

Introduction

“Pokèmon has become such a phenomenal success.....At the very beginning just a few people knew this cartridge, and it was word-of-mouth that spread its popularity without the media noticing it. The cartoon came one year after the debut of the GameBoy game. We continue to sell a lot of the GameBoy games, but now we have movies. We have so much merchandise and the trading cards, but the growth was a gradual process.”

-Hiroshi Imannishi, General Affairs Manager, Nintendo Co., Ltd. (Kent 556)

In the beginning, Pokèmon was a simple word that did not carry much meaning behind it. Literally, it is an elision of Pocket Monsters, small creatures that can be trained in order to battle. Nowadays, the word Pokèmon encapsulates a massively complex set of ideas, reflective of the magnitude of its success in the global market. Defining Pokèmon is hard; it is a global phenomenon that captivated children from approximately 1996 to 2001, a successful franchise that spanned multiple forms of media, and a creative empire maintained by Nintendo and its affiliates through strategic planning, among other possible definitions. The Pokèmon icon has been marketed on every item imaginable, from everyday goods like fruit snacks, clothing, and bedding to objects of much greater proportion, including a PokeCenter and Nippon Airways jets (Tobin 5). But before the marketability of Pokèmon expanded to such proportions, before Pokèmon and its most famous character, Pikachu, became as common a household name in America as Mickey Mouse, there existed a video game. The release of Pokèmon Red and Greenⁱ in Japan for the Nintendo Game Boy paved the way for Pokèmon to extend to other forms of media, such as comics, television, and movies. The first generationⁱⁱ Pokemon video game series is the focus of this case study because of its influence on children’s popular culture and the gaming industry.

In February of 1996, Nintendo originally released Pokèmon Red and Green, the products of six years’ effort by Satoshi Tajiri and his team at Game Freak, in Japan (Kent 556). The player of this 2-D RPG game assumes the role of a Pokèmon trainer in order to collect and train various Pokèmon as part of the overall goal of defeating the Elite 4ⁱⁱⁱ. The Red and Green versions of the game contain the same storyline and gameplay features, but differ in the set of Pokèmon available to capture. As a result of this design element, players who want to collect all the 151 Pokèmon must trade with other players using the Game Boy’s Game Link cable. The overwhelming popularity of the game in Japan led to the establishment of a comic book, television show, and trading card game, among a slew of other products. The television show, video game, and trading cards reached the United States in rapid succession in 1998, due in part to the aggressive efforts of Gail Tilden, the vice president of product acquisition and development for Nintendo of America (Iwabuchi 69). In the U.S., the video games were marketed as Pokèmon Red and Blue, but were equivalent to the Japanese Pokèmon Red and Green counterparts. The television cartoon, which was released before the video game, quickly became the highest-rated kid’s show, which fared well for the sales of Pokèmon Red and Blue (Kent 557). The subsequent releases of the trading card game and movies fueled additional sales in America, until Pokèmon eventually became the full-fledged phenomenon that

people know of today. Its popularity cooled off around late 2001-2002, but Nintendo is still in the process of releasing more video games (Tobin 3).

Aim of the Case Study

This case study hopes to achieve two things: to provide a detailed historical account of the Pokèmon GameBoy game series from their initial conception to the aftermath of the release of the last game, Pokèmon Yellow: Special Pikachu Edition, in America; and to understand the technological, business, and cultural factors that made the game so successful. The popularity of the Pokèmon video games can be explained in these terms by examining the global localization^{iv} pertaining to the games' release in America, the multidimensionality of Pokèmon products across different media, the creativity of the storyline that reflects elements of childrens' values, and the games' flexibility to appeal to different audiences.

From Bugs to Space Invaders to Pokèmon

“I was really interested in collecting insects...Every time I found a new insect, it was mysterious to me. And the more I searched for insects, the more I found...Places to catch insects are rare because of urbanization. Kids play inside their homes now, and a lot had forgotten about catching insects. So had I. When I was making games, something clicked and I decided to make a game with that concept...Playing video games, watching TV, Ultraman with his capsule monsters—they all became ingredients for the game.”

