

# Blurring the Lines: *De Profundis: Letters from the Abyss* (2001) by Michał Oracz

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**Abstract:** Being an expansion of a presentation given at the DiGRA 2015 conference, this article discusses *De Profundis* by Michał Oracz, a Polish role-playing game from 2001, as an innovative project rooted in previous experiments of the Polish role-playing games community. Albeit generally recognised as an RPG, the game merges the features of the pervasive larp and alternate reality game with the more traditional forms of role-playing. The game is discussed as blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, and destabilizing the magic circle of play, as well as merging the presentation of operational rules with what could be recognised as a game session.

**Keywords:** magic circle, New Style, game session, role-playing games, life action role-playing, alternate reality games

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# 1. Introduction

Upon its publication, *De Profundis: Letters from the Abyss* was marketed and generally recognised as a role-playing game.<sup>1</sup> Created by a game and graphic designer Michał Oracz, it was originally published in Polish as *De Profundis: listy z otchłani* by Portal Publishing (Wydawnictwo Portal) in 2001. The game was translated into English to be published by Hogshead Publishing the same year. Other translations followed; Edge Entertainment was responsible for the Spanish edition in 2002 and the French one in 2010, and Krimsus Krimskrams-Kiste for the German edition in 2003. In 2009 the second (expanded) Polish edition was released, followed by another English translation, published as *De Profundis: Cthulhu Gaming on the Edge of Madness* (2010) by Cubicle 7 Entertainment. The first edition is going to be analysed here as characterised by specifically innovative approach to game design, namely blurring the boundaries between a table-top role-playing game, pervasive larp, and an alternate reality game. The fragments quoted and analysed in this article have been taken from the 2001 English edition. Unless specified otherwise, all translations are mine. The article is the expansion of my presentation submitted to DiGRA 2015 conference.

*De Profundis* is heavily influenced by the works of H. P. Lovecraft. The rulebook is written as a series of letters in which a first-person narrator explains the tenets of the game. The general idea is to observe the reality, look for some imaginary traces of the uncanny, extract and explore them, and put one's experiences related to the process down, preferably in a series of letters that should be exchanged with other players. The players can constitute a Society, akin to a traditional role-playing party, or the Web, "an open group of indefinite range, where they can encounter anybody" (Oracz, 2001a, p. 9). As follows, both the rulebook and the gameplay are epistolary. The choice of structure – a series of letters, in which the first person narrator who introduces himself as a game designer presents his experiences and explores his thoughts – is reminiscent of the tradition of epistolary novel, the diary, and the metanovel.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the blurb of the English 2001 edition calls it "GM-free role-playing game of modern and 1920s horror in the style of H. P. Lovecraft".

The game's relationships with the aforementioned genres brings up the subject of the tension between reality and fiction, as well as the question of the artifice, that had already been debated in literature. The "epistolary fiction tends to lay bare the subjective basis of all cognition" (Nünning, 2008, p. 57), and reading diaries,

actual or fictional, published or unpublished, private or public – we tend to fashion a double response. First there is the feeling of the voyeur, peeping around pages as if they were curtains, searching out the secret thoughts and life recorded on the private page. But then comes the troubling response: suppose this text is contrived, the writer lying to the reader, writing a life as one would like it rather than as it is (Duyfhuizen, 1986, p. 171).

In the metanovel, in turn, "the central conflict between fiction and reality is reproduced within the structure of the novel itself" (Lowenkron, 1976, p. 346). Consequently, *De Profundis* seems to be a very "literary" role-playing game, both directly related to Lovecraft, and following an established tradition of metafictional literary genres that focus on their own ontological status (Waugh, 1984).

