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Fun and Frustration

Style and Idiom in the Nintendo Wii

This paper draws on Bernard Stiegler's critique of "hyperindustrialism" to suggest that digital gaming is a privileged site for critiques of affective labor; games themselves routinely nod towards such critiques. Stiegler's work adds, however, the important dimension of historical differentiation to recent critiques of affective labor, emphasizing "style" and "idiom" as key concerns in critical analyses of globalizing technocultures. These insights are applied to situate digital play in terms of affective labor, and conclude with a summary analysis of the gestural-technical stylistics of the Wii. The result is that interaction stylistics become comparable across an array of home networking devices, providing a gloss, in terms of affect, of the "simple enjoyment" Nintendo designers claim characterizes use of the Wii-console and its complex controllers.

The idea for Wii-Fit was born because you found the simple act of weighing yourself every day enjoyable, [...] the creation of a game in the FPS genre was a reaction to your internal sensor telling you that it would be fun (Satoru Iwata).

If there is something simple which someone can find enjoyable, the same joy can be experienced by anyone on earth, I believe. [...] For example, when we were working on Wii-Sports, people in America kept telling me that there was no way that games this simple would sell in the States. When Wii-Sports finally went on sale though, the games appeared to have even stronger appeal in the US than they did in Japan. When you see a phenomenon like that occur right in front of you, you start to see that there really isn't any difference in what east or the west find enjoyable (Shigeru Miyamoto).

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Semi-Conducted conduct

Iwata's comments – that Miyamoto's "internal sensor" prompts the Nintendo designer to create – indicate Nintendo's appreciation for a key concern in recreational computer hardware and software design: affective labor. Nintendo's commercialization of a more emphatically gestural style of game interaction and its 2009 release of "Wii-MotionPlus" (which enhances the precision of gestural registration for products whose themes range from vacation to chores, with recent entries utilizing MotionPlus being Nintendo's WII SPORTS RESORT (2009) or Namco's FOOD NETWORK: COOK OR BE COOKED (scheduled for a November 2009 release), confirm two understudied problems where affective labor becomes crucial for digital gaming studies. The first is the mapping of design affordances specific to digital interaction across such distinct historical regimes of conduct as labor or recreation, habit or manner. The second is the introduction of such mappings in specific locales (domestic space, say, or mobile trajectories), in order to shift the kind and quantity of actions we may enact there.

Implied in Miyamoto's claim that "simple enjoyment" is universal, above, is that synthetic, designed gestures may cut across life worlds and everyday structures of feeling. Nintendo is succeeding at not simply designing digital games, but at a more important design problem for its industry: designing everyday life as digital play and digital play as everyday life, to create some gaming equivalent of reality television, fitness video, and day care, combined. If nothing else, the emphatically gestural style of play characterizing the Wii-console confirms Nintendo's appreciation for the gamer as information producer. Nintendo and its licensees manage the material labor required in the production of hardware and software; the gamer produces the affective labor required to use the equipment. The Wii's success makes questions around gesture, digital interaction design, and affective labor central. Yet how are to evaluate the "simple enjoyment" of such complex shifts?

Hardt observed that in contemporary Toyotist “just-in-time” production, material labor is less effective than “immaterial” affective labor. For Hardt, affect offered both an important analytic for understanding the dynamics of global communication networks and for anti-capitalist resistance, a “biopower from below.” – As he put it: “Labor works directly on the affects; it produces subjectivity, it produces society, it produces life” (Hardt 1999:100). Hardt’s affective labor is immaterial but “ontological – [for] it reveals living labor constituting a form of life and thus demonstrates again the potential of biopolitical production” (ibid.:99). In this account of Toyotism, “the productive decision actually comes after and in reaction to the market decision.” Neither the specificities of industrial labor, digital networks as “new media,” or Deleuzian “desiring production” are sufficient given the historical role played by transnational communication networks, the “new prosthesis integrated into our bodies and minds and a lens through which to redefine our bodies and minds themselves” (ibid.:95). This account of affective labor updates post-Marxist theorizations of labor with a revision of Foucauldian “biopolitics,” that is, efforts since the late eighteenth century to “rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population” (Foucault 1997:73).

