

Digital Media Revisited

Theoretical and Conceptual Innovation in Digital Domains

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“Next Level”

Women’s Digital Activism through Gaming

Mary Flanagan

The growth of the computer gaming industry is at the forefront of defining cybersculture. Game makers possess both the most interesting technology and the distribution channels to truly lead the direction of the future of popular media. Games themselves have evolved as well: the ability to create AIs or random operations, true chance, simulation, 3-D action, and strategy have become relatively common, and the genre leads the movement toward interactive narrative. Because of their central role in both the economy and technology-obsessed culture, we need to contextualize computer games critically, a particularly difficult task when we are engulfed in rhetoric of a cybersociety that looks to technology as an engine for liberation. In an age filled with attractive rhetoric promoting the dissolution of spatial, temporal, and bodily boundaries, it is easy to believe that such permeability signals the end to concerns about race, class, and gender issues in our high-tech era. Yet as participants in Western culture, we know these possibilities are not inherent in any media form; in many ways, the current technology gap reinforces the divides of class hierarchy, gender imbalance, and ethnic discrimination. In response to this predicament, a number of women artists (such as Victoria Vesna, Tina LaPorta, Nancy Patterson, Orlan, and I) are utilizing images of the body, space,

the physical, and the organic and are using the tools of pop culture to express dissatisfaction with women's popular representation, and more deeply, with social categories and cultural constructions related to technosociety as a whole and within it, gaming culture.

In this chapter, I will explore noncommercial computer games created by women. Previously established languages and conventions of gaming culture change in the hands of women artist activists. These feminist artists conceptually remap political, aesthetic, and epistemological aspects of culture by using the tropes and conventions of computer games in unique ways. The bulk of electronic media tools, however, as we know, have their roots in military applications. How can we study this field made possible by technological innovation, a field that is very clearly a part of our future, yet at the same time stay aware of its problematic context (beginning with its origin in the military-industrial complex, for example, and being carried through the obsessive teen male audience for new computer games)? New ways of thinking about these works are necessary, first, because there are few if any serious cultural studies of gaming, and second, because these games present themselves in opposition to the larger commercially based gaming culture narrative. We must look to hypermedia practices at the intersection of women's art and gaming culture, for it is at this location that the boundaries of both commercial gaming practices and stereotypically gendered technoculture are being effectively studied, critiqued, and reworked—reworked in opposition to the dominant ideologies of our time both in popular culture and in the field of multimedia art. A look to women's games and their relationship to cyberfeminist practices will be useful, because at the very least these approaches are engaged in similar political arenas and often feed from each other. Where is the location of this type of alternative production, and what kinds of social change can we hope for? Using work by women artists Natalie Bookchin, Pamela Jennings, and Lucia Grossberger-Morales, this chapter examines women-made games in a cyberfeminist light to understand the motivations, themes, and impact of feminist gaming practices in culture and in cyberfeminism.

The Context of Cyberfeminism

Women's games are produced at the margins of the largest entertainment industry in history. Gaming is now a bigger and more profitable

enterprise than the film and television industries combined (\$6.3 billion in video games was sold worldwide in 1999, and online gaming is a \$250 million industry) and presents us with special challenges (Taylor 1999). As Thom Gillespie (2000) notes, "this \$9 billion market is art and is significant in today's culture in the same way that books, film, radio, television, and rock-and-roll were the significant media of the past" (17). For feminists and others studying the intersection of technology and culture, hegemonic gaming culture is problematic. Although gaming does have some good aspects, such as the community-building power of online games such as *Everquest*, stereotypical human forms and female pleasure machines with hyperreal bodies performing violent acts populate game culture. The image and virtual body of "woman" within this culture is primarily created and represented by men, leaving "real" women less and less interested in engaging with this massive system of interaction and representation.

