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Cool news of the DAY

RSS

Pop Smarts. "Electronic culture and movies are teaching us how to grapple with an ever more complex society" -- that's the basic premise of a new book by Steven Johnson, called *Everything Bad Is Good For You*, as reviewed by John Leo in *The Wall Street Journal*. "Following Marshall McLuhan, Mr. Johnson argues that most of us pay too much attention to the content of pop culture and not enough to how the culture alters our minds and frames what we learn." Yes, *Grand Theft Auto*

may be "violent" and *The Apprentice* "stupid," but Mr. Johnson contends that they can "develop visual intelligence" and "coping skills," for example.

It's a good thing, Mr. Johnson suggests, that kids learn how to pick "up rules on the fly" by playing videogames, and, given that "the average videogame takes 40 hours to complete," they also develop "the ability to persist long enough to penetrate a complicated world." He cites *Sega's 2K3* baseball simulator, "which seems like a course in business school," where "players must make trades, negotiate salaries and decide whether the productivity of a slumping prima donna will improve by benching him for a few days." He also says the reason shows like *Survivor*, [survivorfever.net](#), "are major topics around the water cooler" is that "the shifting alliances and feuds teach viewers how to cope and master 'emotional intelligence.'"

Could be, although as John Leo points out, "perhaps 'emotional intelligence' is learned more profoundly from real-life interactions with family and friends than from hours of watching simulacrum on a screen." Mr. Leo also suggests that Mr. Johnson "does not offer the full-blown [Marshall McLuhan](#) argument: that media determine how we think and feel and that the gain of a new medium entails the cost of losing the old ... The world of print, McLuhan thought, produced privacy, individualism, critical analysis and linear thinking. As print recedes, the loss of such qualities will become more obvious. Complicated, sequential works of persuasion will become more rare and less easily grasped." Hm. Interesting. So, anyway, did you see the look on [Scott's face](#) when he got the boot on *American Idol* last night?

Starbucks Delocator. "It's about corporations and choice," says Xtine Hanson, explaining the thinking behind the Delocator -- a website that makes it easy to find cafes other than Starbucks, as reported by Kim Severson in *The New York Times* (5/4/05). Check it out: Go to [www.delocator.net](#), enter your zipcode and up pops a list of "independent coffee shops within a five-mile radius," as well as a list "of Starbucks stores in the area." The site, which was launched last month, is actually intended as an "art installation," and is the work of Finishing School, [www.finishing-school.net](#), "a tactical media collective" founded by three artists three years ago.

The Delocator's anti-Starbucks manifesto, in short: "The standardization of this spatial, social, and physical experience is hostile to the historical culture of the cafe and is dangerous, ultimately, to democratic principles." Finishing School has also created [The Patriot Library](#), a website "which gives people access to controversial books and other media without the fear of tracking by the government, and an art show that contrasts the lives of the chief executive of the Gap and a Guatemalan garment worker."

But it's the Delocator that's turned into a real hit: "In the month since it started, the Delocator has had more than a million hits and been linked to more than 53,000 other sites. The database stands at just over 3,000 independent cafes, and coffee drinkers are encouraged to add their favorites. By contrast, Starbucks has more than 9,000 locations worldwide ... Starbucks would not comment on the Delocator directly. But a spokeswoman" offered this comment via e-mail: "We are aware that people use many means to voice their opinions, including fliers, bumper stickers and websites."

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