The significance of Hardt’s formulation was its attempt to recoup affect as a primary problem of capital while elaborating a theory of resistance to it. In Marxist critiques of capital, “affect” tends to be secondary (Marx 1993, Katz 2007, Stiegler 2006). Boltanski and Chiapello (2005:85) argued, for example, that “frustration” with a lack of autonomy and creativity in the French workplace in the late 1960s and 1970s represented a long-standing “aesthetic critique” of capital which for the first time became central, contributing to the undermining of social critique aimed at ameliorating economic conditions:

Autonomy was exchanged for security, opening the way for a new spirit of capitalism extolling the virtues of mobility and adaptability, whereas the previous spirit was unquestionably more concerned with security than with liberty (ibid.:198).

Toyotist methods along with Foucauldian understandings of affect, they argued, helped to dismantle the industrial workplace with widespread flex-time, temping, multi-tasking, and communications positions enabled by new technologies. After Hardt, though, a number of U.S. critical science and technology studies have since re-negotiated the terms of Marxist and Foucauldian analyses, bringing “biopower” to bear on the critique of contemporary capitalism to better articulate north-south divisions of labor within global biotech industries (Rajan 2007, Thacker 2005), or to provide historically motivated readings of “citizen-activists” resisting genomic exploitation at their “kitchen top computers” (Haraway 2008:107-132). Here, the object of analysis shifts from a question of *either* capital *or* power to “biocapital’s” flexible organization of international divisions of labor, consumption, recreation, and art *and* attendant innovations in technoscientific media (Both Thacker and Rajan discuss DNA chips, for example). Studies of digital gaming, though, too, have raised questions about flexibility, creativity, autonomy, transnational networks, and affect with regards to digital play – vocational preparation for knowledge work where “good games” equate to “good learning” (Gee 2003:199) or, critical theories of digital gaming arguing against “fun,” and with regards to “freedom” (Bogost 2006:127, 156). Here, too, questions of affective labor, technical operation, and material labor are central, if only because, as Yee points out, digital play often resembles digital work. Yee found that the U.S. online gamers he studied were younger adults working in clerical, logistical, or management (typically “post-Fordist” or “Toyotist” labor) who “come home and do those very same things in MMORPGS” on average 22 hours per week (Yee 2006:69).

A problem for these gamers is that digital gaming may become more like “chores” than recreation. If, as Miyamoto claims, even the everyday act of weighing oneself may be designed as an enjoyable digital transaction, Yee’s observations point to the relevance of critiques of affect in biocapital: interpreting the experience of digital play in terms of affect helps to clarify what kind of time, resources, and effort playing the game is worth, precisely because the actions involved in everyday work may be similar.

If “enjoyment” and “calculation” are entwined in the digital design of everyday conduct, what we do in digital recreation is more than a matter of game or play in the conventional senses of rule-bound or improvisatory behaviors. More generally, digital labor and recreation entail a precise degree of synchronization of gestural action with technical operation: in both, action is a kind of “semi-conducted conduct” which begins with media reception. Studies like those of Yee imply that gamers develop an affective criteriology for evaluating recreational, vocational, or professional conduct (or, perhaps, the productivity of non-remunerated play against hobbies which may become remunerable work). Distinct regimes of motivation and experience whose modes of enactment may resemble one another or overlap can result in mismatches of, or transpositions of, material effort and affective experience. What differentiates productive play or “nice work” (Liu 2004:21, 406) – and more generally, the dividing lines between work and play, reception and production, frustration and enjoyment – may remain unclear. You work this ambiguity out in play. This evaluative problematic where affective labor articulates tensions between productive play and nice work matters even when it is only aspirational, or even irrelevant, for sectors less transformed according to those divisions of labor characterizing the historical development of digital transaction networks. Even when aspirational or irrelevant, that these tensions inform an affective criteriology that must be concretely worked out nonetheless indicates that they characterize an *idealization* of the multiform displacements, distributions,

and transpositions of labor which biocapital effects and obscures. Thus, a revision of Hardt: where affect is made to work indirectly on displaced material labor through active media reception, digital gaming is a privileged form of a more general *biolabor*.

