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You're So Money Baby — Blogging Business of the SuicideGirls

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Intro

The recent proliferation of digital technologies has reactivated debates regarding the aesthetic status of new, technologically enabled forms of expression, and challenges have been mounted regarding the role of commerce in the production of culture. Digital technologies have made questions regarding originality and reproducibility particularly difficult to answer, and have blurred the lines between producer, distributor and consumer to a far greater extent than previous media forms did. Computer games, digital audio and video production equipment, and the Internet have enabled new forms of production and distribution, facilitating what has been termed participatory culture. Since the late-1990s, researchers have shown an increasing interest in this linkage between new technologies and the public at large, looking in particular at the formation of new social collectivities and 'bottom-up' redefinitions of cultural practices. These studies have tended to reinforce the aesthetic and social status quo by categorizing the work of the participating public as transgressive[1] or at least unintended[2]. Users were thus seen as taking basic materials provided by commercial interests (materials that were, in many cases, aesthetic objects themselves), actively re-appropriating them and redistributing them as cultural practices. Think of activities such as writing fan fiction and creating spoofs (fake advertisements) and modifications on the Internet. Henry Jenkins (2002) has summarized this aptly: "Patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies

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[1] Against the perceived economic interests of the commercial culture producers and providers, like Napster.
[2] Of no interest to producers or providers but also not perceived as harmful; for example, Star Trek fan fiction.

which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and re-circulation of media content."

The introduction of Mosaic and the Pentium chip in the mid-1990s profoundly changed the notion of re-circulation initially associated with digital culture by decentralizing computer networks and enabling the peer-to-peer exchange of sound, image and text. The Internet could be used for more than looking up information or sending email. Instead, people formed networks, effectively constructing 'user-created search engines' for the exchange of music files (KaZaA), games, and increasingly, news and chat. While the present moment is marked by a legal standoff between robust communities of users (cultural co-producers) and the established media industry (particularly the music and film industry), some elements of the corporate media world have taken a different approach, embracing the new technological use rather than attempting to outlaw it. These corporations have found their way to online participatory networks and are attempting to use them for their own benefit. Advertisements in the form of games, movies and the like are created to promote a company's product or service, but they crucially rely upon blurring the boundaries between production and distribution, encouraging the target audience to work for them. Whether through playing games with embedded advertising, inadvertently sending marketing information back to advertisers, or simply passing advertising texts within one's circle of friends, the target audience and the larger dynamic of participatory networks are 'used' by corporations to achieve their ends.

The linkage of commercial goals with cultural texts is not new (television and film texts often embed commercial messages, and most art works are elements in thriving commercial industries), but scholarship on the societal status of pointedly commercial culture remains poorly developed. The emergent corporate tendency to create engaging advertisements in the form of entertainment offers customers memorable sensory experiences that tie in with the positioning of the company, product or service, and should therefore be studied. This paper seeks to address this commercial trend by exploring the erotic website *SuicideGirls.com*, where the idea of establishing personal relationships through blogging is used to sell underground erotic imagery. By focusing on the function of blogs, I want to explore the status of participant agency in a commercial environment where images and information are exchanged, as I believe this participation signals a new generation of commercial media culture.

Off-beat eroticism: SuicideGirls.com

In September 2001 two pseudonymed entrepreneurs — Missy (coal-black Betty Page bangs and numerous tattoos) and Sean — launched SuicideGirls.com. With their backgrounds in graphic design, programming and photography, they came up with the idea of launching an alternative adult site that started out as "a kind of an art project" — it grew out of an interest in Bunny Yeager's pinup photos, where the control and attitude of the sexy women were emphasized, only now it was about pierced and tattooed females. Missy describes the portrayal of women on the site in the following words:

> "The site is about the girls being in control and being in charge of how they're portrayed. It's also proof that sexuality and beauty aren't mutually exclusive of intelligence, and we wanted to showcase all of the girls, but leave people guessing a little bit. There's no need to go full-blown porno.[3]"