-Satoshi Tajiri, creator of Pokèmon (Larimer 2)

Appropriately enough, the idea for Pokèmon stemmed from creator Satoshi Tajiri's love of collecting bugs and insects as a child. As a youth growing up in the Tokyo suburb of Machida, Tajiri experienced firsthand how urbanization encroached upon children's outdoor playspaces, as development started replacing nature with concrete. One of the buildings Tajiri frequented in later years was the arcade, where he became passionate about playing Space Invaders to the point where the arcade gave him the machine to take home (Allison 41). Dissatisfied at the lack of information available about video games, the teenage Tajiri and a few friends produced their own magazine, Game Freak, which started out as handwritten copies and evolved into a printed publication (Larimer 1). Because he often felt that video games were not designed well, Tajiri learned to program and took apart a Nintendo system to figure out how to make video games himself. In 1991, he discovered the Nintendo GameBoy and the GameLink Cable, which could connect two GameBoys. In the GameBoy, he saw the medium he needed to implement his idea of a game in which players could collect characters individually but would maximize their collection by utilizing the cable to trade with other players, thus encouraging social interaction. As Tajiri put it, “I imagined an insect moving back and forth across the cable. That's what inspired me (Larimer 2).”

Making Pokèmon a Reality at Nintendo

Nintendo had seen some of Tajiri's previous programming efforts when he had worked on *The Legend of Zelda*, so the company hired him to develop his latest idea. Shigeru Miyamoto, the famed creator of *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*, mentored Tajiri during his long toil to create the Pokèmon game (Chua-Eoan 3). The intricate demands of the development process created their share of obstacles. GameFreak almost went broke during the six years it took to create Pokèmon because Tajiri did not have enough money to pay all of his employees (Chua-Eoan 4). One of the people who stuck it out was Ken Sugimori, one of the co-founders of the GameFreak magazine, who eventually went on to draw all of the Pokèmon characters (Chua-Eoan 3). However, by 1996 when the game was finally complete, the GameBoy technology was becoming obsolete. Its graphics and tiny screen could not compete with the emerging CD-ROM PC games, so both Tajiri and Nintendo released the Pokèmon Red and Green versions in February of 1996 with rather low expectations. The release got a boost from Masakazu Kubo, the executive producer the publishing company Shogakukan Inc., who decided to develop a line of Pokèmon comics that included the first trading cards (Chua-Eoan 4). The sales trend of Pokèmon Red and Green surprised many, as the number of units sold continued to rise steadily. In under a year, Pokèmon had sold 1.84 million copies (Shen 2).

Part of the success was due to the fact that the GameBoy games were affordable to Japanese boys as compared to the newer, flashier titles like *Final Fantasy*. Word of mouth also spread that, unbeknownst to Nintendo, Tajiri had secretly included another Pokèmon in the game, Mew, in addition to the 150 recognized species, which could only be acquired through trading. This programming twist resulted in further sales that catapulted the Pokèmon game and Nintendo into the limelight (Chua-Eoan 4). A television show in April of 1997 and the trading card version of the game in the fall of 1997 quickly followed, enjoying tremendous success in Japan and further boosting game sales. In 1997 alone, 4.7 million game units were sold (Shen 2). However, on December 17, 1997, an episode of the television show entitled "Computer Warrior Porygon" which featured a flash bomb explosion followed by five seconds of flashing red and white lights caused more than 700 children to have seizures. Consequently, the show was shut down for four months, while the producers scrambled to revise their animation techniques (del Castillo 1). The worldwide news reports of the incident were many Americans' first exposure to the Pokèmon phenomenon, which would soon spread captivate their children alike.

Despite the negative publicity, Tajiri and Nintendo pressed onward, releasing yet another version of the Pokèmon game in 1998 for the new Game Boy Color console known as Pokèmon Yellow in Japan (Tobin 7). The game differed from its predecessors by closely following the storyline of the television show, which included Pikachu as the main character, and by sporting more refined, color graphics. During this time, Kubo had also been working on a Pokèmon movie, "Mewtwo Strikes Back," which was released in Japan in July 1998. The simultaneous existence of Pokèmon in different media, including television, film, trading cards had a synergistic effect on the video game sales, clocking in a combined total of 8 million units sold among Pokèmon Red, Green, and

Yellow in Japan (Shen 3). Thus the dominance of Pokèmon was established in a fully-developed, cross-media product line.