“Affective labor” comprises one of three entangled streams of biolabor along with energetic, material labor and technical operationality. Affect interprets some transformation of the material labor which technical operations displace *and* the technical operations whose procedures are largely inaccessible to the media receiver. Affective labor in digital play is intensively material, not immaterial; it is informal and decisive, and affects in digital play express “social” and “aesthetic” critiques of biocapital. Even the most banal product of the digital recreation industry bears a critical function to the degree that it reflexively prompts the affective, interpretive conduct required to operate it. Games glorifying even long-established franchise properties routinely insert knowing nods to affect as biolabor. As the evil Mimi gloats when sentencing you to hard labor as a living battery in a frustratingly tedious sequence of SUPER PAPER MARIO (2007): “Enjoy Labor!”

Evaluative affective labor, its worths or values in relation to effort, learning, conduct, that is, to patterns of use, help determine additional worths and values: whether the design of enjoyment is appropriate or too expensive, a game too hard or too naïve; whether to continue use, and how and what to communicate with others about it; whether to modify the game or the machine in some way, and how or to what degree. If material labor refers to the official, recognizable, or remunerable aspects of productive labor, affective labor refers to the material but informal, uncompensated, or unofficial aspects of problem-solving or pleasure-taking as conduct. Both are “material,” then, but material and affective labor are differentiable to the degree to which actions may be automated, received, and assisted in terms of synchronized gestural-technical conduct, whether in industrial or hyperindustrial production.

“Hyperindustrial” capital is Stiegler’s term for what others have termed “biocapital.” Stiegler’s response to Boltanski and Chiapello’s charge that a newly reinvigorated capital deployed Foucauldian critique along with Toyotist management regimes is that this phase of more intensively controlled capital seems to lack “spirit” while spiraling *out* of control. In hyperindustrialism, Stiegler argues, “the tools for producing material goods and those for creating and diffusing symbols and other ‘spiritual nourishment’ have become the same” (Stiegler 2008b:55). Hyperindustrialism describes deeply motivated historical developments more than recent re-organizations of capital; where both post-Foucauldian and neo-Marxist critiques point to new global divisions of labor, Stiegler adds to this concern the historical differentiation of technocultural habit and invention. Stiegler claims that memory has been industrialized; his observation relies heavily on Leroi-Gourhan’s mid-twentieth century observations of technocultural “rhythms,” which Stiegler describes as “epochal redoublings.” In a first epochal redoubling, a new programmatic level emerges, a new *what* (technical ensemble), partially suspending the effectiveness of prior ones. This “objectifying of a remembered synthesis” is “passive synthesis” on the level of technocultural development. In a second epochal redoubling, the appropriation by the *who* (subject) of the first redoubling is “active synthesis” (Stiegler 2005:95-96). Historical technocultures thus aggregate complex relations between subjects, collectives, technical ensembles, and environmental milieux through the redoubled rhythms of active and passive technocultural synthesis.

Stiegler’s concern is that hyperindustrialism’s globalized “real-time” networks no longer allow for the active and passive syntheses characterizing variegated histories of technocultural development (including print literacies). The “industrialization of memory” beginning with phonography and cinema results in the projection of

a global imaginary displacing the historical processes which mediate individuation vis-à-vis collectivity, and mediate technocultural development vis-à-vis externalization of memory in technique and interiorization of interpretive and expressive facility. These active and passive syntheses are disrupted where individual or collective facility cannot interpret and does not determine the models, criteria, or processes projecting what is now a global imaginary (Stiegler 2001:203-204). The “false day” of global networks, Stiegler argues, produces the limits of industrialism and surpasses them with “real-time” processes: in effect, the de-realization of time. For Stiegler, “hyperindustrialism” is a historical development whose significance goes beyond the importation of specific management techniques: “The redoubling to come is a matter of reconstituting a directional grid beyond the Orient and the Occident” (ibid.:96).

This account makes affective as important as material labor, although in a negative sense: Stiegler argues that as we become increasingly incapable of determining criteria or models according to which hyperindustrialism proceeds, tele-action networks promulgate a condition of “symbolic misery” even beyond their range of use. Beyond responding to Boltanski and Chiapello, Stiegler’s diagnosis of symbolic misery contrasts yet more profoundly with accounts of “the wealth of networks” allowing public enjoyment of nonrival goods produced by volunteer “clickworkers” (Benkler 2007:36, 69-70).