SuicideGirls.com is an adult community that offers a mix of eroticism, creativity, personality and intelligence. SuicideGirls is about so-called empowered eroticism[4]; it provides a site where girls outside of mainstream culture can express their individual style through soft erotic images, and blogs, among other things. Every week the site introduces new SuicideGirls, every day new pictures are added; a full national calendar of events is frequently updated and is searchable by location, date or keyword — members can be looked up by name, age, location or keywords; the site add also features a magazine section with original fiction, articles and interviews with bands. What makes this site especially interesting is that each SuicideGirl has her own page featuring a pertinent profile with personal information such as age, stats, body mods, favorite books, music, sex positions, and current crushes. She can also put up pictures and video

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[3] See http://www.hartfordadvocate.com/gbase/Arts/content?oid=oid:51620

[4] Whether SuicideGirls.com really is empowering to women remains to be seen. However, since the site promotes itself as such, I won't argue against it because that would go beyond the scope of commercial blogging – there is abundant literature on gender and empowerment issues that can be consulted, e.g. Andrea Dworkin.

materials — including a web cam — of herself, express her thoughts and relate her daily experiences in a blog, comment on other blogs and message boards, chat in designated chat rooms, and organize online and offline events.

SuicideGirls.com is foremost an online community and therefore girls from all over the world can potentially become a SuicideGirl, as long as they have web access from where they can publish to their personal page. These girls are in charge of their own online presentation, supported by a lively community where both women and men interact through reading and posting to the girls' and each other's blogs. In addition, members of the site can also post local events to the SuicideGirl calendar or the message boards, comment on pictures, and even hook up with one another. With the ability for members to create their own page, with their own profile picture and personal information, members can search for one another based on location, age, sex and personal preferences. Indeed, not only the SuicideGirls themselves have online pages to fill: subscribers to SuicideGirls.com have similar 'privileges', with the exception that they have to pay a small fee of $4 per month — though they can never apply the SuicideGirl name to themselves: anyone entering the site has to log in as either 'SuicideGirl[5]' or 'Member'. Thus, SuicideGirls.com mixes a DIY attitude with alternative culture — especially Gothic, Punk and Emo[6] — resulting in an appealing grassroots approach to sexuality that is of interest to both women and men.

Blog cult

Blog communities can be seen as a structure to harness innate human behaviour that is motivated by competition, collaboration, status, the tendency to cluster, and the appetite for peer acknowledgement. And so it is with the Suicidegirl community — it, too, relies on the activity and

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[5] See http://www.playbackstl.com/Current/Archive/suicidegirls.htm for more background information on the SuicideGirl phenomenon. For instance, new girls are featured twice weekly; first they "go pink", which refers to their first photo shoot before it's been uploaded, i.e. to be in "limbo." ("Going pink" refers to the color a member's posts change to when they become an SG.)

[6] 'Emo' is short for 'emotional'. It is an east-coast (particularly Philadelphian) social and music scene characterized by black hair, black-rimmed glasses (even when not necessary to correct vision), and tight pants.

creativity of bloggers. Blogs by both SuicideGirls and members are — with some exceptions — updated daily; their posts are arranged in reverse chronological order, so new entries are always at the top. Although bloggers link to selected articles and web pages accompanied by a concise description or comment, the basic unit of the blog is the post itself. The usage of blogs for commercial purposes came about when Mosaic and the Pentium chip were introduced, which profoundly changed the notion of re-circulation. Companies such as Macromedia, Groove Networks, Gizmodo and Openflows have started to experiment with blogging for business; they are embracing the new technological use to reach online participatory communities and are encouraging the target audience to work for them. Whether blogs are created in order to build a name or to promote a company's product or service (or both), the crucial element is the blurring of boundaries between production and distribution. Publicity is key in this process of building a blogger community. Through blogs, companies may let their customers know about something new — for the web has made publicity available to anyone with access to a computer. When someone views your blog, the words are the content and the design becomes a brand. Blogs, like other technologies such as instant messaging and chat, give the Internet the potential of being a very personal medium. And companies may use that to their own advantage to reach out to communities.