Bringing the Pokèmon Craze to America

At the same time that Pokèmon was rebounding from the setback and reestablishing its foothold in the Japanese market, across the globe, Game Freak and Shogakukan Inc. were trying to convince executives at Nintendo of America that the same success could be repeated in the United States. They also saw the export as a chance to revive the aging GameBoy console. Gail Tilden, the vice president of product acquisition and development at Nintendo of America, worked with Kubo, Tsunekazu Ishihara of Creature, Inc., Takashi Kawaguchi of Nintendo, and Al Kahn (creator of the Cabbage Patch doll) to tailor certain aspects of Pokèmon to the American audience and aggressively market the product line (Chua-Eoan 4). The television show, toys, cards, games (released as Pokèmon Red and Blue versions), and comics all hit the shelves with a few weeks of each other in late 1998, and quickly solidified Pokèmon Red and Blue as the bestselling game on the market (Kent 557). Nintendo released the GameBoy Color in America in November 1998 and Pokèmon Yellow: Special Pikachu Edition hit the shelves about a year later. The combined launches of Pokèmon and the GameBoy Color had monumental effects on handheld console sales. In the United States, Pokèmon sales gave the entire gaming industry a much-needed boost. Usually video game sales drop during transition years in which new consoles are released, but US game sales actually increased by \$1 billion (due to GameBoy sales) to \$1.26 billion, representing 18% of the market (Kent 558). In short, Nintendo's marketing strategy paid off as Pokèmon once again swept a nation and revived the popularity of the GameBoy console.

The Aftermath of the Pokèmon Series Release

Pokèmon continued to show strong performances in America and Japan, as a slew of new games, toys, movies, etc. were steadily churned out. The next generation of card and video games, toys, movies, comics and the television show reflected the addition of 100 more Pokèmon species by Tajiri and GameFreak, setting the stage for Pokèmon Gold and Silver, the sequels to Pokèmon Red/Blue/Yellow, to be released. Nintendo went on to release the N64 console, and several Pokèmon games emerged for it, including "Pokèmon Stadium," which allowed Pokèmon GameBoy players to upload their characters to the N64 to battle against each other with 3D graphics (Shen 3). To exemplify the continuing dominance of the Pokèmon game releases for GameBoy, GameBoy Color, and the N64, consider the following statistics: In the year 2000, 6 of the gaming industry's top 10 best-selling games were Pokèmon titles. As of February 2000, 12 Pokèmon games were available, almost 27 million Pokèmon game units were sold in the United States, and more than 74 million units had been sold worldwide (Short History 1). However, as historical trends dictate, the Pokèmon empire had to eventually fall, and it did just that around late 2001-2002 (Tobin 3). The fizzling of such a dominate player was most likely due to the fickle nature of the children audience, who move from one fad to the next and the saturation of every possible media and product outlet to prevent any more room for expansion.

This is not to say that Pokèmon no longer has a presence in Japan or America. The Pokèmon franchise still active—the television show is still airing and a new set of GameBoy Advance games, Pokèmon Ruby and Sapphire, is about to be released in March 2004 (Pokemon.com 1). But it certainly is not operating at the height of popularity that it enjoyed during its heyday when the Pokèmon presence was inescapable.

Factors that Spell Success

The success of the Pokèmon video game series and of the franchise as a whole can be attributed to its remarkable flexibility as a multidimensional commodity. The game design and storyline was general enough to encompass values embraced by all children, but the products could be localized to a particular market without stripping them of the basic essence of Pokèmon. The rapid expansion from the initial video game to an entire product line would have not been possible without the interplay between the different kinds of media (comics, TV show, card game, video game, toys), and the strategic release of these different products to reinforce each other. Multifaceted cultural awareness, business prowess, and full exploration of the technologies possible within the constraints of the GameBoy design all contributed to the unprecedented success of the video games.