For Stiegler, “virtual reality” or “virtual space” are metaphors for retentional ensembles conserving data that is inaccessible without the mediation of technical apparatus. Such interfaces do not distribute “the immaterial,” but allow “these states of illegible matter” to be manipulated (2008a:205). As Stiegler explains Marvin Minsky’s vision of “virtual reality”:

The data-glove and the robotic hand are synchronized; every gesture by the user is copied by the robot, but the user will also feel all the effects of the robot’s actions. If, for example, the robot is

instructed to tighten a bolt with a wrench, the gloved user will feel the wrench's weight and the bolt's resistance, as they are visualized in virtual space (ibid.:152).

Significantly, "as in the case of genetic manipulation, technicization is no longer an exteriorization, but rather an interiorization through the organism's *re-organization*." The corporeality implied in Minsky's vision, Stiegler argues, is that of a "removable" body (ibid.:53): it exteriorizes itself while interiorizing the resulting exteriority, in the process re-organizing its organs, becoming removable from itself. Minsky's "virtual reality," Stiegler argues, absents the body from its lived "ipseity" (or "mine-ness"). Stiegler asks: "Is it possible that absence of a body proper could allow for "mine-ness," for ipseity and idiom? Or do possibilities of "mine-ness," ipseity, and idiom rather reside in – are they in an absolute complicity with – the possibility of telepresence and virtual reality" (ibid.:156)? Further: "Must possibility precede its real-ization? Must it be stated retrospectively that a possibility was suspended there, before?" If "virtual reality" is fiction, the truth here is "the paradox of the externalization of 'qualities' nonexistent *before* their exteriorization" (ibid.:157). But what sort of hyperindustrial motor conduct makes possible the technical suspension of its own prior, externalized inscriptions, without that conduct being entirely historical in its own right? Through what kind of action does the "industrialization of memory" proceed? The answer is semi-conducted conduct, its privileged form, I think, being play, or more broadly, media reception where both *work* and *play* are two entangled modes of biolabor.

But even the hyperindustrial design of biolabor has a history: developmental modes of production and reception; style and idiom. And perhaps the criteriologies Stiegler demands for technical literacies are being displaced into criteriologies of affective labor. In any case, rather than seeing affect in digital gaming as "symbolic misery," or

alternatively, as transposed from primordial “fight or flight” responses (Grodal 2003:151), treating fun and frustration in digital gaming as affective expressions of semi-conducted conduct reveals entanglements of material, technical, and affective labor; and more broadly, of media reception, biolabor, and biopolitics. Where informatic means displace energetic exertion, affect, in some sense, brings them to measure, one in terms of (the displacement and distribution) of the other. More simply, affect expressed as gestural-technical conduct mediates biolabor’s exchange and use values. Analyzing the Wii’s gestural-technical stylistics, I conclude that computer-mediated “enjoyment” inscribes an informal signature effect indexing the projection of a global imaginary to situated conduct within transaction regimes where, Stiegler insists, historical modes of active and passive synthesis may be frustrated by the capital-intensive projection of media expression.

Stylistics of Semi-Conducted Play

The act of weighing oneself, or proper online manners (as a *manga* primer in the 2007 Tokyo Game Show guide makes clear): conduct or disposition in contemporary digital recreation point to not only legal, economic, technical, subjective, but also *ethical* capacities to the degree that biolabor in hyperindustrial capital helps conduct the development of personhood. We can stylistically compare the Nintendo Wii, designed to count calories burned as well as narrative “heart points,” both against other consoles and devices such as Intel’s “Health Guide PHS6000,” a home medical device first tested in Asian markets and available in limited distribution in the U.S. This networked device integrates user input of biometric data with remote monitoring services instead of integrating “fitness” with logical play and televisual recreation as the Wii-console does.