A look at game making and its relationship to cyberfeminist practices is useful, for as a critical movement cyberfeminism specifically addresses the question of women within technological culture. Cyberfeminists are actively studying technoculture to find ways to place women back both into the history of technological development and within (or at least alongside) the current cybercultural traditions and institutions. Perhaps the most effective investigation in cyberfeminist research works from an analysis of empiricism and of objective knowledge begun by women in the fields of the sciences and philosophy. This basis, the study of science, traces the way new technologies might offer hope for women to invert traditional power struggles and hierarchies embedded in Western culture in regard to the body, work, and the use of technology. Donna Haraway (1991: 175), perhaps the first and certainly one of the most influential cyberfeminists, suggests that women should seize the tools and technologies that have already marked them as "other." Her claim to be a cyborg rather than the more commonly invoked second-wave feminist/New Age "goddess" proclaims her hope in the emancipating possibilities for women offered—both spiritually and materially—through technology. Sadie Plant furthers this argument by noting that women have in fact been a part of the history of both the use and development of technologies and goes further to envision that women's increasing use of technology, coupled with their "innate" skills with weaving, as described in

Plant's (2000) overview of history, means that once and for all "cyber-space is out of man's control" (273).

The writings of cyberfeminist critics and theorists have become important components of technology and cultural studies in academic circles and have had a dramatic impact on discourses about innovation, science fiction, political activism, and the historical position of women and technology. The rise of cyberfeminist writings has focused increased attention on women's computer-based artistic practices as a result; women's interactive games, however, remain somewhat obscure to both popular and scholarly attention. Of course, there is a lack of scholarly attention given to gaming altogether. Our most popular pastime (in the form of electronic games, sports, etc.) receives very little scrutiny. Critics, either not involved in the culture or afraid to make overly obvious critiques of what seems to "an outsider" like frivolous content lying under gratuitous, violent imagery, shy away from gaming in general. Yet the cultural stakes are quite important and necessitate thoughtful evaluation. In the competition for consumers' attention and dollars, gaming companies' interactive worlds and marketing material become more and more embellished and problematic through time, not less, and are getting more and more complicated in form, content, and the integration of gaming into everyday life. Still, cultural stakes are high, and stereotypes abound. For instance, censure by the Advertising Standards Authority has not stopped companies such as SEGA from creating games based on ethnic stereotypes ("SEGA Dreamcast" 2000).¹ In addition, those who study or speak out on issues like violence in gaming are targets for derision by proponents of computer gaming's representational "innocence."²

Women's games propose an investigation of contemporary issues in electronic media and culture and offer commentary on social experiences such as discrimination, violence, and aging that traditional gaming culture stereotypically uses unquestioningly. Games produced by women will be explored in a close textual reading to take a look at exactly how they rework these issues.

Social Critique

In her "low-tech" game projects, California artist Natalie Bookchin uses humor, pixelation, and juxtaposition to enact disturbing stories. Her