Cultural Awareness

From the initial design up until the introduction of the GameBoy games in America, the culture of the audience was always in the back of Tajiri and Nintendo's mind as they fine-tuned the game design and marketing towards a particular group of people. This "culture" mentioned includes the differences in customs between the U.S. and Japan, and also the children culture, that is, what appeals to children as opposed to adults or teenagers. Several features of the Pokèmon GameBoy series hint that this sensitivity to differences in culture was a top priority. When Tajiri was thinking up the elements of gameplay, he had two motivations. He wanted to create a challenging but fun game that would excite children's imaginations, and he wanted to relieve the stresses that accompany children as they grow up in postindustrial Japanese society. Japan, known as an "academic record society," places much emphasis on education from an early age, where 44% of Japanese 10-14 year olds attend cram school in order to prepare for the rigorous high school entrance exams. The increased time spent on schooling takes away from childrens' opportunities to play with each other and interact with nature, which was such an essential part of Tajiri's childhood (Allison 41). In making the video game, he wanted to combine this form of play sorely missing from the typical Japanese child in the virtual format that could recreate this type of experience (Allison 42).

Another prevalent aspect of Japanese culture that is pervasive throughout the game is that of "cuteness." The "cute" business in Japan started in the 70's, and is best characterized by Sanrio, with its popular Hello Kitty product line (Allison 39). The Japanese advertising agency Dentsu offers the explanation that cute characters represent appropriate symbols of identity at the personal, group or national level, functioning as a device for self-realization. Also, people derive consumptive pleasure from purchasing cute items, which comforts and soothes the consumer from the daily rigors of Japanese

life, which demands much from its students and workers (Allison 40). Masubichi lists physical smallness as the main criteria that determines cuteness, in addition to babyish, naïve, innocent, rounded, soft-edge, or brightly colored attributes (Allison 43). Pokèmon, originally called Pocket Monsters, exemplifies this need for cuteness to derive from miniaturization. Tajiri said that he fully intended for the Pokèmon to be small and able to be carried in Pokeballs, which are miniaturized capsules because it gives children a sense of control over their characters—in other words, the physical size of the Pokèmon serves as reassurance that the trainer-trainee relationship is kept intact (Chua-Eoan 4). Some of the original Pokèmon characters fit the cuteness criteria described, indicating that cuteness may have in fact been a driving force behind the design of several characters. It might also be argued from a gender perspective that the prevalence of cute Pokèmon could serve to appeal to girls, who traditionally appreciate cuteness more than boys, in a bid to widen the appeal of Pokèmon.

In contrast to these Japanese cultural elements that influenced the initial game design and concept, the move to introduce Pokèmon to American audiences involved somewhat of a reverse process, in which the “Japaneseness” of Pokèmon was eliminated. Within the video game series, all the Japanese writing was eliminated, from graphic signs and other icons, so that children would not be distracted by the foreign writing, and the names of Pokèmon were Westernized (Iwabuchi 67). The protagonist of the game, Satoshi (named after the creator) was changed to Ash, while the arch rival character, Shigeru (an homage to Miyamoto) was changed to Gary. Also, references to American pop culture replaced such Japanese counterparts. Two characters were renamed Hitmonlee and Hitmonchan, in deference to Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Also, the drawings of the human characters do not look Japanese, a term referred to as *mukokuseki*, which literally means “someone or something lacking nationality.” The practice is very common in Japanese animation, in which characters tend to be based on Caucasian types. These changes were implemented to make Pokèmon seem as de-exoticized as possible, reflecting the understanding that such “culturally neutral” characters might have broader appeal to a global market (Iwabuchi 58).

The television series that aired in America was much more drastically edited than the video games, due to cultural differences in the acceptable levels of violence and sexuality or sexual innuendo shown on TV. Other elements were changed to mimic trends in American film. For example, the soundtrack to the TV show was edited to become more pop-like and music was employed primarily to clarify the action on the screen, as opposed to the Japanese series, which uses an orchestral score to underline the intensity and solemnity of the story. Also, the American version of the cartoon creates more of a direct good guy/bad guy dichotomy whereas the Japanese version tends to blur that strict division, choosing instead to focus more on the relationship between the characters (Katsuno 84). These dramatic changes to the television show are relevant to analysis of the video games because the different media that Pokèmon inhabit do not function exclusively of each other. Many of the children who play the video game watch the TV show and vice versa and play the card game, read the comics, buy the toys, etc. Sefton-Green suggests that the video game provides children with an interactive medium, while the television show provides the needed visualization of the storyline that cannot be accomplished by the Game Boy’s fair graphics (152).