Yet in each case, displacements of material, technical, and affective labor become expressive through use of the networked device. Intel's "Health Guide" device allows medical provisioning to be outsourced while extending health monitoring to the home. The Wii de-skills digital gaming, while "health" becomes a matter of unintegrated parameters and biometrics with no guarantee for indexing "fitness" to individual bodies or game narrative (if only because avatar and password relation is not biometric). Agency, intentionality, or action have to be designed for semi-conducted conduct, and *then* related to law, economy, technoscience, or subjecthood. While each device gains the consistency of its operations in terms of regimes of law, economy, technoscience, or subjecthood, the semi-conducted actions taken in each case are not reducible to those regimes. These devices, in respect to the contexts in which they are produced and used, do not index health statistics uniformly, but do index everyday conduct as biolabor. How easy to use or how secure the console or monitoring device is; the devices' capacities to "make us smart" about health or to distract us from health care; each device's affordances of "preventive" care: our synthesis of habits in some ways proceeds from, but in some ways may interrupt, the hyperindustrial diagramming of biolabor. Stylistic comparison is a first step towards a "medial ethics": the description of the capacities of gestural-technical action.

But what is style? For Stiegler (2008a:85), style in language, technology, or art is "deictic, the anchor for all contextuality as well as for every possibility for escaping from contextuality." Style reproduces in non-genetic ways. The idiomaticity of style expresses technocultural specificity but permeates technocultural borders, because the reflexive dimensions of any style allow it to communicate with styles foreign to it. Style points, by means of its reflexivities, to memory and to futurity. Even globally marketed devices differ as to the styles of gestural-technical action they provision and prompt, as Nintendo's successful deployment of simplified, "cross-generational" gaming

demonstrates. And as significant as the Wii has been as a console “alternative,” equally significant are Nintendo’s holdings in gestural-technical design and its numerous failures in deploying them.

Nintendo’s holdings in gestural-technical design range broadly from control systems using ornamental pen-like devices (US Patent Application #D530,372) playing cards capable of storing data (US Patent #7,118,482), or specialized displays for massively multiplayer configuration (US Patent #7,115,031). Nintendo’s domestic networking efforts also are historically deep. In the late 1970s, Nintendo’s Yokoi Gumpei developed a “self-propelled cleaning device with wireless remote control” (United States Patent #4,306,329) – a precursor of the “Roomba” vacuum introduced by the U.S. iRobot Corporation in 2002. Both de-skill cleaning tasks; primary differences between the two devices include Nintendo’s wireless vacuum lacking automatic self-navigation or exhibition of browser or menu systems.

Designing conduct is more complex than mediating physical or phenomenal distance or activities like recreation or hygiene. It also means mediating media histories. In 1995, Nintendo followed on stereoscopic peripherals for the “Famicom” (Nintendo Entertainment System) with a stereoscopic console, the Virtual Boy, a stand-alone unit designed by Yokoi, the inventor of the remote-controlled vacuum. Rather than distance the user from the device operated through an intervening controller, the Virtual Boy required users to hold their faces to the table-top device, as if to peer into a Nickelodeon miniaturized to the size of bulky binoculars – an awkward mapping given the need for interactive feedback, extended time of use, and the two-color stereo display. The Virtual Boy’s display, subjectively speaking, causes discomfort from the awkward posture required, and considerable eyestrain. Virtual Boy failed the “test” of medial ethics expressed in terms of home gaming. (The Nintendo 64 system brought back a stereoscopic peripheral display and specialized games.)

The Wii-console has succeeded where Nintendo's alternative consoles or peripherals often have not been widely embraced (it's useful to keep in mind that sales figures do not indicate the most widely played console; the Wii outsold the Playstation 3 in 2007 while Sony's Playstation 2 was still the most widely played console in minutes per month). In 1984-5, Nintendo introduced a phototransistor sensor-based "zapper" device, shaped like a pistol for the Famicom (NES; US patent #4,813,682, filed 1987, describes a similar phototransistor technology). In 1992, Nintendo introduced the SNES Superscope, shaped like a shoulder-mounted bazooka, using an infrared wireless sensor mounted on the television. Both Zapper and Superscope depended on synchronizing signals between the controller and the video interlace. These devices didn't adapt arcade-style play to the home; like the Wii-console, each deployed a network of wireless and wired sensors and signaling devices specifically developed to expand the bandwidth of interaction available to players situated around the television in the domestic space in more flexible ways than possible in arcades.

