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Playful Fandom

Gaming, Media and the Ludic Dimensions of Textual Poaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the idea that fandom, as the collection of activities and behaviours relating to the fan identity, has a ludic dimension, and that said dimension merits individual inquiry from a game-studies perspective. Furthermore, it is argued that there is mutual benefit in exploring the intersection between fan studies and game studies, which has so far been overlooked in research, design and direction.

Keywords

games research, fandom research, interdisciplinarity, fans, fandom, games, gamers, play

INTRODUCTION

The study of fans and fandom, just like the study of games and play, is known for being relatively young and saddled with notions of triviality. The ambiguity of the studied subject and the interdisciplinary character of both research fields have created problems with defining and maintaining their identity as distinct disciplines. In the last few years, however, innovations from both fields have been successfully incorporated into other areas, from economics (Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944; Leonard, 2010), to biology (Sigmund, 1993), to global culture and education (Vasquez, 2003; Black, 2008; Zimmerman, 2009), demonstrating their relevance. As the academic and non-academic interest in fans, gamers and related identities is increasing, I argue that there is notable value in exploiting existing overlap in theory and methodology. By seeing gamers as fans (rather than only users or players), and fandom as a playful activity (rather than only creative or consumptive), we can enrich discourse and gain more insight into a number of existing questions.

This paper is split into three sections. The first two serve as a baseline for the ensuing conversation, giving brief consideration to the current state of game and fandom studies, before moving into the main part of the argument and conclusions.

Gaming at the Crossroads

In 1938, an age sadder than ours, Johan Huizinga made bold to theorise play as a fundamental element of human culture and call our species

homo ludens, man the player¹. Almost a century later, the study of play and games is still widely regarded as being in its formative years, with sparse theoretical frameworks and an eclectic approach to methodology.

The 2015 DiGRA conference in Lüneburg, Germany opened with the theme “Diversity of Play,” addressing not only the endless variety of the play element in culture, but also the endless methods academia has employed over the years to capture and understand it. This is but one instance where the diversity of play and the diversity in the study of play are brought into question, as fast development of both has made this conversation one of high relevance in the past few years. A short history and a number of unusual circumstances have shaped games scholarship into an experimental and interdisciplinary space, one without the defined contours of more traditional disciplines but with overflowing innovation. The elusive definition of play and the cultural baggage associated with this most “trivial” of subjects have necessitated an inventive approach to research (Aarseth, 2003; Consalvo, 2006; Lammes, 2007; Mayra, 2008, 2009; Mayra et al., 2012; Lankoski and Bjork, 2015). Interdisciplinarity has arguably enriched game scholarship, but it has also contributed to anxious questions about its present and future as a sovereign academic field. The plurality of methods, voices and approaches in the study of play has created as much insight as it threatened incoherence. Being able to observe playfulness in so many aspects of the contemporary life has also opened up the category of games to renewed ontological debates, which can be seen as burdening a conversation area already heavy with fatigue. Expanding the scope of research to thoroughly embrace the diversity of play has been argued to come with the risk of rendering game studies obsolete. This problem was prominent enough to be featured in the conference’s main aims.

A panel discussion, led by Frans Mäyrä, titled “From Game Studies to Studies of Play in Society,” sought to address the problem more specifically and discuss a few of the different conflicts arising at this

1. A reader (or fan) of Huizinga might recognise this sentence as a play on the wording of his iconic introduction to *Homo Ludens*.

perceived research crossroad. While it is not within the scope of this paper to try and summarise the entirety of the nuanced points presented by the speakers, there is a small selection of ideas I would like to bring to attention as a primer for my own argument. In particular, the criticism of Joost Raessens, who questioned the narrative implied by the panel's title. As Salen and Zimmerman have illustrated (2004), games and play exist simultaneously as subsets and oversets of each other. The study of the two, Raessens asserted, has always maintained an intrinsic and unseverable connection. There is no movement between the study of games and the study of play in that regard, and the related research always happens within the wider context of society.

