Seven Points to Reappropriate Gamification

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Abstract:

Games have always been everywhere. This is increasingly so because of the expanding pervasiveness of games in contemporary culture, shift to post-industrial era, rise of positive psychology as well as general awakening to the role of and importance of human motivation, creativity and empowerment. This sudden but explosively expanding trend of gamification of our reality has suffered from growing pains which has lead to polarized, ideological and opportunistic discussions, narrative and debate about what gamification is, how it should be defined, how it should be applied (if at all), where it should be applied as well as about its overall ethical and societal premise and scope. In this article, we attempt to make sense of some of the prevailing foci of this discussion during the early growing pains of the development of gamification. We feel that this sense-making effort is crucial for a mature, constructive and healthy development of increasing pervasiveness of gamification which commands an increasing meaning and importance in our daily lives. Therefore, in this article we wish to reclaim the discussion and help redirect it to its constructive rails and to save it from the dangers of luddism towards ludism.

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1. Luddites and Ludification

The industrial revolution, while often celebrated for its technological advancements, also harshened the living conditions and social status of the working class (Williamson 1982). The high unemployment and inflation that invested Britain in the beginning of the 19th century, gave rise to a popular movement that targeted what workers believed to be the cause of their harsh living conditions: the machines. It was the beginning of the Luddite movement, owing its name to the fictional figure of Ned Ludd (an apprentice who destroyed several textile machines) and later of General Ludd, an equally mythical figure hiding in Sherwood forest and leading a revolutionary movement against mechanization (Navickas 2005). The peculiar form of protest of Luddites, destroying industrial machinery, was meant to economically harm the owners of the factories and to materially allow the return of a previous era, in which the control of the production was entrusted to the workers themselves.

While the Luddite movement was forcefully contrasted by the British government and disappeared in a few years, failing its fight against industrialization, the ideas of Luddites were destined to fascinate many generations to come. The term Luddite has since acquired a political meaning, where some see it as a diffidence towards technological advancement that goes beyond reasonable skepticism and legitimate wariness, while others see in the movement one of the precursors of elabor unions and of the fights for worker rights (Thompson 1991).

The Luddites' aversion to technology, nevertheless, has become the main trait of their existence in popular culture. In 1995, for example, journalist Kickpatrick Sale smashed a personal computer in front of an audience at New York City Town Hall, claiming that "Luddites are back!" (Minard 2007). The fight of humanity against the machines has often been fictionalized, and films such as *Terminator* (1984) or *The Matrix* (1999) have often been defined as Luddites (Lehman 2015).

Beyond the political implications, we can see that Luddites are mostly defined by a specific relationship with technology, rejecting the ideology of progress, and proposing alternatives to technological development often driven by nostalgia. In other terms, we could call them *apocalyptics*, as Umberto Eco (1994) defined the tendency of interpreting technological advancement as something intrinsically bad that will have primarily nefarious effects on human life, when not potentially bringing an end to civilization itself. On the opposide side of the

spectrum to Luddites, Eco places the *enthusiasts*, who welcome acritically every new technological innovation and ignore or dismiss any potential threat emerging from them (a modern example might be the climate change deniers).

Technological advancement has always faced both apocalyptic and enthusiastic reactions, moral panic and hasty implementations. The fact that both approaches are irrational and present severe risks was not enough to spare research and academia from such perspectives. Nevertheless, scientific research is epistemologically required to have a critical approach towards the development of technologies that will strongly impact our lives and societies. An enthusiastic approach, oblivious of these consequences, is highly irresponsible. At the same time, however, research cannot limit itself to point out the dangers of technological developments: Luddite and apocalyptic approaches in academia go often unheard, as they fail to propose convincing alternatives.

Discussions around the risks and benefits of new technologies are continuously arising in society, and academia is often called to investigate the pros and cons of these developments - for example in AI (Floridi et al. 2018), automation (Nof 2009) or Big Data (Boyd & Crawford 2012). Academic discourses and research, then, face the challenge of going beyond enthusiasm or diffidence and avoid moral panics and judgmental attitudes. Neither enthusiast nor apocalyptic, the researcher has to question the assumptions of emerging fields so to find ethical, sustainable and effective ways of *handling* the emergence of new technologies.