The basic premise, namely the exchange of the letters, situates *De Profundis* in the category of asynchronous multiplayer games (Tresca, 2011, Kindle, chapter 4, section "History"). In playing-by-mail, the oldest form of games belonging to this category that had originated from playing chess, "players sent their decisions or turns via postal mail to an opponent, who in turn would send his response" (ibid.). "As technology advanced, so too did play-by-post gaming, evolving from postal to email, from email to web, from web to persistent browser-based games (PBBGs)" (ibid., chapter 4, section "Introduction"). However, playing-by-mail games and PBBGs, as Tresca (2011) discusses them, are usually set in a secondary universes, clearly separated from the everyday life of the players (e.g. magic kingdoms), who take on fictional personas (e.g. dragon slayers) in the game. On the contrary, in *De Profundis* the players choose one of the three options:

Next we must choose the characters we are going to play, whom we are going to act out in the game. For we can play:

- ourselves;
- an investigator taken from *Call of Cthulhu*, old or current; or
- a character taken from a story by HPL or another author (Oracz, 2001a, p. 10).

Hence, the first option directs the players into merging their assumed persona with their everyday life identity. The underlying idea of *De Profundis* is to blur the distinctions between everyday reality and the world created in the course of the game, and this option is one of the tactics facilitating it. As it will be presented in the course of this article, while displaying some features typical of games, *De Profundis* was a highly innovative, one of a kind project, stemming from the experiments undertaken by its author and the other members of the Polish role-playing community.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. New Style games and the Polish role-playing games scene

*De Profundis: Letters from the Abyss* is a representative of the so called New Style of role playing games publishing of late 1990s and early 2000s. The New Style series of print rulebooks started with *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen: A Superlative Role-Playing Game in a New Style: Devised & Written by Baron Munchausen* by James Wallis, published in 1998 in the traditional A4 format yet with an atypically small number of 24 pages. The British company which released that game, Hogshead Publishing, had diverted their focus from their flagship product, the classic *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, to something decisively different: “a roleplaying game completely out of the norm which D&D established and every game since has followed” (The Alexandrian, 2015), “an arguable RPG” (Harrigan, Wardrip-Fruin, 2010, p. 3). The atypical, concise publishing format highlighted the change in approach to the idea of a role-playing game core book.

The success of the game led to the publication of a series of innovative rulebooks, with *Pantheon* (2000), *Powerkill* (1999), *Puppetland: A Storytelling Game with Strings in a Grim World of Make-Believe* (1999),<sup>3</sup> and *Violence: The Role-Playing Game of Egregious and Repulsive Bloodshed* (1999) being other notable examples of New Style games. *The Extraordinary Adventures*

<sup>2</sup> In this text I am going to focus on Oracz and his contribution to the project, the Polish role-playing games scene in its broader context being a subject of my further research.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to the expanded print version put on the market in the New Style series, *Puppetland* had been published online in 1995.

belonged to the category of story-making games that “combine narrative elements with standard game features including competitive play, a clear ending point and a winner” (Wallis, 2010, p. 69). As Wallis has it in relation to the story-making games, the crucial point in their design is the intergeneration of the rules and the game structure, resulting in a ‘coherent package’” (ibid., p. 79). This could be said about the New Style games in general. The designers strived not only to fit in with the requirements of the already existing genre by supplementing new settings or new game mechanics, but also to significantly change the idea of role-playing.

The English version of *De Profundis* was published under the aegis of Hogshead; its original version had been developed in the creative milieu gathered around *Portal* magazine. Some of the most crucial innovative features of the game had been, actually, already present in other Polish projects. Specifically, as to blurring the boundaries between the game and reality, Oracz observes that:

*De Profundis* was not an idea out of its times. Working on the game, I didn't absolutely feel that I was creating anything innovative when it came to [this issue]. At that time some very sophisticated larps and dramas had been already organised in our country (lasting for months, sometimes), where the players totally erased the boundary between themselves and their characters, or simply played as themselves, with some fantastic elements added as a skeleton of the preliminary sketch of the story. Playing “ourselves”, playing “here and now” created a very strong effect, to say the least (in Mochocka, 2015).