3,912,567
2,674,190
839,230
492,426
364,434
19,927
14,994
666
165

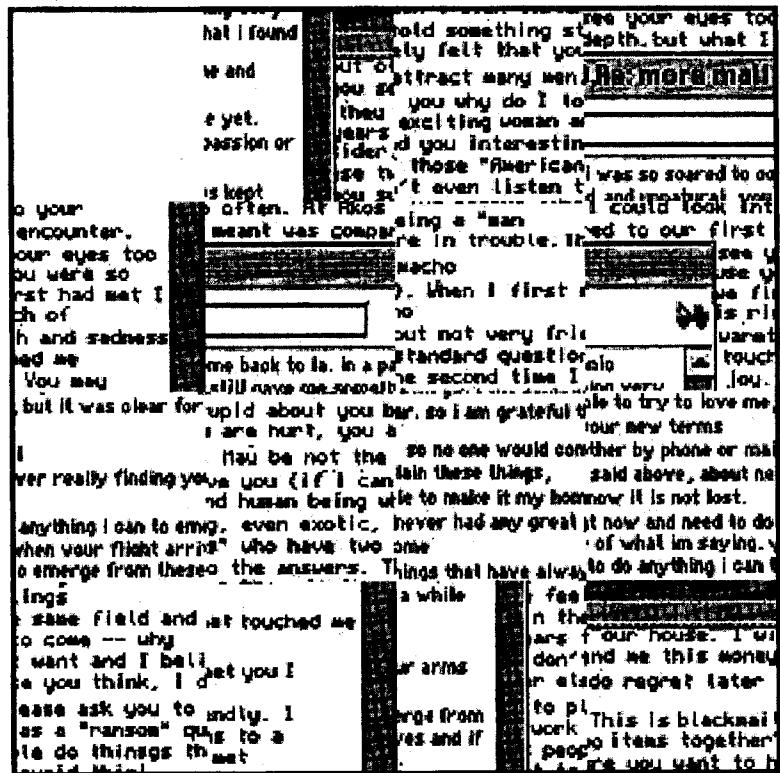
Figure 13.1

Natalie Bookchin, *Truth* (1999).

ironic number/word play *Truth* (1999) (figure 13.1), for example, begins with a list of numbers. Clicking on the numbers brings up thwarted searches in search engines or sites pertaining to "truth." Of course, as any user of a search engine expects, a great deal of irrelevant "truths" appear before the user. Bookchin's play on our expectation of fact or true story, however, is not important; her use of both political- and personal-style stories emphasizes ideas about the outside and interior worlds that "truth" inhabits.

Truth 2 (1999) (figure 13.2) is a sliding block puzzle composed of pieces of e-mail. It contains the broken narrative of a relationship, with references to "our house" and "when I first met you" and "when your flight arrived"; we get the sense of a present-day couple, perhaps even a long-distance romance, falling apart, or perhaps this is a commentary on the way we construct our contemporary communications, in fragments. The image is a narrative jumble of layers of e-mail, window upon window, with snippets of intimacy chopped off by operating system windows. Players piece together this history in a voyeuristic fashion, trying to see the sentences' form in the sliding block-style game.

The most well known of Bookchin's gaming material is *The Intruder* (1998–1999) (figure 13.3). Working from a Jorge Luis Borges short story, "The Intruder" takes the participant through ten arcade-style games as the means of conveying the short story. Participants must play the simple arcade-style games to advance the narrative.



[Click here to scramble](#)

**To play: click on puzzle parts
to slide them to their proper position.**

Figure 13.2

Natalie Bookchin, *Truth 2* (1999).

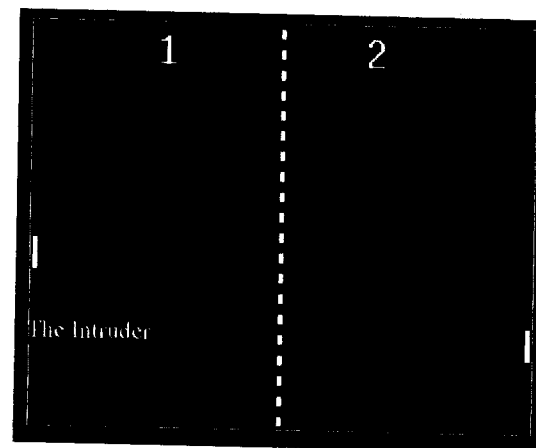


Figure 13.3

Natalie Bookchin, *the Intruder* (1998–1999): opening scene.

In the story, two close brothers decide to share their relationship with a woman named Juliana between themselves. Different games enable the narrative to move forward. With each game move, the player earns a sentence or phrase and thus advances the narrative. We learn about the brothers' relationship, their history, and their fight over Juliana. For example, when the brothers decide that Juliana is getting in the way of their close relationship, they have her pack up her meager belongings and sell her to a warehouse.