In the panel discussion and his own project, *Playful Identities* (2006; 2015), Raessens traced his position from Huizinga's work to Heraclitus and Schiller, demonstrating how the modern collective phenomenon we've come to call "the ludification of culture" has in fact very deep roots, and that the study of games as we know it has already accommodated said phenomenon this far. He suggested that game studies could adopt a form of strategic essentialism; in finding and maintaining a conceptual, theoretical and methodological core, we could preserve the unique character and purpose of games as a discipline, while remaining open to experimentation and collaboration.

The entire discussion is, I think, characteristic of the currently perceived pitfalls and limitations of game scholarship. As I advocate for exploring the intersection between game studies and a related discipline, I do so with the belief that the theoretical work produced by each field already demonstrates a prototypical core, one that is strong enough to be relevant far outside the area of its original inception.

Fandom at the Crossroads

Before continuing, it would be best to provide more information on what "fandom" generally means and how it has been studied so far. Much like

play or art, fandom is a term of passing familiarity, often understood on an instinctive level, even though its exact definition might be vague. We can recognise it in literature and music, in artwork, costume and an assortment of collection-centred hobbies. Some of its more visible and notorious forms can take the shape of women fainting in the presence of the Beatles, a masquerade of young people dressed as fictional characters or entire rooms occupied by pop culture memorabilia in the tradition that Forrest J. Ackerman made iconic in the late 1930's. Popular discourse surrounding it comes with its own set of stereotypes and shallow interpretations, often prominent enough to be reproduced in related media as a form of self-parody or internalised critique (Ogg, 2010; Figal, 2010). Atypical patterns of consumption and a deep devotion to the fan object tend to form the common understanding of fandom-related behaviour, which can easily lead an observer into reading it as a pathological condition (Jensen, 1992).

The Oxford English Dictionary simply defines “fan” as a “devotee of a particular activity or performer.” Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) trace the origins of the term to 18th century American journalism, where it was used to describe passionate baseball spectators². Before that, “fan” was a common abbreviation for “fanatic,” meaning religious zealot. This notion of religiosity and fervour is still evident in modern understandings of fandom, surviving intact in terms like “fan pilgrimage” and “cult media.” Mark Duffet (2013) was quick to point out that even “devotee” as a synonym implies a submission of self or identity to the fan object, and a notable amount of material in fandom scholarship has been specifically aiming to dismantle these connotations of mindlessness and pathology. Three seminal studies, published in 1992 in close proximity but independent of each other (Bacon-Smith, Jenkins, Lewis), made a particular effort to reframe fandom as affective, productive and socioculturally significant. In her ethnographic account of the early Star

2. Researchers have been known to use terms like “fan,” “enthusiast,” “connoisseur,” “cultist,” “audience,” etc. interchangeably, despite the supposed differences in meaning. Abercrombie and Longhurst (2014) made an effort in distinguishing these categories, though the distinctions remain arbitrary and their proposed taxonomy is not universally accepted.

Trek zine culture, Camille Bacon-Smith portrayed fandom as a transgressive and radical form of expression; a means of exercising personal agency within the confines of socially prescribed femininity. Henry Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers*, recognised in fans a vast amount of potential in terms of creativity and an often impressive accumulation of knowledge on their given subject. Fandom, according to Jenkins, can be defined as the exceptional reading of media texts which might be unexceptional on their own. This perspective would denote fans as a skilled and critical audience whose labour adds value to the source material, yet is trivialised by association with “trivial” culture. Lisa Lewis began her introduction to *The Adoring Audience* by wondering why fans are so maligned and stigmatised, a question that Zubernis and Larsen (2012) were still in the process of answering twenty years later. The fans in that context are potentially undermined by dominant ideas of taste, and the inherent imbalance of power between media producers and media consumers.

Beyond the endless justification of fandom’s existence, however, and the scholarly affirmation of the fans’ creativity, the related field of study has gone in circles in terms of defining the studied subject itself. As at the time of writing there is no consensus on what exactly constitutes a “fandom” or what characterises a “fan.” Different authors have described fandom as fluid, multifaceted and difficult to pinpoint with any measure of accuracy. In some of the simplest terms, Cornel Sandvoss (2005) describes it as the “regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text.” Lisa Lewis (1992) refers to fans as the “most visible and dedicated of any audience,” but these notions of involvement and dedication have proven very difficult to delineate. In the spectrum between passive reception and active engagement, fans have been known to occupy multiple roles simultaneously, which complicates the performance of their identity. Matt Hills (2002) has criticised attempts to simplify fandom as either a mode of consumption or a form of cultural resistance, since these seemingly incompatible behaviours can be seen coexisting within the fan who functions as a very predictable consumer while at the same time transgressing dominant culture, industrial media

production and established hierarchies of taste. John Fiske (1987) famously argued that the ways audiences derive meaning are so complicated that “there is no text, there is no audience, there are only processes of viewing” and any effort at essentialism will inevitably fail.