A discussion of various psychodrama techniques (psychodrama understood here as “a game played for fun”, not a therapeutic session) included in Appendix B of the rulebook (a reprint of an article from *Portal*) had originated from Oracz's participation in such projects. The article states that in order to play psychodrama, “we need no world description, character sheets, rules or scenarios”; also, “there is NO GAMEMASTER here. There are only players. And, at the same time, each of them has something of a GM in them as they create another bit of the story” (Oracz, 2001a, p. 29–30). Techniques such as, for example, interweaving descriptions with dialogues, limiting the gameplay in time (one hour being the recommended scope), setting the action against empty landscapes, creating symbolic scenes, evoking the sense of insecurity and confusion in the players, and providing “ambient” music are recommended (ibid., p. 30). It is explained that:

we needn't worry much about coherence, credibility, and realism, and our heads are filled with hundreds of books, films, ideas, associations and such. During a psychodrama session these veins of gold become uncovered in strange ways, often surprising to ourselves. Yes, it is improvisation, but each of it[s] elements results from the abilities of more than one person (ibid., p. 31).

To sum up, innovative as it was, *De Profundis* followed a well-established tradition of the experimental approach to role-playing in Poland. On the other hand, however, as Oracz admits it (in Mochocka, 2015), the publishers were conscious of their target, which generally consisted of decisively less avant-garde players, and toned down certain aspects of the game, specifically the ones that, as Oracz (ibid.) recalls, reflected his interest in Schechneresque "dark play"; for example, a section on activating imagination via dedicated exercises was not included in the game eventually. Here comes the question of the play between the author and the receivers: "*De Profundis* makes an impression of a sincere and 'intimate' address to the reader, yet that did not result from some exceptional trust, as it was simply a technique I adapted (and put into perspective, a very undeveloped one)" (ibid.). The artifice was hidden behind fictional sincerity.

The game, outstanding as it was, got the Diana Jones Award nomination in 2002; to quote the recommendation:

Out of Poland comes a roleplaying game that expands the definition of what a roleplaying game is, and what an RPG rulebook is. This free-form, Lovecraftian game runs by correspondence. Rather than adapting tabletop RPGing to play-by-mail, *De Profundis* re-invents the roleplaying form to match correspondence-style play (The Diana Jones Award, 2002).

As has been already stated, *De Profundis* is a New Style game, and some of New Style games clearly belonged to a category which Wallis calls story-making games (2010, p. 73). The underlying design principle in their case is, as Wallis has it, is that they:

do not create a fully-fleshed story [...]. Instead, they provide the pieces of the story's skeleton and the rules for assembling it. The players' interaction with the game builds these pieces into the framework of a story, while the players' imagination and improvisation simultaneously add the flesh of the narrative, bouncing off the prompts and inspirations provided by the game engine (ibid.).

*De Profundis* fits in with these requirements, as there are very specific rules and prompts for building up the story, making the core book closer to the role-playing scenario or adventure module, while the story itself is much more open for the players' decision than traditional scenarios or modules. What could be also pointed out here is that the recurrent features of New Style games are playing with fiction and authenticity as well as blurring the boundaries between the game world and the actual world. The play with authenticity is already present in *Baron Munchausen*. Much in the tradition of the budding 18th-century novel (Martuszezwska, 2007), the designer's name is concealed under the guise of the editor, while Munchausen himself is granted the authorship on the title page of the game. As Wallis says, explaining the status of the rulebook, it:

is written not by me but by the Baron himself - by charming coincidence, I discovered the long-lost manuscript of the game that my ancestor John Wallis, a games publisher in the late 1700s (true) had commissioned from Baron Munchausen (not quite as true) (2010, p. 75).

A similar device is utilised in *Violence*, allegedly written by "Designer X". When it comes to the erasing or loosening up the boundaries between the game and "reality", both *Violence* and *Powerkill* are highly metafictional. Applied to literature,

metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality (Waugh, 1984, p. 2).

In games, metafictionality could result in self-conscious and openly stated interest in the relationships between game mechanics, game world, game culture, and gameplay (Mochocka, 2007). New Style games renegotiate the genre conventions and focus the receiver's/player's attention on the possible out-of-game impact of the in-game decisions, discussing the ethics of role-playing games. In other words, they 1) point to the fact that players' decisions can have consequences going beyond the magic circle of play<sup>4</sup>; 2) destabilise the magic circle they are meant to create by

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<sup>4</sup> The concept originated from "Huizinga who wrote about the spatiotemporal separation of play and ordinary life", and "has become one of the most discussed [ones] in

drawing attention to the interrelationships between the game and the actual world. This merger between the game world and the actual world and the focus on self-conscious gameplay stays also at the foundations of *De Profundis*.