Let's take a look at Friendster as an example of the importance of the formation of a community that stresses the relationship between commerce and life online. In March 2003 Jonathan Abrams launched Friendster as an alternative to mainstream dating sites such as Match.com and Yahoo! Personals. Friendster differs in that it goes beyond the standard profiles of 'shared interests' and 'demographics'. Abrams says: "What I tried to do on Friendster is more reflective of real life than other dating sites. In real life you don't socialize isolated, you do it collaboratively with your friends. It's not meant to be perfect, but I think it's an improvement.[7]" The site started out with Abrams' friends and acquaintances — as beta-testers[8] — who could invite people they knew to try out the site. One can connect oneself to friends of a friend and vice versa by reading someone's profile and the 'testimonials' of your 'shared friends'. By late August the site had 1.6 million users and the number is increasing every minute. Only the basic service is free, and since its testing days the site has gradually developed into a

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[7] Sellers, J. (2003). Can We Still Be Friendsters? *SPIN,* November 2003, pp. 101-106.

[8] The site was always meant to be a for-profit one.

commercial enterprise by soliciting banners, selling merchandise, and linking Amazon products to profiles — similar to SuicideGirls.com — in which favorite books, CDs and movies are mentioned. Friendster offers therefore a networked environment that is becoming increasingly commercially structured by tapping into connected profiles of peers for commercial purposes.

The formation of a network of like-minded people, i.e. a participant network, like Friendster or SuicideGirls, offers a site that has certain kinds of affordances, by which is meant that a participant network is only given meaning and structure through users' interpretations and negotiations[9]. The interpretations and negotiations are thus interpretations and negotiations of affordances of the artifact: namely, the possibilities for action that it offers. The range of descriptions and interpretations that can be made of an online, networked environment is constrained by the commonsense understandings and experiences of ordinary people in everyday life[10]. By this I mean that human actors do not necessarily behave in the same way as individuals interacting face-to-face; however, the range of possibilities for for action and reaction is not nearly as open as is often implied. Thus, blog software, for instance, has been designed to have practical and social meaning — or use value. When people interact through, around and within a networked environment through blogs, it is necessary for them to find ways of managing the constraints on their possibilities for action — constraints that emerge from the affordances of given technological forms. When SuicideGirls.com uses blog tools to engage (potential) consumers in an interactive experience by letting peer networks work for them, viral objects, such as (representations of) SuicideGirls, embedded in blogs are an expression, as this one type of affordance technology, i.e. a technology of sociability.

Understanding blogs as an expression of affordance technology through the use of participant networks means, then, that the main feature of building

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[9] See Gibson, J. J. (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
See Grint, K. & Woolgar, S. (1997). *The Machine at Work*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

[10] See Hutchby, I. (2001). *Conversation and Technology: From the Telephony to the Internet.* UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

and retaining the community is a heavy dependence on interconnected peers. The use of blogs as a strategy for luring and holding onto consumers is, therefore, inherently social. Interpersonal communication through blogs is one means by which people exchange images and information, and SuicideGirls.com has employed it successfully. They have understood that they sell to networks and not to individuals per se. These networks of like-minded people are crucial to the process of building a sense of anticipation and a desire to purchase, the erotic products and services on offer.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997[11]) published a comprehensive study that connected the emergent properties of online communities with new paths of e-business. It showed how businesses tap into virtual communities by either aggregating people in a community initiated by a company or using existing virtual communities for their own benefit. Communities provide, then, a meeting point for vendors and purchasers to exchange information about commercial opportunities and to execute transactions. For the business model of SuicideGirls.com demonstrates that its customers are lured by alternative erotic imagery and are held onto by the force of a community that is initiated by the SuicideGirls themselves, but it works well because of customers' blogs'. The creation of a (sense of) virtual community among consumers of a company's products is a route to success. For example, Amazon.com is noted for the book reviews contributed by customers, and the Kaiser Permanente health care maintenance organization has set up discussion forums for members with various medical conditions. Note, however, that while it seems very simple to build a community by offering an online space to the customers will come (and stay) by themselves, that is not, generally speaking, the way it works[12]. What is unique about SuicideGirls.com is that all the girls portrayed have something to say (or show) that is first and foremost the art of their body, but that reaches to other artistic realms — such as non-mainstream poetry, songs, paintings and clothing — as well.