This ambiguity is arguably the first and most obvious common feature between fandom and play. Both function as umbrella terms to denote spaces of inquiry that are unstable but ripe with possibility, roughly situated just outside what current theory can outline.

Fandom at Play

As mentioned before, the main argument for this paper is that fandom, in its multitude of expressions and definitions, has a ludic dimension. From that perspective, it can be studied not only as a culture (e.g. ethnographically) or a collection of texts (e.g. through textual analysis), but also as a system, or constellation of systems, that facilitate play. It would be prudent to note that a typology of these playful behaviours would be beyond the scope of this paper. The literature-based research presented here is considered complete and self-contained, while simultaneously being part of a bigger project.

The theory which serves as the basis for my proposed perspective on fandom comes from Salen and Zimmerman’s book, *Rules of Play* (2004), where they define play as “free movement within a more rigid structure.” Their definition, while by no means perfect or all-encompassing, has a remarkable openness. It can afford enough flexibility to allow multiple interpretations in different levels and contexts without compromising on nuance. Moreover, it succinctly and elegantly distils the essence of several earlier, less minimalist definitions.

Citing Huizinga (1955) or Caillois (1961; 1962) might seem like a more obvious choice for this purpose, as the scope of their foundational work was broad enough to encompass play in every facet of culture, and as demonstrated in the previous section, fandom has been studied

primarily as a culture. Echoes of their theories certainly resonate within my argument, but overall I found certain aspects to be too vulnerable to criticism, which prevented me from implementing their definitions of play directly. For example, Huizinga's mention of fixed rules or Caillois' claim that play is, by its own nature, unproductive. Aside from fandom, multiple other forms that we commonly acknowledge as games or manners of play would fall outside the boundaries these authors have set. The limitations of their theoretical work have been analysed and critiqued at length in related literature (Pearce, 2006; Consalvo, 2009; Frissen et al., 2015). By comparison the Salen and Zimmerman definition, which was partially developed in response to these earlier theories, does not present the same problems.

In addition, it incorporates three formalised ways to conceptualise play; game play, ludic activity and the more general notion of being playful. To summarise these categories, game play is the most narrow, involving players experiencing play through the kind of rule-bound system we typically call a game, e.g. playing chess. Ludic activities would include types of freeform play that happen outside of game systems, e.g. playing with a stuffed toy. The notion of being playful mainly refers to a particular state of mind imposed on top of ordinary actions. It is the broadest of all categories, including things like the playful delivery of a smile or a play upon words. The theoretical models derived from Huizinga and Caillois reference the latter two categories more, but in choosing the Salen and Zimmerman model instead, I would like to argue the idea that fandom can manifest not only as play in an abstract sense, but as a game; a system that involves players, rules, artificial conflict and quantifiable outcomes.

For example, in *Convergence Culture* (2008), Henry Jenkins describes the fandom emerging around the CBS show *Survivor*. One of the biggest aspects of the show's appeal was arguably the secrecy surrounding its production, with each episode being shrouded in mystery until its broadcast. The category of fan known as the "spoiler" would be the most invested in predicting the show's plot. By engaging with similar-

minded fans on specialised forums, the spoilers would take advantage of their collective resources and intelligence (e.g. analysing episodes frame by frame) to challenge the show's producers (in deciphering small clues to predict the next episodes). Jenkins is using very deliberate language to describe this activity as a competitive game people engaged in, with defined rules and boundaries about the kinds of information that could be accepted into the spoiler rhetoric, self-identifying players and outlined goals. This behaviour observed around *Survivor* is not unique, and Jenkins himself directly compares his findings to his own previous work on the *Twin Peaks* fandom, where debating solutions to the show's overarching mystery was similarly structured as a logical playful sequence.