The Luddite diffidence towards the adoption of new manufacturing technologies was not unreasonable: they did indeed cause economic imbalances and put workers in a weak position where they were often subject to abuse. Technological development, when not guided by ethical principles, can cause immeasurable misery. Nevertheless, today, two Centuries after the Luddite battles against the machine, several bottom-up movements appear able to successfully challenge the schemata of industrial production, by sharing horizontally the means of production: fab labs, 3D printers and sharing economy have the potential to revolutionize the systems of production and distribution of goods (Walter-Herrmann & Büching 2014), and not by destroying the machines, but by democratizing them.

Most technological and social innovations do face both enthusiastic and apocalyptic reactions, sometimes with Luddite undertones. It is the case also of the ludification of culture - a trend

that sees growing the prestige and influence of playful and games (Raessens 2006, Bonenfant & Genvo 2014) - which has a similar disruptive potential of that of industrialization. Beyond the often-cited commercial success of digital games, paired with the growing influence of their imaginaries, the most evident effect of the ludification of culture is the rise of practices of gamification, and of heated debates around them. Enthusiastic approaches to gamification, mostly by the corporate world, have been harshly criticized by academics (Juul 2011, Waltz & Deterding 2015). On the other hand, academia has been increasingly adopting an apocalyptic approach to gamification. Again, many concerns about the impact that it can have on society at large are well justified - it is certainly the case with the Chinese Social Credit System, a gamified ecosystem of initiatives that are being implemented in the People's Republic of China, sharing a similar logic at aiming at social control (Liang 2018). This system is purportedly making use of a reward system based on points, to gamify loyalty to the state, adding to data surveillance a playful layer that naturalizes it. Similarly, the metrification of academia increasingly gives rise to game strategies in regard to citations and publications that can be played to maximize employability without necessarily improving research quality (Lorenz 2015). The examples of dangerous and unethical gamification could be many, including the infamous *Disney Electronic Whip* (Lopez 2010).

However, as for the industrial revolution, we believe that a Luddite reaction to ludification (alliteration intended) would not do any good. While a critical perspective to ludification and gamification is necessary - and it is within the mission of academic research to investigate it - catastrophism and apocalyptic attitudes would be counterproductive. We believe that instead of a Luddite reaction we would need a "ludite" one: we should embrace the pervasiveness of play in our societies and discuss how this cultural change could be harnessed for good. We should devise ways to distribute its potential and democratize gamification.

2. Make Gamification Punk Again

While it rapidly became a popular buzzword and was somewhat sanitized in the process, gamification was born punk. When it was a novel idea it had a strong critical perspective, overturning the common ludophobic stereotypes about games being overall bad for society and for individuals, and proposing that, in fact, they could help fix real world problems (McGonigal

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2011a). Gamification in its beginning was openly questioning the *status quo*, proposing to revolutionize fields such as education and healthcare, accusing them to be too serious and top down, to drive away people instead of motivating them. Gamification was advocating for a new way of doing things, one that would imitate the ability of games to be engaging, to create meaningful experience, to convey feelings of autonomy and mastery.

Why do we call these characteristics "punk"? Punk is a concept derived from a music genre, that indicates a specific way of doing things and relating to power. Punk is anti-establishment and promotes individual freedom. It endorses diversity (Simonelli 2002) and has a DIY character, strongly focusing on a bottom-up approach (Moran 2010). The first approaches to gamification shared this spirit and aimed to use play to desacralize and humanize various fields (for example Lieberman 1997, Salen 2007).

