



Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software

By Steven Johnson

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In the tradition of *Being Digital* and *The Tipping Point*, Steven Johnson, acclaimed as a "cultural critic with a poet's heart" (*The Village Voice*), takes readers on an eye-opening journey through emergence theory and its applications.

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK

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Explaining why the whole is sometimes smarter than the sum of its parts, Johnson presents surprising examples of feedback, self-organization, and adaptive learning. How does a lively neighborhood evolve out of a disconnected group of shopkeepers, bartenders, and real estate developers? How does a media event take on a life of its own? How will new software programs create an intelligent World Wide Web?

In the coming years, the power of self-organization -- coupled with the connective technology of the Internet -- will usher in a revolution every bit as significant as the introduction of electricity. Provocative and engaging, *Emergence* puts you on the front lines of this exciting upheaval in science and thought.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

An individual ant, like an individual neuron, is just about as dumb as can be. Connect enough of them together properly, though, and you get spontaneous intelligence. Web pundit Steven Johnson explains what we know about this phenomenon with a rare lucidity in *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*. Starting with the weird behavior of the semi-colonial organisms we call slime molds, Johnson details the development of increasingly complex and familiar behavior among simple components: cells, insects, and software developers all find their place in greater schemes.

Most game players, alas, live on something close to day-trader time, at least when they're in the middle of a game--thinking more about their next move than their next meal, and usually blissfully oblivious to the ten- or twenty-year trajectory of software development. No one wants to play with a toy that's going to be fun after a few decades of tinkering--the toys have to be engaging *now*, or kids will find other toys.

Johnson has a knack for explaining complicated and counterintuitive ideas cleverly without stealing the scene. Though we're far from fully understanding how complex behavior manifests from simple units and rules, our awareness that such emergence is possible is guiding research across disciplines. Readers unfamiliar with the sciences of complexity will find *Emergence* an excellent starting point, while those who were chaotic before it was cool will appreciate its updates and wider scope. --Rob Lightner

From Publishers Weekly

To have the highly touted editor of a highly touted Web culture organ writing about the innate smartness of interconnectivity seems like a hip, winning combination unless that journal becomes the latest dot-com casualty. Feed, of which Johnson was cofounder and editor-in-chief, recently announced it was shuttering its windows, which should make for a less exuberant launch for his second bricks-and-mortar title, following 1997's *Interface Culture*. Yet the book's premise and execution make it compelling, even without the backstory. In a paradigmatic example here, ants, without leaders or explicit laws, organize themselves into highly complex colonies that adapt to the environment as a single entity, altering size and behavior to suit conditions exhibiting a weird collective intelligence, or what has come to be called emergence. In the first two parts of the book, Johnson ranges over historical examples of such smart interconnectivity, from the silk trade in medieval Florence to the birth of the software industry and to computer programs that produce their own software offspring, or passively map the Web by "watching" a user pool. Johnson's tone is light and friendly, and he has a journalistic gift for wrapping up complex ideas with a deft line: "you don't want one of the neurons in your brain to suddenly become sentient." In the third section, which bears whiffs of '90s exuberance, Johnson weighs the impact of Web sites like Napster, eBay and Slashdot, predicting the creation of a brave, new media world in which self-organizing clusters of shared interests structure the entertainment industry. The wide scope of the book may leave some readers wanting greater detail, but it does an excellent job of putting the Web into historical and biological context, with no dot.com diminishment. (Sept. 19) Forecast: All press is good press, so the failure of Feed at least makes a compelling hook for reviews, which should be extensive. A memoir of the author's Feed years can't be far behind, but in the meantime this should sell solidly, with a possible breakout if Johnson's media friends get behind it fully.

From [Booklist](#)

Johnson makes sense of the cutting-edge theory of emergence, exploring the ways intelligent systems are built from small, unintelligent elements without control from above. Johnson is a journalist for an online magazine; emergence is being touted as the coming paradigm for the Internet. Johnson discerns emergent qualities on the Internet by using analogies from the biological world, so it is with the world of slime molds and ant colonies that Johnson repairs to report on people who have teased out rules of emergence. Entomologist Deborah Gordon tells him about the iterative acts of ants that produce the meta-behavior of colonies in Arizona (a reprise for readers of her *Ants at Work*, 1999). Cities also exhibit emergence, with Johnson reminding us of what Engels wrote about Manchester and Jane Jacobs about New York in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). From these and other examples, such as the popular computer game *SimCity*, the Web site eBay, or a cyber-community called slashdot.com, Johnson generalizes five rules of "bottom-up" behavior in self-organizing systems. A lively snapshot of current trends. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Users Review

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Lisa Gaither:

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Octavio Martin:

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Michael Gage:

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