The game participants play during this sequence commences with a start, presenting us immediately with the image of a woman's bare underside and a meager bucket (figure 13.4). The body produces little trinkets; the objects begin pouring out of the woman's torso. This loaded image represents several narrative layers: Juliana's meager possessions, the wretchedness of Juliana herself as a possession, or even the trinkets that could be purchased as an exchange from Juliana's sale price to the warehouse. In the end, they fall from her body like loose children, and we collect these bits to know more about her fate.

When a silent, pixelated, blocky figure of a woman appears onscreen in yet another game (figure 13.5), we immediately know this is Juliana,

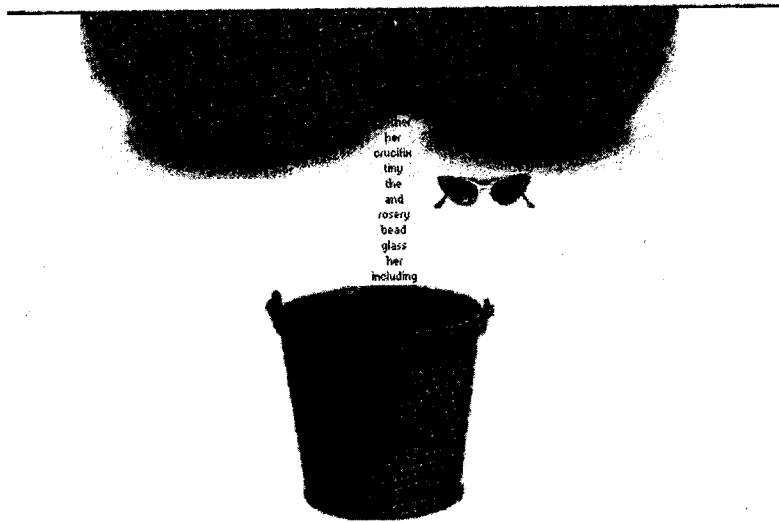


Figure 13.4

Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder* (1998–1999): trinkets collection game.



Figure 13.5

Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder* (1998–1999): woman-running game.

yet she is never given dialogue or a voice in Borges's story. While the story unfolds around her she becomes, more and more, a shadow produced by men's desire. The game's aesthetic further supports this narrative evolution. Whereas the background graphic (a small town) is somewhat detailed, the closer human figure is obliterated in chunky pixels. As game players we maneuver Juliana, causing her to run or jump, eventually advancing the narrative when she falls into a hole.

Looking at the content of the work and the interaction style, we immediately notice the gap between these two areas, a gap cyberfeminists might note is a site for irony. To cyberfeminists, irony is celebrated as a strategy of resistance. Rosi Braidotti (1996) notes that irony must be performed, not simply presented. "Postmodern feminist knowledge claims are grounded in life-experiences and consequently mark radical forms of re-embodiment," she notes. But they also need to be dynamic—or nomadic—and allow for shifts of location and multiplicity" (para. 19). Thus, whereas women's lived experiences culminate in a variety of complex physical, social, and philosophical realities, commercial games' women characters act as static agents of pleasure. Bookchin's seemingly stiff graphic style and the narrator's solemn reading ironically play off the arcade game concept. Although the story itself is written by a Latino author, the pieces excerpted into the games are narrated (when there is voice at all) by a Latina. Because the narrative is about the control of a Latina woman character, having a Latina both participate in the narrative and refute, or at least cause us to reflect upon, the issue of voice by reading it aloud is an important aspect of the artwork.

The story becomes particularly effective and poignant because of the technological approach used; we, the once perhaps "innocent" interactors/readers/listeners of a short story, find ourselves, within a game format, actually participating in the further abuse of Juliana. What is striking about the work as a whole is not the assembly of cute, fun games but rather how those cute, fun games implicate the participant within the dark narrative. The political position of the game interaction against the narrative becomes stronger when one takes into account the user: we instinctively know that as users we are in a precarious and uncomfortable place, not the typical "rewarded" command post most computer gaming

products offer. The implication of the male user becomes particularly marked because of the narrative's focus.