What went wrong? With time, gamification became a victim of its own success. The fact that its ideology resonated well in a society undergoing a moment of ludification, engaged in a "ludic turn" (Henricks 2017), made the concept appealing for many. Oversimplifications and poor implementations attracted criticisms to the whole concept, as did purely rhetorical attempts to exploit the term (Landers 2019). Gamification has then often been used to tap into the economic and cultural success of digital games in order to sell half-baked marketing strategies to "Vice Presidents and Brand Managers" (Bogost 2011). Gamification, from a groundbreaking perspective on how to do things, was then transformed into a product, a "magic formula" to be sold by self-proclaimed experts and consultants. The whole concept of gamification, then, started descending the Gartner *hype curve*, increasingly surrounded by a bad reputation, accused to be top-down, exploitative, simplistic and of risking to be a tool of capitalism (Fuchs 2014, DeWinter 2014). Many proponents of gamification, recognizing its potential misuses, started to distance themselves from the practice (e.g. McGonigal 2011b) or to switch to other, less controversial terms, such as "eudamonic design" (Deterding 2014) or "gameful design" (Dichev et al. 2014). Despite the fact that valuable research on gamification and well designed implementations have never ceased to be produced (Bai et al. 2020), the conversation around gamification got finally stranded on terminology debates and ideological stances, among which it easy to find apocalyptic and Luddite positions.

3. Seven Points to Reappropriate Gamification

Today gamification is moving to the "realism" part of the hype curve and, as most things that are going out of fashion, is now often looked at with a certain diffidence. However, we believe that the importance of gamification to understand and have an impact in a ludifying world is still great. With this chapter, then, we aim to clean the air and restart the conversation. We aim to go beyond the disputes about definitions and the criticism based on its worst implementations and rhetoric uses. *We aim to reappropriate gamification.* To do so, we have prepared a list of seven cardinal points.

3.1 One - Beyond Definitions

The concept of "gamification" and its definitions have been at the center of many disputes - and has ended up being almost a taboo in some circles. This has happened for several reasons. We have identified the four most critical ones.

First of all, the idea evolved in an intensely neologistic period. A decade ago, academics and practitioners were trying to define the many emerging phenomena that were increasingly tying games to non-ludic fields. According to their perspectives, they outlined these phenomena as "persuasive technologies", "exergames", "serious games", "game-based learning" and so on and so forth. Each concept had its own nuances, but many competed and overlapped. "Gamification" was sometimes proposed as an umbrella term encompassing them all, and sometimes as a subset of one of the other terms. Eager to defend their own metalanguage, researchers and practitioners rarely tried to systematize this terminological cornucopia in a collaborative way.

Second, gamification is a difficult thing to define. It inherits its indeterminacy from one of its components, the word "game". Game and play are tough concepts to define, being expressed in radically different ways in many languages (Huizinga 1949) and often referring to an inhomogeneous set of activities (Wittgenstein 1953). Game studies have been accused of having an obsession with definitions (Salvador 2015), and gamification was somewhat caught in the crossfire.

Third, because of the difficulty of defining exactly what gamification is, the concept has often been dealt with according to its secondary connotations. As gamification was appropriated by consultants and marketing experts, then the concept itself started to be associated more and more with these environments and therefore perceived by researchers as an external threat. The ludification of culture, a cultural trend that made games more and more relevant for culture and society, has also caused defensive reactions and game romanticism. This is quite evident in critics of gamification such as Bogost (2011), that sees gamification as an attempt to hijack the prestige of games by people that do not really care about them. It is, in a way, a "not a real gamer" argument, similar to those generally used against "gamer girls" (Shaw 2011) and that accounts for a perceived invasion of external actors in the field of gaming. This is often reflected in the recurring prejudice towards gamification scholars seen as people that do not enjoy playing games.

Fourth, the difficulty of defining gamification is also reflected outside the field of gaming and game studies. Enthusiastic non-experts generally focus on the "game" part, and have trouble understanding the difference between, for example, a gamified application and an actual game. The general confusion within ludic terminology does not help disambiguating. The result, however, is an oversimplification and dilution of the concept that feeds directly the shallow understanding and implementations of gamification which, in turn, shed a bad light over the whole concept. It is a vicious circle.

To overcome these challenges, we propose to look beyond the terminology and definitions. We believe that the ludification of culture has indeed an effect on how humans conceptualize and interact with non-ludic practices and objects, and that playfulness and gamefulness are becoming more and more widespread modes of interpretation of reality. Beyond the labels that we might want to use to describe these phenomena, we believe that they are worth studying in order to understand contemporary culture. In order to do that, it is important to distinguish several levers:

- Conceptual vs Practical: it is important to distinguish between the cultural trend that affords and ensures the efficacy of gamification, from its practical implementations.
- Abstract vs Specific: while gamification may be an elusive umbrella concept, when we study gamification, we need to carefully define what is it that we are investigating (i.e.