What Children Want

Given that Pokèmon was modeled after the a favorite childhood activity of Satoshi Tajiri, it comes as no surprise that the video games excel at combining all the activities that generally appeal to children. The first of these is acquisitiveness. Children have an instinctual need to collect, whether it be baseball cards, dolls, stamps, or Pokèmon paraphernalia. Plotz suggests that children learn to recognize patterns and organize their world through these collections (1). The Pokèmon catchphrase “Gotta catch ‘em all” perfectly sums up the acquisitive nature of the game, where the whole objective, in addition to defeating the Elite 4 trainers, is to try and collect all 151 Pokèmon species. But the beauty (or evil, depending on who you ask) of the Pokèmon world is that the collecting is never done. Once all the Pokèmon in the video game are acquired, there is still the card game, comics, toys, and other products that comprise the totality of the Pokèmon collection, and encourage consumerism.

The Pokèmon video games also caters to boys and girls of a wide range of ages because the gameplay and storyline engender both sets of qualities that traditionally appeal to boys and girls and offer a varying level of difficulty appropriate for a broad age range of gamers. With regard to traditional game qualities, Henry Jenkins relates the aspects of gameplay that boys like to their propensity to play outdoors and be visible in the public sphere. As a result, many of the computer games that boys enjoy tend to involve action, violence, mastery, and autonomy from parents, which mimics elements of their outdoor gameplay (Buckingham 20). In contrast, girls are encouraged to stay within the private sphere and play with games or toys that develop their future domestic skills. Consequently, the computer games that girls tend to identify with usually involve cooperation with others, slow, unfolding action that does not require manual dexterity, and domestic skills such as nurturing and raising (Buckingham 21).

The Pokèmon video game series offers boys and girls such a gaming experience. It involves action and violence in the form of Pokèmon battles, where two Pokèmon fight until one faints (note the gentler action and resolution involved than in a typical fighting or shoot-em-up game), and the mastery comes in the form of acquiring knowledge. Becoming a Pokèmon master and beating the Elite 4 trainers requires understanding the best way to raise the stats of particular Pokèmon in order to help them reach their maximum battling potential. The autonomy from parents that children can derive from playing the Pokèmon video games comes from the fact that the terminology in order to understand the Pokèmon world is complex and esoteric, thus giving children a form of power over their parents, who sometimes do not understand what their children are discussing. The Pokèmon video game also incorporates traditionally female gaming elements, in that the gameplay requires cooperation with other people within the game, and between people who play the game. The protagonist, Ash, must gain clues and train his Pokèmon by talking and interacting with other characters in the game. If he avoids the characters, he can never reach the final level and battle the Elite 4; thus, the game demands social interaction within the context of the storyline. In order to catch all 151 Pokèmon, the game player must also cooperate with other game players in order to conduct trades, which involves negotiating skills. Also, the act of training Pokèmon itself invokes maternal connotations, as many game players develop a bond with their virtual Pokèmon because they are actively involved in the caretaking and development of their

Pokèmon as they train them to reach their maximum potential (Buckingham 21). Another appealing aspect of Pokèmon that may transcend gender issues is that fact that the Pokèmon are sexless and can only utter their name over and over, which eliminates any sort of gender association due to behavioral patterns. Kids may decide that a Pokèmon “looks” male or female, but actually, the gender is quite uncertain.

Business Prowess

The Pokèmon phenomenon can be described as multidimensional, and is a form of multimedia in the truest sense of the word. The fact that Pokèmon was available in so many different forms of media attests to the business savvy that the marketing team of Nintendo used to penetrate as many markets as possible in America. But initially in Japan, the establishment of the “Pokèmon supersystem,” as described by Iwabuchi came through trial and error (65). Pokèmon started out as one form of media, the video game, and the establishment of other forms such as the comic book and TV series were contingent upon the success of the media form that preceded it. Thus in Japan, the Pokèmon empire was established layer by layer, but once all the pieces were in place, Nintendo could decide which media form should be introduced first into the American market. Cultural factors played a huge role in the way that the Pokèmon supersystem would be presented to Americans, and Gail Tilden led the charge to localize Pokèmon by modifying its content. She understood best that getting children to adopt Pokèmon would best be achieved by conveying the impression that they were global characters that children in any part of the world could identify with, rather than simply trying to mask the fact that Pokèmon is from Japan (Iwabuchi 69). Nintendo of America decided that the best strategy to ensure success of the video game was to introduce the Pokèmon Red and Blue cartridges at the same time as the TV show, comics, trading cards, and all the other forms of media. This all-out coordination effort could not have succeeded without the recognition that various forms of Pokèmon media needed to be localized in order for this grand introduction to reach its fullest effect (Iwabuchi 66). When compared to previous fads, such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or Power Rangers, it is clear that Pokèmon extended its longevity where both of these trends could not because of its origin as a game first and foremost, which was closely tied to the television show in that they complemented each other. Also, the sheer diversity of advertising forms that Pokèmon employed, from all the forms of media released within weeks of each other to the full-fledged website to the various promotional tie-ins with companies was like nothing ever seen before, clearly putting to shame the typical advertising campaign that consists of perhaps TV, radio and print ads.