Whether blogging would also work for other types of businesses is a topic for further study. It is important to frame the way a community is organized in order to be able to study how it evolves, the patterns that are formed and

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[11] Hagel, J. and Armstrong, A.G. *Net Gain: Expanding Markets through Virtual Communities* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997)

[12] See Anita Blanchard (2002) *Sense of Virtual Community – Maintaining the Experience of Belonging* (IEEE)

the way in which collective behavior is driven, if one wishes to examine the viability of a possible relationship between online (brand) marketing strategies and communication formats that serve to build a strong base and a relationship between company and consumer, and among consumers themselves.

Determining the value of blogging a SuicideGirl

A blogger has only his or her reputation to work with. This means that, once one has subscribed to SuicideGirl.com, the access to blogs, in combination with the erotic imagery of a SuicideGirl, builds up a partnership between texts and readers (or fellow bloggers). The SuicideGirl community affords the following statistics (January 16, 2004):

SuicideGirls 256
Pictures 26,777
Magazine features 176
Videos 35
Comments 2,332,456
Blogs 239,677 (members)
Unique visitors 500,000 (p. week)

A very lively community, indeed, where the erotic element may be the luring factor, but it may not be the driving power that builds a sense of partnership or community and makes people return to the site. A lot of girl visitors[13] want to become SuicideGirls themselves. Kate78 for instance writes in her weblog on December 2, 2003:

> "punk rock chick from houston, texas. now i live in the KC area. my im is ciderpunkette or xfrankenstein78x. i play bass in a band named the vexed. my **livejournal** is located at http://www.livejournal.com/~kate78
> i am also a **suicidegirl**...my page is here...my set has not gone live yet...you will just have to wait.[14]"

Kate78, Texan-born, is a regular blogger. She writes about her studies in Kansas City, a city she has come to hate after she learned that her car insurance could only be renewed in Texas. She describes herself as a "punk

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[13] SuicideGirls.com received about 200 requests per week.
[14] http://www.subkultures.net/kate78

rock chick" — illustrated by pictures that show her with long spiky hair; she has got her nose pierced and her skin is covered with tattoos — and a "suicidegirl". There are plenty of blogs — e.g. LiveJournal, Blogspot, Punklog — where girls write about wanting to become a SuicideGirl. The girls are mainly motivated by a wish to share the art of the their body, and since they keep control over the photo sets and shoots, they have the feeling that they are in control over their image and admirers. The format of using interactive tools, combined with possibilities for, for example, organizing or attending live events and contributing to or buying from the online store give SuicideGirls.com an unprecedented stickiness that establishes a sense of belonging, a sense of community.

The practice of using blogs as strategy to build loyalty and trust works, then, when the models of business-to-consumers (b2c) and of consumers-to-consumers (c2c) belong to the same (and simultaneous) online network. Consumers participate in the commercial environment of online participatory eroticism through mediated networks. When a company encourages its customers to blog because it believes there to be an active, creative audience that interacts — one way or another — with a SuicideGirl and with each other, networks are formed of and for people who share similar interests — either positive or negative. Although SuicideGirls.com does not overtly advertise its services, the function of its blogs is to hold on to its clientele. This may be compared with other possible ways of attracting, or bonding with, (potential) consumers, or of getting an indication of their activism in relation to a commercial entity. One can think of current trends within online marketing, such as the usage of entertainment formats for advertising purposes (e.g. BMWfilms.com, Americasarmy.com, Cokemusic.com), or for expressing criticism (e.g. Whatisvictoriassecret.com, Unbrandamerica.org). SuicideGirls.com taps into communities by selling engaging eroticism. Although, in general, money is not made directly through commercial blogging, with the exception of blog activities by media outlets such as MSNBC.com and Slate, SuicideGirls.com has found another way to transform words into money by offering a meeting-place where like-minded people blog to voice their own and peers' opinions and interests. The girls portrayed ('sold') here are promoted and marketed through material — the most significant of which are blogs and images — that appears to have been authorized by SG Services Ltd to serve the adult entertainment market. Several SuicideGirls are also active outside the SuicideGirl domain, promoting themselves and the site on, for instance,