These peripherals afforded distinct gestural-technical styles around which "bonus" sequences in general game titles were designed as "rewards," or for which specialized titles were developed, i.e. YOSHI'S SAFARI (1993). They distinguished the console in terms of synchronization of exhibition and conduct to emphasize franchise value, regardless of the actual use of the peripheral device, as these peripherals also became graphical icons in titles not supporting them. These peripherals were complex historical artifacts operating somewhere between technology, medium, content, and conduct; their stylistics did *not* mime the physical artifacts they resembled. These earlier domestic networks indicate the identifiable range of stylistics for semi-conducted conduct, which I summarize here. On start-up the Wii exhibits a *browser*, an application style prototyped by Engelbart in his 1968 "oNLine System." Selection proceeds through a form

of *logical writing* with the networked, synchronized control device, a stylistic prototyped for computing in the 1960s by well-known figures like Engelbart or Sutherland. Nintendo pays great attention to *situation orientation*, as in its 1979 wireless vacuum or the bathroom scale inspiring the “balance board” peripheral used in titles like WII FIT (2007). Like the Zapper or Superscope, the Wii-control system expands TV-centric gaming by configuring the situation orientation as a *media space* (Negroponte 1981, Bolt 1980) allowing more “natural” gesture. The Wii-mote’s generic form factor as *gestural object* allows a broader variety of actions than those optimized for the Wii-mote itself. Rather than special-purpose sensor devices requiring specific gestures (like the shoulder-mounted Superscope), the generic Wii-mote “morphs” via insertion into a range of objects for distinct titles or sequences, like a “driver’s wheel” for MARIO KART WII (2008), transforming from “wand” to “wheel.” (A plastic pistol-shaped object is also available: a hollowed-out, artifactual memory of the now forgotten Zapper.) The ensemble of gestural objects users can configure with the Wii-mote retains the *haptic* feedback available in standard console controllers.

The Wii avoids *body-centric* “wearables” by default (although one Wii-mote hack places the sensor bar on the head to track user position within a stereoscopic media space). The Wii’s situated media space configuration and avoidance of body-centrism eliminates high-cost equipment, hard-wearing configurations, and displacement of the physical, phenomenal, historical site where the console is situated (where Nintendo holds extensive design assets and expertise). The Wii-mote can function as active memory or sensing object, prompting messages about the user’s activities, but its *active object* capacity is minimal (sensible given the Wii’s claims to emphasize player movement where complex spatiality responds to temporal, gestural streams). Unauthorized by Nintendo, one Wii-hack controls a Roomba, the *autonomous* cleaning robot (recalling Nintendo’s own 1979

semi-autonomous vacuum). And while not supporting any literal *pharmakon* in the sense of technically permeating organic boundaries (beyond the prompting of user response), the Wii-remote has also been re-purposed for surgical simulation.

Stylistics of synchronized gestural-technical conduct range from exhibition to *pharmakon* (paraphrasing Stiegler, from externalization of memory to internalization of expressive facility). But the salient stylistics for the Wii emphasize limited expansion of the familiar space of televisual play and more complex yet accessible mediation of handedness, tactility, and corporeal movement. These emphases contrast with those of Intel's biomedical device for transmitting vital signs from home to remote interpreters, *and* those of gaming consoles emphasizing computationally intensive graphics power or animated behaviors and processes without significant stylistic variation of conduct (although given competitors' recent attempts to move towards the interaction stylistics emphasized by the Wii). In contrast to consoles which spectacularize the automated gaze with more intensive computation and to health maintenance devices processing and transmitting biometric data, the Wii spectacularizes semi-conducted conduct in familiar space. It allows historical technical-gestural conduct (where specific and contingent technical regimes determined the development of gestural and motor skill) – to be transposed as generic gestural-technical semi-conduct. Further, in making that transposition one that can be emphatically enacted and lived, it offers simple enjoyment even as it demands greater bodily coordination and movement. In sum, it reminds users that their bodies are not removable from domestic space becoming more important as a productive offsite for information processing.

Miyamoto's statement that the same gestural-technical joy can be "experienced by anyone on earth" suggests a flipside of the global imaginary standardized by streaming media like cinema, phonography, or television: a distinct regime subjecting hyperindustrial audio-

vision to semi-conducted gesture. Perhaps this subjection comes as relief: if Nintendo aims to universalize the unevenly developing stuff of gestural-technical conduct, in the same attempt, it provisions an informal signature effect making processes of biolabor diagrammatically comparable in terms of affect – fun or frustration?

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