The final tense game seals this implication into an indictment. The player takes part in a "fugitive"-style game in which we guide crosshairs over a pixelated "brush" landscape. The point of view and the sound of a helicopter let us know we are hunters and thus, there is indeed a victim. To complete the narrative, we must aim and "shoot at" a fugitive figure below (metaphorically, at least, this is Juliana) to earn the "reward": the story's end.

While the debate about violence and gaming rages on, the use or at least the suggestion of violence is invoked in Bookchin's work. Mary K. Jones, a producer for Edmark Software, notes that although it is too simple to blame video games for cultural violence, games do offer a unique platform for violence over other media: "I think the trouble with computer-game violence is that you actually cause it to happen . . . you make choices in computer games" (Gillespie 2000: 17). At first, Bookchin's work looks like pure arcade fun; while playing *The Intruder*, however, we unsuspectingly cause Juliana's destruction. Perhaps this is a stronger indictment about violence in computer games than any critic's words could offer, or we could read this activity of "hunting the fugitive" in its larger technocultural context, in which, it seems, woman just does not belong.

Questioning "Woman"

Many women's gaming projects delve into the meaning of "woman in technoculture." This investigation works at odds with stereotypical game images of women and against larger assumptions about the body. The perpetually problematic issues brought forth by the body-mind duality are now inflated by the incorporation of technology artifacts; the relationship of the body to the mind to, now, new technologies and networks must be better articulated and mapped. As architect Karen Franck (1999) notes, "We construct what we know, and these constructions are deeply influenced by our early experiences and by the nature of our underlying relationship to the world" (295). And these experiences have been lived through the body, though Western traditions (including disciplines rang-

ing from classic philosophy to, more recently, design) have sought to deny that fact. Because the body itself not only is a matter of material existence but is also constructed through common practices and discourses, the question of women in computer culture takes on additional meaning as game bodies such as avatars and virtual characters are literally and consciously constructed.

Gaming culture's production of woman is problematic. In fact, while computer games offer a seeming variety of characters as women, from random monsters in *Resident Evil* to *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft, the games' relationship to women is an exploitative one. For every seemingly liberatory image of a female heroine or monster in these games, the problematic side of these characters—through dress, unreal body design, and the relationship of the body to the user—dominates. Braidotti (1996), among other writers, is struck by the repetitive "pornographic, violent and humiliating images of women" (para. 46) that are circulated and produced in new technology artifacts. Proponents of computer games argue that characters are simply fictional constructions; many say that games, as a form of popular culture, cannot be taken seriously. Yet the problem lies not only in the representation of the image of woman in gaming culture, but in the relationship we have to that image through game-style interaction and the subjectivities offered through games. The centrality of women characters and bodies in computer games is disturbing because of the control of the virtual body; users cause these virtual women to respond to their actions at all times, complicitly assuming a command-and-control relationship with virtual bodies. This is problematic because such total control over the body, any body, makes the body itself quantifiable. Further, because women have been historically "tied to the body" in a range of ways, from the writings of classic epistemology to current-day health realities (such as higher health premiums due to women's birthing capacity) to marketing efforts that encourage us to "fix" the body (with cosmetics and other products), this association has had a particularly negative effect upon women. Since women are at a disadvantage by being historically "tied" to the body, the controlling relationship to our virtual avatar bodies reduces women's autonomy and value. As Dianne Butterworth (1996) cautions, high-tech "propaganda reinforces men's [and via them, women's] conceptions of the 'inherent' dominance and subordination

in sexual and other relations between the sexes. . . . Just as the personal is political, she notes, “so is the technological” (320). Gaming culture has historically been defined by men; therefore women’s alternative practices in electronic media can be read against both popular-culture creations and the history of electronic art as well, bringing with them a different definition of “woman” into technoculture practices.