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the independent, mediating, moderating, dependent variables and their relationships) or when we are designing gamification, what is it really exactly we are making?

- Strategic vs Emergent: we must distinguish between the strategic and willful attempt to design actions and applications that make use of playfulness and gamefulness to tap into their cultural prestige and the emergence of bottom-up gamified practices that do so naturally and implicitly.
- System vs Experience: we should distinguish between gamification as a system (that is, based on the creation of a game structure) and as an experience (that is, based on encouraging a playful attitude from their users).

The variety of these levels is symptomatic of the complexity of the cultural trends, design strategies and emergent experiences related to gamification. Far from being a depleted field, there is still a lot of work to do in order to deepen our knowledge about these different dimensions, to describe and distinguish them and to device ways of designing and evaluating their implementations.

3.2 Two - Latu Senso

Nomina sunt consequentia rerum. This Latin phrase, derived by the *Institutes of Justinian*, reflects the ancient belief that the things in the world are somehow defined by the names we give them. On the contrary, words generally fail to point unequivocally to facts of life, their meaning emerges from their multiple uses and interpretations. The same is true for the word "gamification", which has assumed, across the years, several meaning according to its uses, creating further confusion and miscommunication. We identify three main interpretations of the term:

1) A "pop" use of the term. The term has entered in the common language at the height of the hype curve, and hence it has inherited some of the characteristics of the opportunistic uses that were made of it. This rhetorical use of the term has already been criticized (Landers 2019) and is often based on an utilitarian adoption of the term purely for its symbolic value and not for its response to a specific identified need. Gamification in such cases is often seen by critics as a form of sugar-coating if not as a simple misplaced keyword to add to one's project to prove it is innovative and "cool". In this acceptation, more often than not, the term gamification is

merely used as a band aid word to signify, in lack of better conceptual understanding or linguistic expression, the work's interest in positive psychology.

2) A specialistic but restricted use of the term. Beside its appropriations, the term, even when used in a sensible way, has often been used to define specific rule-based systems applied in non-game contexts. The classic idea of gamification being based on the simplistic notion of "game elements" (criticized in Bonenfant & Genvo 2014), or on the adoption of game design guidelines to create tings that are not games are good examples of this way of understanding gamification.

3) "Gamification" has also been used in a broader way to indicate a sort of user-centered fun-enabling philosophy of doing. In this case, the label "gamification" indicates the many ways in which playfulness can be used to promote cultural, psychological and societal good, rooted in positive psychology and in the cultural drive of the ludification of culture.

While the restricted use of the term might be the most common one, we argue that the expanded one might be more desirable. At any rate, the meaning of words is often the result of a negotiation. If the common use of a term is simplistic, that is not necessarily a good reason to abandon it entirely. The many misconceptions and misrepresentations of quantum physics in pop culture did not convince scientists to ditch the term for a new one. For the same reason we believe that we should reclaim the term "gamification" in its broader acceptation, and make it a solid concept that will help us investigate and understand the changing role of play and games in contemporary societies.

3.3 Three - When does gamification work?

Philosopher Nelson Goodman suggested replacing the traditional question "what is art?" with a new one: "when is art?" (Goodman 1976). In other words, he dismissed the ontological claim that art is something separate and definable, and instead adopted a pragmatic approach based on the features of a specific kind of symbolic activity.

Similarly, we want to reject the traditional empirical question "does gamification work?". The utilitarian ideology behind this question reinforces the idea that gamification is a tool, and that studying it from an empirical perspective simply means to assess its efficacy. This question has

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an intrinsic defensive nature, motivating its own legitimacy through an utilitarian argument, and therefore linking the value of empirical research on gamification to its ability of improving the efficacy of gamification techniques.

Instead, we believe that we should instead start from the fact that gamification – intended as practical implementations of the ludicisation of culture - *is happening*. Empirical research, from this perspective, is and will be an ongoing process requiring granularity more than grand statements. For this reason, the question "when does gamification work?" can be far more productive, as it evades the utilitarian approach, and recognizes the variety of gamified practices and places them in their sociocultural context. This does not mean that we should not assess empirically gamified implementations, but that we should stop to try to "prove" that gamification is worth our attention, and instead focus on studying its many effects on culture and society.