Resistant and Transformative Play

By applying the Salen and Zimmerman definition of play to fandom in the wider sense, we can immediately begin to observe how the concepts of the "rigid structure" and the related "free movement" can be projected onto a number of situations:

If we consider fandom in the context of media production, the rigid structure would represent the moral, legal and financial boundaries of the centralised media industry. The free movement, in that regard, would be the creation and distribution of unauthorised amateur content. Jenkins mentions in his 1988 essay on *Star Trek* that "for the fan, reading becomes a kind of play, responsive only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own kinds of pleasure." The type of reading he refers to is the act of repeat, active consumption which aims to deconstruct and reassemble the media text, as much as internalise it. Amateur production stems from this kind of reading, as fans attempt to extend the experience of their favourite TV show, film, book or game through fan writing, fan art, etc. Patterns of engagement that fall outside predictability are not always welcome by the product and profit driven media industry (Mavridou, 2013). The type of active audience described

by Fiske and Jenkins can be interpreted as rebellious and out of control, frightfully defiant of centralised hierarchies of taste and at constant danger of breaking the law (Tushnet, 1996, 2007; Lessig, 2001, 2008).

In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman have labelled this type of play “resistant,” describing it as being representative of a friction that naturally occurs between the free movement of play and the rigid structure that contains it. Resistant play exemplifies that friction, making the magic circle very visible in the process. The notion that fandom is a form of resistance is very prevalent in fan studies literature (Fiske, 1989a, 1989b; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Hills, 2012). By conceptualising fandom as playful resistance, however, we can immediately begin to shed light on currently unresolved problems. As mentioned earlier, Matt Hills posed the question: if fans are a resistant audience, how can they simultaneously function as the most loyal of consumers? The thing to point out then would be that resistant play is not the same as pure, radical resistance. The former doesn’t seek to dismantle the rigid structure, but merely maintain the freedom of movement which characterises it. Play can be transformative, and resistant play is arguably the most likely one to instigate transformation (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Transformative play will, over time, shape the rigid structure around itself, but in eliminating the structure completely it would subsequently push itself out of existence. Instances of playful resistance and indeed, transformation have been observed throughout the evolution of the media industry, which has come to embrace fan input and participation in unprecedented ways. Fandom, though, cannot exist in its current form without the rigidity of centralised media production, so despite any tension or friction, its resistance will likely always maintain its playfulness and not seek radical change.

Theatre, Fantasy and Narrative Play

If we consider fandom in the context of artistic expression or creativity, the established narrative canon within which a fan creator operates

would be construed as the rigid structure. The free movement then would represent the act of appropriation and remixing. By borrowing and puppeting the characters, settings and other narrative elements of an established story, the fan creator operates within the boundaries of said story but in an almost entirely fluid, theatrical manner. Eiji Ōtsuka (2010), in discussing the fandom that appeared around the anime and manga series *Captain Tsubasa*, drew parallels between *dōjinshi*³ production and the tradition of kabuki theatre. The collective narrative tradition of kabuki was formed through repetition of performance and multiple dramatic adaptations of the same base material. Stories are not static, and new ones are expected to emerge from fragmenting and remixing the old ones. The talent of an author in kabuki is not judged on originality, but on their ability to cut out a slice of this grand narrative and present it as a single theatrical work, a new interpretation. Francesca Coppa (2006), independently came to a similar analogy between fandom and theatre. Fan fiction, she argues, has more in common with the performative rather than the literary genres, despite being presented in prose form. The narrative parts of the original become objects on the proverbial stage of the story, where they can be endlessly manipulated into new arrangements. The fan author in this instance merely utilises words in the absence of more convenient means of expression. In the above two examples, it is important to point out that theatre is something fundamentally played. Much like any known game setting, the stage needs human participation to put things into motion and breathe life into it. In the case of fandom, the canonical story is spontaneously made into a stage, a playground, a system which can facilitate narrative play.

