that they are learning (gloss on "without realising...")</li> </ol>
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4	b	<p>Candidates should analyse how the language emphasises the excitement generated by rewards in the world of video games.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on appropriate language feature(s).</p> <p>2 marks may be awarded for reference plus detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for reference plus more basic comment; 0 marks for reference alone.</p> <p><i>Possible answers shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	<p>4</p> <p>Possible answers include:</p> <p><b>Word Choice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “everywhere”: suggest rewards are all around, presenting an infinite set of possible attractions</li> <li>• “(gaming )universe”: a vast, multi-faceted environment of infinite possibilities</li> <li>• “teeming”: suggests a vibrant superabundance; brimful of lively attractions</li> <li>• “deliver”: suggests video games are productive, make good their promises, fulfil expectations</li> <li>• “spells”: something magical, enchanting, wondrous</li> <li>• “vivid”: colourful, intense, attractive, striking</li> </ul> <p><b>Sentence Structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of list (“more life...new spells”): suggest variety, large number of rewards</li> <li>• brevity of each example in the list (“more life...new spells”): heightens the “teeming” idea; no time for a detailed description, there are so many aspects they come tumbling out at a rapid, almost breathless rate</li> <li>• repetition of “new”: stresses the fresh challenges that abound, never-ending novelties on offer</li> <li>• (Repeated) use of comparatives in final sentence: stress idea that video games are superior to life itself in a variety of ways</li> <li>• repetitive, rhythmic build-up in final sentence (“and more...and more”): heightens the sense of the writer having an ever-expanding range of positive points to make about rewards in video games</li> </ul>
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<p><b>5</b></p>		<p>Candidates should provide two criticisms of the content of video games.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p><i>Any two points from the “Additional Guidance” column for 1 mark each.</i></p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The games may seem attractive but the attractions flatter to deceive, are rather superficial, blind one to the truth (“dazzled”)</li> <li>2. Subject matter of the games is infantile, petty, puerile, trivial... (“actual content...childish”)</li> <li>3. Unnecessarily threatening, unjustifiably scary (“gratuitously menacing”) - gloss on menacing alone 0 marks</li> <li>4. The subject matter is very limited and/or moves between the two extremes of violence and childish fantasy (“alternates... princess-rescuing”)</li> <li>5. Violent (“drive-by shooting”)</li> <li>6. Pure fantasy (“princess-rescuing”)</li> </ol>
<p><b>6</b></p>		<p>Candidates should provide an explanation of how chess or algebra proves the point the writer is making in the passage.</p> <p>Candidates must use their own words. No marks are awarded for verbatim quotations from the passage.</p> <p>Clear explanation: 2 marks; less assured explanation: 1 mark.</p> <p><i>Possible answer shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p>Possible answer (algebra): Many people see algebra as pointless, abstract, irrelevant, but studying it develops their brain power, adds rigour to the way that they think.</p> <p>Possible answer (chess): Many people see chess as a game which has a straightforward objective or is abstract or is glorifying war and battles in a formulaic way, but playing it develops strategic, tactical thinking, adds rigour to the way they think.</p>

7	a	<p>Candidates should analyse how the language emphasises the contrast between novels and video games.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on appropriate language feature(s).</p> <p>2 marks may be awarded for reference plus detailed/insightful comment; 1 mark for reference plus more basic comment; 0 marks for reference alone.</p> <p><i>Possible answers shown in the “Additional Guidance” column.</i></p>	<p>2</p> <p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Repeated) use of the conditional “may”: suggests some uncertainty about the impact of novels or that the efficacy of novels is somewhat haphazard (especially when set against the definite, irresistible “force” of video games)</li> <li>• “activate (our imagination)”: suggests setting something in motion, a more gradual process perhaps (than the more immediate and more strategic thinking skills video games demand)</li> <li>• “conjure up”: suggests a somewhat magical, mystical, dreamy, ethereal process</li> <li>• parallel construction in “Novels... emotions”: suggests something very measured, unhurried, perhaps even languid, about the outcomes of reading novels</li> <li>• “force”: video games are much more compelling, active, immediate, dynamic (especially when set against the uncertain “may” of novels)</li> <li>• switch from “our” to “you”: suggests playing video games is a more direct, personal activity</li> <li>• list of verbs (from “analyse...to decide”): rapid fire, punchy run of infinitives suggest playing video games is a very dynamic, frenetic activity which involves a lot of cerebral processes taking place simultaneously</li> <li>• nature of verbs in the list: all the verbs are to do with higher order thinking skills and so stress the cerebral nature of playing</li> </ul>
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7	b	<p>Candidates should evaluate the final paragraph's effectiveness as a conclusion to the passage as a whole.</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment. For full marks there must be appropriate attention to the idea of a conclusion. A more basic comment may be awarded 1 mark.</p> <p><i>Possible answers shown in the "Additional Guidance" column.</i></p>	<p>2</p> <p>Possible answers include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brings use back to the idea of games having merit.</li> <li>• The writer returns to one of the arguments made at the beginning of the passage - that there are intellectual benefits to be found in all types of learning</li> <li>• Comment made on the benefit of novels ("activate our imagination") but it then goes on to talk about the list of things that games encourage us to do ("analyse, choose, prioritise...")</li> <li>• Comparison made between how a gamer looks and what is actually happening on the inside of the brain in order to prove the point that strategies are being used. This could link with the idea of algebra or chess and the benefits that arise through the skills gained from them</li> </ul> <p>Or any other acceptable answer</p>
8		<p>Candidates should identify key areas of disagreement in the two passages by referring in detail to both passages.</p> <p>There may be some overlap among the areas of disagreement. Markers will have to judge the extent to which a candidate has covered two points or one.</p> <p>Candidates can use bullet points in this final question, or write a number of linked statements.</p> <p>Evidence from the passage may include quotations but these should be supported by explanations.</p> <p><i>Approach to marking shown in the "Additional Guidance" column.</i></p> <p><i>Key areas of disagreement shown in the grid below. Other answers are possible.</i></p>	<p>5</p> <p>The mark for this question should reflect the quality of response in two areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification of the key areas of disagreement in attitude/ideas</li> <li>• level of detail given in support</li> </ul> <p>The following guidelines should be used:</p> <p><b>Five marks</b> – comprehensive identification of three or more key areas of disagreement with full use of supporting evidence</p> <p><b>Four marks</b> – clear identification of three or more key areas of disagreement with relevant use of supporting evidence</p> <p><b>Three marks</b> – identification of three or more key areas of disagreement with supporting evidence</p> <p><b>Two marks</b> – identification of two key areas of disagreement with supporting evidence</p> <p><b>One mark</b> – identification of one key area of disagreement with supporting evidence</p> <p><b>Zero marks</b> – failure to identify any key area of disagreement and/or total misunderstanding of task</p>

	Area of Disagreement	Steven Johnson	Boris Johnson
1	Video games as important as reading	Recognises the merits; asks the question about whether or not they can have a similar educational value as other forms of learning	Video games responsible for poor literacy

<b>2</b>	Video games mentally stimulating	Deals with higher order thinking skills	Video games pretend to be educational
<b>3</b>	Video games are good	Rewards and the sense of satisfaction that comes from playing them	Video games are addictive
<b>4</b>	The importance of gaming	There are things going on the background (the different between what we see and what is actually going on in the gamers' minds)	Encourages the removal of video games from children