Playboy.com[15] and live burlesque shows[16]. They are the currency that binds SuicideGirls.com and its erotic consumers: her gender, her online performance, her role-playing and her being a public figure give a SuicideGirl an identity. This public identity is bound to a moment in time and space and is articulated; it is a given form. In other words, a SuicideGirl is intertextually present (in mediated expressions), she is commodified in texts, suggest and, through attracting fans — Goth fans, for instance — she brings in customers.

On the other hand, the subscribers to the SuicideGirl.com service are producers of both meanings and texts, such as blogs and SGArmy[17]. It can be argued that the blogs of members are authorized, because they are monitored and may be deleted if their content (e.g. racism) is disapproved of by SuicideGirls.com. At the same time, however, there are many examples that indicate that comments, positive or negative, reach beyond the paid-for controlled domain of SuicideGirls.com. For instance, the website "Amorous Propensities: Sex is Funny[18]" hosts among other things a message board that often features posts by (former) SuicideGirls and (unidentified) members, regarding SuicideGirls.com. On June 7, 2003, "Revelation" writes:

> "The owners of Suicidegirls are right wing conservatives, especially Sean Suicide. They rip off the models by offering lifetime membership, which isn't true once they are kicked off the site. They are paid quite low than any other adult modeling website. They also are racist zionist. They shove their Israeli right wing views on their members and if no one agrees they instantly terminate membership. They also give 10% of membership fees to the IDF."

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[15] See http://www.reuters.com/newsArticle.jhtml?type=internetNews&storyID=4349410

[16] See http://www.hartfordadvocate.com/gbase/Arts/content?oid=oid:51620

[17] SGArmy is an online location where members can post their self-made SGbanners, posters, stickers and the like, for free usage by SuicideGirl.com and fellow members. The shop section sells SGmerchandise that can be made by order of SuicideGirls.com or bought from SuicideGirls.com or its members.

[18] http://www.edifyingspectacle.org/sexuality/blog/archives/amorous_web_cyber_sex/suicidegirls_com.php

On August 25, 2003, "Chris A." responds rather lengthily to the post above:

> "I am a member of Suicide-girls.com and the only thing that I've been exposed to since I joined is a plethora of interesting people possessing a shared disposition in an un-accepting society, and who enjoy being part of a community that not only accepts any deviation from the status quo, but encourages it. […] Suicide-girls is in no way a political website, and although it's members sometimes do, it isn't trying to make any sort of direct political statements. I am a political science major […]."

On the August 27 "Sgirls" provides him with a link[19] to the anti-SuicideGirls LiveJournal community — among which there are many bloggers — that consists of ex-SuicideGirls and ex-members. The most common topic covers personal accounts of mistreatment (e.g. posing for other erotic sites) by the SuicideGirls.com management. It seems that erotic sites have a tendency, similar to that of other media organizations such as the news, to dispose of images and stories very rapidly, with even the hottest girls quickly falling off the site. Bloggers, whether ex-SuicideGirls or members, keep these images and stories up and running by re-circulating them and introducing new angles, insights and revelations. These unauthorized expressions often arouse curiosity — whether favorable or otherwise — and steer people to the official web site[20]. Blogging can also become monstrous, when negative expressions appear in blogs or other sites. Such acts are hard to control beyond the official site. Missy has stated that they are "very protective of our community and we do take members off. They have to be respectful of the girls and other members. If anyone is personally insulting ... they're removed. And if anybody is harassing in any way, we take them off the site.[21]" Criticism, social engagement or other types of statements through unauthorized blogs spread like virus and may make blogging for business turn against you[22].