### 3. The rulebook, the rules, and the game session

The English edition rulebook is very short, contained on 32 pages of the A4 format altogether, with a glossy full-colour cover. The cover art by Dennis Detwiler evokes the sense of instability and psychedelia enhanced by the title and the headline: “A game of mind-warping horror (in the style of H. P. Lovecraft) created by Michał Oracz”. The rulebook itself is black and white, with small copperplate illustrations, most of them positioned as a kind of initial capitals. The illustrations look as if they were taken from an old encyclopaedia; they feature collages of body parts, landscapes, people, and scientific instruments. They are fairly abstract, and have no direct connection to the fragments of the text they accompany. Such a hiatus between the verbal and visual texts that seem to be totally disjointed, adds to the uncanny, dreamy atmosphere of the vintage copperplates, and leave the reader/player at a loss as to their meaning.

*De Profundis* is focused on a very specific type of experience, and with an overtly articulated ambition to be innovative and ground-breaking (“Please, do not mistake it for a play-by-mail game. Can playing a PBM game make one insane?” [Oracz, 2001a, p. 5]). What makes it truly

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game studies” (Montola, 2012, p. 48). What follows, it could be defined and understood in a number of ways; specifically, some contemporary scholars insist that the magic circle is isolated from its environment, albeit its boundaries could be breached or penetrated, while the majority “see the boundary of play and non-play in terms of transformation or filtering rather than in terms of isolation” (ibid., p. 51–53), in agreement with the interpretation suggested by E. Goffman, who understood “the magic circle [as] a social and cultural structure that contains endogenous meaning within”, and “selectively filters and transforms exogenous meaning to endogenous meaning (ibid., p. 51). By virtue of its transformative powers, the magic circle of play offers the players its “protective quality” (Myers, 2010; as cit. in: Montola, 2012, p. 52). In the case of role-playing games, the special status of the magic circle of play allows players to experiment with “identity alteration” (Bowman, 2012, p. 32) in a “safe, liminal space” (ibid., p. 54). For a thorough review of the positions on the magic circle, see Montola 2012 (p. 48–55, passim).

exceptional is the fact that the rulebook could be perceived both as the game manual and the game instance (Björk, Holopainen, 2004). It merges the presentation of operational rules with what could be recognised not only as a recording of, but also as a game session per se. Despite the disclaimer that it should be “Read and interpreted only as a game” (Oracz, 2001a, p. 2) it also encourages the players to breach the spatial, temporal, and social boundaries of the magic circle, what can situate it in the category of pervasive games, as recognised by Montola: “A pervasive game is a game that has one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play, spatially, temporally, or socially” (2009, p. 12). To provide some examples:

In *De Profundis* we don't declare to the Game-master that we are going to do a library search. We go to a real library ourselves to look for vague comments and hints [...] (Oracz, 2001a, p. 7).

Sometimes I think I no longer live in the real world, but in some other imaginary place, as if taken out of our fantastic and sometimes frightening games. Now you have decided to cross the line too and see everything differently (ibid.).

In other words, in *De Profundis*, unlike in virtually every role-playing handbook, you won't find a ready-made conventional world, created or established for the purpose of the game. There is no established canon of binding fiction, such as bestiary [...]. So we blur the line between gamespace and the real world we inhabit in everyday life. I will describe the rules for modifying its elements and looking for secrets, magic and hidden nightmares [...]; expect a letter on the mysteries of the Filters for perceiving other worlds in the place of the one were [sic] used to (ibid.).

Now, you may find it surprising, but we don't play in HPL's world at all, but rather in our real one. Only then and there we seek scraps of what Lovecraft and others wrote about. This is exactly what I remember from the Hermit's manuscript; after all he wasn't really creating a game, but rather rules for correspondence between the few outsiders who have encountered the hidden side of our reality (ibid.).