Furthermore, the particular practice of cosplay also has the added advantage of containing the word “play” in its name. The limits of perceived reality, the physical boundaries of the body and the societal etiquette which governs things like gender presentation are often the rigid structures an aspiring cosplayer playfully explores (Gn, 2011;

3. “Dōjinshi” is an umbrella term derived from the Japanese language. It has mainly come to be associated with self-published fan comics, but technically it encompasses all kinds of derivative media products.

Bainbridge and Norris, 2013; Mavridou, 2015). While elements of canon appropriation mentioned previously would also apply to the process of constructing a costume and performing a character, the fact that cosplay is a deeply-embodied, lived experience can potentially put it on a different circle of play potential compared to other creative fan practices. Fron et al. (2007) have in the past examined cosplay as a play form related to dress-up and make-believe, as well as an extension of a player's relationship to their customisable avatars. Nicole Lamerichs (2010, 2013, 2014), following a similar line of thought, made explicit references to the "ludology" of cosplay, emphasising aspects of fantasy play and performativity, over the pragmatic fashioning of the costume.

Playing with Videogames

In the more specific context of games the raw materials, which comprise a game, either analogue or electronic, can similarly be utilised in ways the original developers never intended. By hacking into the game's code, for example, the programming and assets can be remixed into something entirely new, from a fan sequel to an animated film or even an art installation. By taking apart the pieces of a board game, new rules and mechanics can be applied. A game experience that was designed for narrative and a slower contemplative pace can be rewritten as a race against the clock, which can only be made possible by the creative use of bugs and glitches. The rigid structure in the above examples is defined as the game's own boundaries, e.g. the dimensions of physical pieces, electronic controllers or lines of code. Newman, in his extensive study on videogame fandom, *Playing With Videogames* (2008), detailed a long collection of free-moving activities that take place within the rigid means of the game code under the term "superplay." Players who engage in this type of free movement or freeform play are known to identify themselves as fans of the games they repurpose. The amount of time and effort, or devotion, if we would use that term, required to explore the inner mechanisms of an existing game and reach the level of mastery required to remix it, is arguably enough on its own to denote this type of player

as a “fan” according to definitions discussed earlier in this paper. Ōtsuka (2010) made direct comparisons between game hackers and other types of culture-remixing fans, interpreting their behaviour as essentially the same. Robert Jones (2006) described game machinima as a form of transformative play, and read into it typical fandom-related notions of cultural resistance and transgression.

Intersections in Scholarship

As evidenced by the above, the concept of fandom as playful activity is not entirely unknown to either game or fan scholars. The latter in particular have made a number of passing mentions to it. In *Textual Poachers*, using the example of the Velveteen Rabbit, Jenkins characterises fandom as a manner of affective play, which adds emotional and personal value to the fan object while dismantling it. Jonathan Gray (2007) described certain fans’ engagement with political news as a blend of rational opinion and emotive playfulness. Hills (2002) observed playfulness in the fan’s crossing of boundaries between the inner and the outer self, fantasy and reality. Harrington and Bielby (1995) similarly observed that some fans appear to play with the boundaries of fiction without losing their own sense of identity. The latter three authors all partially adapted Winnicott’s theory (1973), conceptualising fandom as a manner of play involving cultural artefacts functioning as transitional objects. Hills in particular gave one possible definition of fandom as something “formed around any given text when this text has functioned as a proper transitional object in the biography of a number of individuals.” The purpose of fandom playfulness, according to that, is to alleviate existential anxiety.

The relationship between play and performativity, as well as performativity and fandom, has been subject to academic enquiry in separate studies (Lancaster, 1997, 2001; Jenkins, 2006; Fernández-Vara, 2009a, 2009b; Bennet and Booth, 2015; Brenner, 2015). The simultaneous connection between all three concepts, however, is not

common in scholarship. Paul Booth is notable for including “play” in the title of his 2015 book *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age*. His study explicitly references the Salen and Zimmerman definition of play, alongside nods to the theoretical work of Huizinga, before settling on Caillois whose typology of play includes mimesis and agon; categories that suit fandom activities such as parody, pastiche, roleplay and competition which Booth examines. Definitions of play serve as a framework of understanding fandom, but outside the introduction, the matter is not explored any further, as the rest of the book is centred on how fans interact with the media industry.