Nevertheless, several issues remain with the empirical assessment of gamification strategies. The effects of many of those are generally temporary or superficial and are often measured together with other dimensions (e.g. usability) and without a control group. This and the fact that many users of these applications do not really have a choice, as experimentation often happens with employees, makes the results of these empirical studies questionable. We believe that to try to answer the question of when gamification works, researchers need a standardized way to measure the consequences of gamification activities.

3.4 Four - Enabling or Controlling

Traditional forms of gamification have been criticized for being controlling, top down, manipulative and paternalistic (Linehan et al. 2015, Thibault 2019). It is true that gamification often puts in place asymmetrical power relations, where the designers get to "make the rules" and the users need to follow them. The fact that gamification is generally applied in projects that aim at behavioral change (be it for commercial reasons, or for humanitarian ones, like favoring exercising) is sometimes depicted as problematic, as behavioral change is indeed the result of an exercise of *power*.

Nevertheless, the idea that changing the mind of people is intrinsically linked to exploitation is a prejudice, probably rooted in the uneven power relations among the people involved. This

however is not universally true, as there is some wide consensus, for example, that educators should indeed be able to change the mind of their students - without manipulating them. Maybe it is for this reason that the field of education has often made use of various forms of gamification, even centuries before the term was invented. We can think of the works of thinkers such as Rousseau and Schiller, who underlined the importance of play as a key part of the education of children, as well as educators such as Montessori, which shared similar views. The idea that gamification is intrinsically manipulative is probably linked to an overestimation of the commercialization in gamification applications, again due to the popularity of the concept in the early 2010s. This would explain why similar concepts, such as serious games or game-based learning, do not encounter the same amount of opposition or criticism. We believe that the risks linked to a manipulative use of gamification are very true. We see dangerous and problematic implementations everywhere in the World, from the Chinese Social Credit System (Liang et al. 2018), to the dopamine loops put in place in US American Social Media. Denying the dangers of gamification would mean adopting an acritical, enthusiastic position. However, focusing only on the risks and disregarding the opportunities would be an equally acritical apocalyptic position. To reappropriate gamification, therefore, we need to explore how and when control can be an enabling force. Some forms of control over the markets as well as control over society are considered necessary to ensure equality and justice. The control of the gamifiers over their users needs to be of the same kind: a way of creating a space of freedom and self expression, where constraints are to spark creativity and fun is meant to motivate and not to manipulate.

3.5 Five – Wider and Deeper

By the standards of stand-alone games and the sheer richness of games and play in our culture, early gamification attempts often seemed either poorly designed or naively simplistic in comparison. This situation is often attributed to the (unintended) design philosophy of employing isolatable game elements into extant systems while the design of games commands a much more nuanced, holistic and integrated thinking. While being an understandable early step in the development of gamification, of its conceptualization, understanding and literacy, this was a farcry back towards the infancy of game design in general. Unfortunately, instead of

making use of the vast spectrum of games and digital gaming, the sources of inspiration for gamification design seem to be quite narrow. Gamification techniques seem to ignore many game genres and types that could instead offer interesting ideas and mechanic. In some cases the issue is even deeper, and some of the elements that have become central in gamification design have almost no relationship with how actual digital games work, or overrepresent some elements. It is the case, for example, of badges, which become a key element in gamification while not being extensively used in digital games - and that are not even necessarily part of the play experience, and work as extraneous motivators.

To overcome this challenge, gamification research has, first of all, to acknowledge something that is well accepted in game research: that our understanding of games and play is still limited and requires more work. We believe, therefore, that gamification design should be recentered around three main points:

- Games and play are mysterious. Gamification needs to acknowledge this complexity and use it as a resource to explore new and innovative ways of designing.
- There are a lot of games out there. Instead of being inspired only by some very specific subsets of games or by other gamification attempts, gamification designers should look at the richness and variety of the whole gaming field.
- Gamification design should be playful in itself. Collaborative and creative design is necessary for achieving solid results: play cannot be designed without being playful.