As follows, such game design can be also discussed in relation to the ideas that renegotiate the concept of the magic circle, such as the “stereoscopic vision” (McGonigal, 2003, p. 3), “cell membrane” (Nieuwdrop, 2005, p. 1, 6), or the suggestion that the boundary delimiting the circle is not as meaningful as it might be expected (Dena, 2009, p. 172–173). This could be also related to the maja-lila theory, as exemplified by Schechner: “Maya-lila is fundamentally a performative-creative act of continuous playing where ultimate positivist distinctions between true and false, real and unreal, cannot be made” (1988, p. 7). It is a concept taken form

the ancient Indian philosophy, still valid in contemporary Indian culture; as Schechner has it, the traditional Western perception of games and play is diametrically different, and a series of oppositions can be formulated when it comes to “approaches to playing” (ibid., p. 11–12). A concept Schechner relates to *maya-lila* is the dark play, which:

may be conscious playing, but it can also be playing in the dark when some or even all of the players don't know they are playing. Dark play occurs when contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out, as in the double cross [...]. Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules [...] (ibid., p. 12–13).

Whereas, as it was mentioned before, *De Profundis* did not utilise pure dark play for the fear that it would have been unethical, it seems to allude to dark play profusely. Here, the Lovecraftian flavour is applied not only to the game content, but also – or rather first and foremost – to the game mechanics. Wallis's premise of the “coherent package” has been fulfilled.

## 4. Cthulhu reality

Yet another intriguing point of reference for *De Profundis* could be the idea of intradiegetical presence of the Lovecraftian protagonists in the original Cthulhu stories (Price, 2009, p. 241), as it seems to be accurately reflected in the game. Apart from two Appendices, the text takes the form (stylistically, and to some extent typographically) of a series of letters, written between 25 December 1999, and 22 November 1999. In these letters the author/narrator explores his emotional and mental states in great detail, looking for some uncanny, Cthulhu mythos related explanation of everyday occurrences (“I haven't received your answer to my most recent letter yet. Still, I am writing to you without delay, since meanwhile something important happened. Something strange” [Oracz, 2001a, p. 3]), and explains the rules of the game which consists in exploring one's emotional and mental states and writing letters describing them. As follows, the procedure of playing the game is illustrated with an exemplary game session:

The letter is our board for playing *De Profundis*. It is the room where we meet to play. It is where things happen and our characters can be presented; where we can have an adventure or a conversation together. *De Profundis* is letters (ibid., p. 13).

Appendix B is, as it was noted before, a reprint, attempting at the illusion of authenticity.<sup>5</sup>

Published the same year *The Beast* (Wiseman, Lee, Stewart, 2001) was launched, *De Profundis* represents certain features attributed (Szulborski, 2005; Thompson, 2010; Kim, Allen, Lee, 2008; McGonigal, 2007, 2008; Mochocka, 2011) to alternate reality games, such as creating multimedial environment, hiding information in the game approached as a system of information, appealing to networks of participants, creating illusion of reality, and utilising storytelling and emergent narrative. Of those features, the call to deploy inter-immersion (Pohjola, 2004, p. 89-90) and performing belief (or the Pinocchio effect, namely “The desire for a game to be transformed into real life, or conversely, for everyday life to be transformed into a “real little game”) (McGonigal, 2003, p. 9-10) are perhaps the most significant:

As you describe some events in you letter, imagine this is not a game. Try to feel as if everything you are writing or going to write had been for real. [...] Cross the line between the game and reality. [...] It's not about writing a good story or having an interesting game; it's about blurring the line between what we write and reality (Oracz, 2001a, p. 18).