In that regard, the conceptualization of fandom as playful, or play as fannish has an element of novelty but is not original. Scholars who have acknowledged these ideas, however, tend to reference them without delving into the subject at any considerable depth or attempting a more thorough interdisciplinary approach between the corresponding disciplines. The examples I have presented throughout this section of the paper should help to demonstrate that fandom already goes a lot further than non-competitive, affective or fantasy play. Being able to see fans as players can offer new angles to our currently limited comprehension of their activities and behaviours. Seeing gamers as fans can similarly deepen our understanding of the play experience, and how the latter influences game development and design. Amongst game researchers, Steven Jones (2008) could trace the design of *Katamari Damacy* to the Japanese otaku⁴ culture of collecting fan memorabilia. Olli Sotamaa (2005) found exploitable value in videogame fan labour. Broc Holmquest (2013) analysed the fandom around *Silent Hill Downpour*, arguing that games often demand active reading and metatextual participation to complete their narrative. A narrative like that of *Silent Hill*, he asserts, cannot function without the active reading and conversation of the fans who surround it; this kind of participation, the

4. “Otaku” is another Japanese term, situated somewhere around the notion of the “obsessive fan” or the archetypal “basement dweller.” It has been appropriated in English to neutrally (or even positively) describe a fan of Japanese pop culture, but the meaning is different in the original language where it has clear negative connotations.

labour involved in assembling and decoding the narrative's many pieces, is built into the game's design as an integral part of the experience. Mia Consalvo (2003) looked at the production of game walkthroughs as a form of intertextual reading and narrative making, directly comparing it to other forms of media fan engagement. Consalvo concluded that "positioning gamers as fans or active audience members is an important and significant move."

Scholars like Saito Tamaki (2011) have theorised that modern fans might belong to a new type of personality that derives deeper satisfaction and stimulation from their engagement with media, and is therefore better equipped to face a world which is growing increasingly saturated with media texts. Others, like Cavicchi (1998), have instead conceptualised fan behaviour as an internalised performance, and a mindset which in some manner can be found within everyone. Regardless of where the truth might be on that spectrum of perception, fandom can serve as a model to explore the new identities and typologies of pleasure emerging in and around gaming. The knowledge accumulated by fans and gamers alike is arguably an important form of literacy, increasingly relevant in the age of information. And phenomena like #gamergate have shown that in seeing the gamer identity as a fan identity, we can gain fundamental insight into the deep emotions it inspires and the ways it is policed.

Conclusion

The diversity and ambiguity of the play element in culture has been acknowledged in scholarship since Huizinga's foundational work in the late 1930's. These characteristics of play complicate academic research, largely necessitating an interdisciplinary and experimental approach. The latter could be argued to have benefitted discourse, but as the field of games studies has been seeking to define its own boundaries during the last few years, the fluidity and complexity of the researched subject has also contributed to a certain anxiety about the future. The field of

fandom studies also suffers from similar ontological and epistemological concerns, as well as comparable accusations of triviality and a short history in academia. Fandom has been observed to be just as diverse and ambiguous a phenomenon as play, with a historically enduring and pervasive presence in multiple facets of culture. The significance of both subjects has already been defended rigorously within academia, and research results continue to support such defense.

My belief is that these two academic fields share enough common ground and have matured enough, that theory and methodologies can be exchanged without compromising the integrity of the source. While our research designs evolve alongside our understanding of these complex subjects, the literature-based argument presented here is meant to serve as a basis for further discussion and empirical application. The aim of the paper is to make a case for the benefits of conceptualising fandom as a form of play, and respectively, conceptualising gamers as fans. As demonstrated by the outlined examples, the proposed interdisciplinary approach can offer game studies valuable insight into a number of subjects, e.g. the productive qualities of playfulness, the unique sensibilities of the gamer or the role of metatextual engagement in the experience of game play. A review of the literature shows that research has already taken place in this scholarly intersection, though not in any considerable depth. Fandom scholars have acknowledged the playfulness in fan activities and game scholars have explored the fannish dimension of gaming. Beyond that, however, the conversation remains limited and the aforementioned intersection largely unexamined. The conclusion of my argument is therefore one about perspective; about expanding (rather than limiting) our direction, and taking advantage of research potential that could very well be hidden in plain sight.

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