Exploring Memory and Space

Like many works of art by women that delve into recollection or ideas of memory, loss, and retrieval, women’s games have a peculiar fascination with memory, land, and the past as sites for the formation of identity.³ Women’s games are preoccupied with notions about the body, homeland, loss, landscapes, identity, and social constructions. Is this because of women’s lived experiences, or is it for more deeply rooted reasons explained by psychoanalysis? Perhaps like Sigmund Freud’s description of the “Fort–Da” game children play or Jacques Lacan’s rereading of this interpretation, in which Lacan notes that loss is rooted in desire: an inability to master personal loss is the very cause of desire, and these game experiences are in touch with loss and desire in complex ways (Fer 1999). In any event, these subject areas are not usual subjects for commercial-style gaming, and thus women’s independent games set a very different tone.

Creating work that reshapes or creates new enactments of memory and history is a way to explore productively ideas about identity, the body, and loss through an alternate and politically loaded means. Like much of feminist artwork, popular computer games are almost exclusively composed of bodies and environments. But unlike the feminists who play with concepts of disassembly, dissolving or displaced landscapes, and memberment/dismemberment, popular commercial games work to construct the contrary: cohesive, “realistic” rooms, containable lands, whole and hyper- (or oppositely, “dead” or broken) bodies, and rigid boundaries. Landscapes in games have believable rules and a rational order, though the effects of the rules in the game worlds may be detrimental to the bodies contained within. But as bell hooks (1999) importantly tells us, “Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be



Figure 13.6

Lucia Grossberger-Morales, *Sangre Boliviana* (2001): “Cholera 92” game.

interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practices” (209). Women’s games thus counter traditional gaming spaces.

Lucia Grossberger-Morales, an artist who has been creating interactive art since 1982, created the installation *Sangre Boliviana* (*Bolivian Blood*) in 1995 (figure 13.6). Her practice is encapsulated into a personal mythology: she recounts that she was inspired to purchase a computer while working as a reading teacher and watching students become more enthralled with video games and arcades than her courses (Arts Wire 1995). The installation was turned into an interactive CD-ROM in 2001.

Sangre Boliviana focuses on Grossberger-Morale’s bicultural experience of being both from Bolivia and from the United States. The project consists of nine interactive pieces, each of which concentrates on a segment of her visit to her homeland and comments on the politics of home and place. Grossberger-Morales uses different media—photography, video, fractal art, and various traditional designs—to reflect upon and re-create the fragmentary and layered nature of memory and of cultural hybridity.

The section of *Sangre Boliviana* entitled “The Dream” leaves the user with Grossberger-Morales first driving with friends in a Jeep Cherokee. She then recounts being lost in a mysterious landscape until she

begins a narration about computers, which sends her on an adventure with her mother and her younger self. Another area, "Emigrating," layers reminiscence with family photographs to show the relationship between personal and national history by focusing on the town in which Grossberger-Morales was born. The arcade game experience entitled "Cholera 92" explores the Bolivian cholera outbreak in 1992 in which 500 people perished. Users "shoot at" cartoon images of water, toilets, dirt, and other sketches drawn from the artist's dialogue. As a "reward" for shooting the image, we learn more about cholera, the history of the Andes, and the simple cure for cholera shown in short *Quicktime* movies and text. The play between such text and image is ironic and disturbing; as players we begin to realize how simple education and resources could have changed the trajectory of a whole town's history. Then, after the informative moment, on to the next level, which displays a different cartoon image to shoot. Here, a hybrid of game and interactive art techniques is used to subvert computer gaming tropes with political messages.