This is not to say that *The Beast* and *De Profundis* are identical. To say the least, *The Beast* was not advertised as a game and its operative rules were not explicitly explained (McGonigal, 2003a, p. 4), which makes it significantly different from *De Profundis*. The operative rules of the latter are explicit, yet they are presented in the course of the narration that emulates the emergent narrative that could have originated out of the gameplay. Here comes another major difference: the gameplay of the ARG relied heavily on the information gap, with reconstructing the embedded narrative (LeBlanc, 1999; as cit. in: Salen, Zimmerman, 2004, p. 383) being its primary goal, whereas in the gameplay of *De Profundis* the narrative is mainly emergent (ibid.), while at the same time the rulebook could be treated as a record of a game session. The participants of an ARG

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<sup>5</sup> The Spanish edition features a set of unbound pages, emulating hand-written letters, bringing *Composition No. 1* by M. Saporta or *The Helpless Doorknob* by E. Gorey, or other similar publications, to mind.

collaborate primarily to compete against the game system, while the member of the *De Profundis* Net collaborate on the consensual creation of the game experience. Last but not least, multimediality of the first English edition of *De Profundis* was limited, while *The Beast* (and other ARG that followed) offered a plethora of different channels of communication.

In a way, *De Profundis* preceded some developments in larp theory and practice. Whereas the game was marketed as an RPG, it could have been called a pervasive larp instead, had such a category existed in Poland at that time. To compare the definition of the Nordic larp by Stenros: “larp is temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world. They are framed by their fictionality and the participant is present in the moment of playing as both a player and a character” (2015, p. 197) with the following quote from the game booklet: “To be specific, sometimes I can’t tell for sure who I am: myself or a character in *De Profundis*. I haven’t told you yet, but you should know that I have another character ready besides Pickman, namely that of the author of *De Profundis*, the Hermit” (Oracz, 2001a, p. 10). The pleasure of larping comes, Stenros goes on to observe, from “the friction between the game world and the real world” (2015, p. 197), and so seems to be the case with *De Profundis*. More specifically, it resembles a temporally seamless game of a kind discussed by Stenros, Montola, and Björk in reference to *Prosopopeia Bardo: Momentum* larp (2009, p. 102), as it seems to be marked by “completely integrating ordinary life with game participation”, and the players are here “instructed to play the game as if it was real” (ibid.).

## 5. Conclusion

The game was published as an RPG, and up to this day is generally recognised as one. However, taking into account its characteristics, *De Profundis* could be associated with pervasive games, specifically the pervasive larp, and it cannot be denied that it shares some crucial features with alternate reality games. The article focused on the most salient of these shared characteristics such as breaching the boundaries of the magic circle in the spatial, temporal, and social dimensions; alluding to dark play; and sustaining the TINAG principle. By no means do these points exhaust all

possible topics of discussion concerning *De Profundis*. A subject of my further research is, specifically, how *De Profundis*, published as a print book, utilises its modalities, game mechanics, and narrative affordances to achieve the effect akin to the one accomplished by transmedial ARG or pervasive larp systems.

According to Michał Oracz, as quoted above, the game had originated from the projects undertaken by a group of progressive Polish role-players. On the one hand, *De Profundis* followed the standards established by the New Style games, but on the other hand the ideas embedded in the game came from the genuine investigations into the nature of role-playing. The game had been created prior to the widespread recognition of the alternate reality games and pervasive larps, but it nonetheless operates on many of the principles that made *The Beast* and other projects so significant.

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### **Zacierając granice: *De Profundis: Letters from the Abyss* (2001) Michała Oracza**

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł, stanowiący rozszerzenie referatu zaprezentowanego podczas konferencji DiGRA 2015, skupia się na polskiej narracyjnej grze fabularnej z roku 2001, *De Profundis* Michała Oracza – innowacyjnym projekcie osadzonym w sferze eksperymentów podejmowanych na polskiej scenie gier fabularnych. Choć produkcja jest rozpoznawana przede wszystkim jako RPG (narracyjna gra fabularna), to łączy cechy *pervasive larps*, gier rzeczywistości alternatywnej (ARG) oraz starszych, skonwencjonalizowanych typów gier fabularnych. Omówiona została w kontekście zacierania granic między fikcją a rzeczywistością oraz destabilizowania magicznego kręgu gry, jak również łączenia prezentacji zasad operacyjnych z przedstawieniem zapisu sesji gry.

**Słowa kluczowe:** magiczny krąg gry, Nowa Fala, sesja gry, narracyjne gry fabularne, larp, ARG, RPG

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