3.6 Six - Gamification and ludophobia

Gamification is intrinsically linked to the ludification of culture, which, as all cultural trends, does encounter resistance and opposition, often but not always due to a generation gap. The diffidence towards play that dominated many moral panics against games is not completely over, and it is still possible to hear arguments blaming them for mass shootings or linking them to terrorism. This ludophobic attitude is sometimes reflected on gamification, which inherits the fears that surround new technologies as well as those related to the relations between play and reality. Religious values themselves have often had an ambivalent relationship with play, sometimes becoming open hostility. In Italy in the 15th century it was not uncommon, after the sermon of some radical religious figure, to participate in a “bonfire of vanities” (falò delle

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vanità) involved the burning of game sets and playing cards alongside mirrors, high-heeled shoes, perfumes and other frivolities. Puritan ethics has often been described as hostile to play (Daniels 1995) and max Weber, in his famous work on Calvinist ethics, insists on their hostility towards frivolous pleasures. While the attitude of Abrahamic religions towards play has not always been hostile (Leone 2016) and some of its hostility might have been exaggerated (Johnson 2009), the roots of ludophobia do run deep in the ethical systems of most of the West.

Even when they do not reach open hostility, older generations are often less passionate about games and gamification. Lifestyles and ways of thinking oriented towards instrumentalism tend to see enjoyment and fun as opposed to utility and efficacy. Play has, for a long time, been considered as the opposite of "seriousness", and the idea that games can be used to do something useful can still be met with disbelief.

One solution often adopted is answering these concerns by adopting the same mindset. It is the case of arguments that point out at the prosperity brought by the revenues of the game industry and equate the ability to generate wealth to the worth of a certain cultural artifact. Similarly, proving the effectiveness of games and gamification in affecting behavior, for example in education, and in generating results goes to great lengths in changing people's attitude towards them.

For these reasons, we believe that it is of capital importance to contextualize gamification in its cultural and historical background, to be able to understand the different reactions, opinions and prejudice that different people can have towards them. For this reason, the effectiveness of gamification is also strictly linked with the ways it is communicated and presented – and any gamification that aims to be inclusive needs to take into account the variety of relationships that people can have with play due to their culture, age, beliefs and personality.

3.7 Seven - Gamification is Not a "Thing"

Gamification is typically described as a strategy or a technique. It is seen as a technology, or an objective of design. We believe that, instead, gamification is better understood as a "lens" through which we can look at the world. If the current cultural context made it more prominent and heightened its influence over society, forms of gamification *ante litteram* have always existed. It is a very human thing to do, to try to alleviate a boring task by making it fun or

exciting. We can find traces of it in Mary Poppins' philosophy as well as in Stakhanov's productivity records, and far before that (Vesa et. Al 2017).

A diachronic approach to gamification, hence, can help us understand the past by looking in a fresh at the role of play in past societies. It allows us to reflect on the present, going beyond the practical applications of gamification, and engaging the sociocultural positioning of games and the ideologies and practices that emerge from it. It can, finally, offer us a way to imagine the future, to speculate on the role that games can have it, be it dystopian or utopian, and to try and steer towards the latter.

Gamification, finally, can become an analytic category. It can be a way to investigate the dynamics and negotiations between everyday life and enjoyment, between different ways to create value and give meaning to our everyday life.

4. Conclusions

With our seven points we tried to map the current status of the conversation about gamification. We outlined the misunderstandings and the main issues that pollute it, and we tried to offer possible solutions to go beyond them, to bridge across perspectives and address fears and misconceptions. We tried, in other words, to reappropriate gamification and to restart the discussion on the role and productivity of this concept in academia.

To this end, we advance a final note. There seems to be a confusion between researching gamification and implementing it. While many researchers working on gamification engage in experiments to study the effects and the efficacy of gamification techniques, the two things are still clearly separate. There should not be a divide between researchers criticizing gamification and others that insist on the positive sides. Research does not need enthusiasts nor apocalyptics. Gamification research needs to engage both positive and negative sides of the phenomenon realistically and at the same time. This might take time: we should not forget that the concept is still relatively new, and that research on it is still not mature. Instead of becoming frustrated with the shortcomings of the current state of the art, however, we believe we should be excited about its potential, and about what this new lens to look at humanity has still to offer.

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