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[19] http://www.livejournal.com/community/sgirls

[20] See "My Face is Never was" - Exploring the Textual Construction of the Celebrity; Productive Intersections between the Actor, Institutions and Audiences (forthcoming) by Shenja van der Graaf.

[21] http://www.citypaper.com/2003-07-09/feature2.html

[22] Rosen, E. (2000). *The Anatomy of Buzz: How to Create Word-of-Mouth Marketing*. New York: Doubleday.

Participatory eroticism

> "[…] Snow is no airbrushed, plasticine bimbo -- she's a SuicideGirl. You've admired girls like Snow from afar before. She's the scarlet-haired rockabilly gal with flames tattooed on her back that you spot at the Reverend Horton Heat show. She's the cute barista in a Weezer T-shirt who serves up your double-tall latte with soymilk at the coffee house. She's the dread-locked vixen with a pierced septum who works at the indie record store. In high school, she sat at the back of the class and doodled fairies and devils on her notebook while the math teacher droned on about algebraic formulas. Maybe you'd find her hanging out in the commons listening to Mudhoney or Iggy Pop on her Walkman, or reading Sartre or Voltaire in a quiet corner of the cafeteria. She was as intriguing and mysterious as Mata Hari -- and equally out of your reach. You might glimpse an outline of a nipple ring beneath her vintage 1950's frock, but all you could do was fantasize about what might be underneath. Until now.[23]"

The answer to what makes SuicideGirls.com to such an underground success is that this erotic organization has realized that blogs offer an opportunity for erotic organizations to become more transparent, more accessible, and more answerable to afficionados of the erotic. SuicideGirls.com offers a group of people a site where they can come together to share common interests and needs. The extended dialogues within these communities provide a sense of being, of belonging. A face and personality is attached to the SuicideGirls that, on the one hand, may give way to female empowerment — the girls being in control of their own image — while, on the other hand, the girls are used or promoted as if they were *objets d'art* — though in fact they are getting paid to be photographed in erotic positions for commercial — often male — purposes.

However, based on the SuicideGirls.com philosophy of feminine empowerment, the girls' blogging activities may show that the erotic industry is not a monolithic corporation but rather a collaborative team of individuals with varying viewpoints and who have more in common with their readers than they could possibly know from simply looking at the

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[23] http://www.citypaper.com/2003-07-09/feature2.html

images. But do they want to know? As the success of SuicideGirls.com shows, the answer must be a definite yes. What draws people initially to the site is having and wanting to express an erotic interest in Gothic and punk girls; however, after joining, a hardcore community is fostered that wants more than the offer of static erotic products. The community, no longer passively watching, empowers the girls: no longer are they simply lust objects — they have now gained control over their own (re)presentation through the opportunities of interactive software.

By sketching briefly the story of SuicideGirls.com, I have attempted to describe a current commercial trend to create engaging, participatory communities by means of blogging. This approach indicates the potential for using consumers for a company's end by building relationships between consumers and products through interactive experiences. Blogs offer a site where a company, its erotic products and services, and customers intersect. Nowadays businesses crucially rely upon blurred boundaries between production and distribution, encouraging the target audience to work for them. They connect with their online customers by providing an engaging interactive environment where people may share their interests and experiences and where they're encouraged to pass on the message among their circle of friends —thus creating the potential for exponential growth. It is a very inexpensive strategy when done well; if not, negative messages can damage a company's image beyond repair.

This trend of using blogs for commercial purposes raises interesting questions regarding, on the one hand, the cultural status of online blogging from a commercial perspective, e.g. how should we consider the cultural status of artifacts such as blogs that have commerce at the core of their identity — can we speak of a displacement of aesthetic experience by the branding experience, or might these two experiences be seen as part of a continuum — and, on the other hand, regarding participatory culture in a commercially mediated environment: e.g. what is the status of b2c, c2c, and p2p in a commercially structured network — what are the implications for user appropriation? The answers to these questions among others studied by various academic disciplines may contribute to the building of a framework for examining the consequences of this strategic shift towards relating to, reaching out to and linking online customers in a commercial web (b)log.

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