The aggressive Pokèmon campaign in America also must attribute its success to the business factors inherent in the game design. At the root, the game is designed to encourage consumerism. The act of collecting that is the fundamental principle of the game, combined with the multiple forms of Pokèmon media available make for every parent’s nightmare, as the number of items to acquire in the Pokèmon collection becomes endless. The video game in particular was marketed in such a way to encourage the buying of multiple items which, when used together, enhanced the overall playing experience. For example, the decision to split the 151 Pokèmon among two versions of the game which otherwise is essentially the same game requires multiple purchases for

the hardcore gamer trying to capture all the Pokèmon. Instead of one GameBoy console and one game unit, the purchase becomes a cooperative effort involving two GameBoy consoles, one of each version of the game, and at least one GameLink cable, sold separately, to initiate trade between the two consoles. The release of Pokèmon Yellow included the option of printing out Pokèmon data, but in order to take advantage of this feature, a separate GameBoy Printer must be purchased.

Technological Exploration

The GameBoy equipment requirements described previously that allow the hardcore gamer to get the most out of the Pokèmon gaming experience exhibit the prevalence of business trends that are influenced by technological factors. The Pokèmon video gaming series is unique in that its marketing and development went directly against the current trend of the gaming industry at the time. During that time, the industry was heading towards more sophisticated hardware, and subsequently more complex games that boasted superior graphics aspiring towards 3-D realism (Buckingham 15). In direct opposition to that, the Pokèmon video game series actually was released during a time when the GameBoy was teetering on the brink of obsolescence, with its 2-button commandeering and small, 2-D screen. Remarkably, the Pokèmon games took off despite the GameBoy's outdated technology and brought the console back into the forefront of portable gaming during a time when the media had already written it off (Chua-Eoan 5). From a business perspective, the Pokèmon video game series was successful because it worked within the technological constraints of the GameBoy system, utilizing extra features like the GameLink cable and GameBoy Printer to encourage more buying in the consumer's quest to "catch 'em all."

Conclusion

The Pokemon video games series is interesting because it stemmed from one man's childhood love of collecting bugs and evolved into a full-fledged media empire whose success was greatly underestimated. The creativity of the game idea itself would have never been able to carry the game to the heights that it reached; it was a combination of a compelling storyline, a multidimensional array of media products, strategic business decisions that were flexible enough to respond to the nuances of local markets, and a game design that included elements of gameplay that resonated with boys and girls of a wide age range. Pokemon took the technology that was available at the time, the would-be obsolete Game Boy, and renewed interest in portable gaming technology, despite its simplistic controls and fair graphics. Although the popularity of Pokemon nowadays is in decline, as is usually the result of the fickle children's market, the imprint that this phenomenon left on the gaming industry and in shaping children's culture will be understood and appreciated for years to come.

ⁱ Pokemon Red and Green are two versions of the same video game that differ only in the sets of Pokemon that can be found. Pokemon Red and Blue were the first two versions released in America.

ⁱⁱ By first generation, I refer to the first set of Game Boy video games released by Nintendo. This includes Pokemon Red, Green, Blue, and Yellow.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Elite 4 are four highly advanced Pokemon trainers that the protagonist, Ash, must defeat in order to beat the game and become the Pokemon Master.

^{iv} Global localization, defined as a strategy by global companies to “transcend vestigial national differences and to create standardized global markets, while remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets and differentiated consumer segments.” (Iwabuchi 67)

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