Grossberger-Morales (2001) notes in her "Artist's Statement" accompanying the CD-ROM version of *Sangre Boliviana* that she can represent her bilingual and bicultural experiences best through multimedia and that her work creates a "post-modern collage." Like *Sangre Boliviana, Endangered and Imagined Animals* (1995) (figure 13.7) is an interactive CD containing seven interactive experiences; some use fractal-generated images to create animals inspired by the weaving of inhabitants of the Andes and the extinction of species in the Amazon. Inspired by ancient murals and patterns from traditional artwork, Grossberger-Morales explores the real and mythic animal shapes ingrained in Bolivian and South American culture. "These are images from ancient civilizations," she notes in the "Artist's Statement" accompanying *Endangered and Imagined Animals*. Again, exploring nature and memory through the work, Grossberger-Morales examines the complex cycle of history and of life—in fact, one of her games is entitled "Web of Life."

Grossberger-Morales pushes the links between her creative computer work, history and memory by contextualizing her work culturally, pushing the link between her own cultural hybridity and heritages in both the work and the creative process. Between 1988 and 1995, she incorporated a "fun flow" process into her computer art practice in which animals and

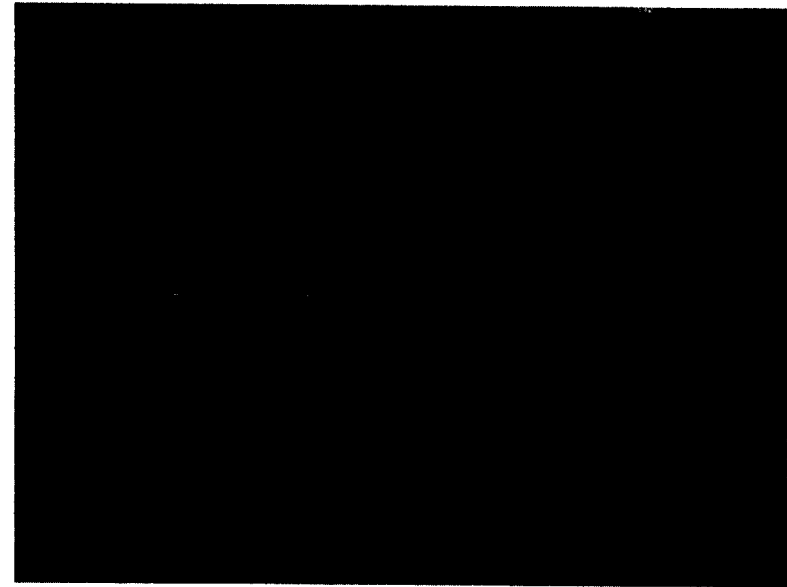


Figure 13.7

Lucia Grossberger-Morales, *Endangered and Imaginary Animals* (1995): screen capture.

other shapes and patterns from her cultural heritage would emerge from fractals and designs. Memory, landscapes, and bodies are key areas for women artists' exploration because they provide the context of women's lived experiences and are often incorporated into creative practice. As feminist philosopher Sandra Harding (1996) notes, "one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know" (240); women's games thus help articulate these boundaries, providing a fundamental map between the unknown and the known.

Grossberger-Morales (1995) strongly connects her art practice with her lived experiences. "One day," she notes, "I understood what the animals meant." The artist recounts her process of reconciling her connection to native cultures with computers. She presents each set of images in *Endangered and Imaginary Animals* in a unique way. In one game, maneuvering the mouse causes the player to begin "painting" with the animal

shape; in another, we find ourselves stretching and squashing the images of these unusual creatures. As in a children's paint program, interaction here is simple, but the theme, the loss of the "endangered" position of Grossberger-Morales's cultural memory, is especially poignant because of the simplicity of interaction. The real and imagined animals, along with the bicultural dream spaces in *Sangre Boliviana*, work to strongly counter seamless, cohesive commercial-style game spaces and complicate identities offered by popular gaming practices and also work to personalize the gaming arena into an intimate individual space.

Self-Discovery

Of all the complex facets present in women's games, perhaps the most interesting is the way in which they bring exploration, chance, and connections to the forefront. These games function to celebrate the act of playing as a means for self-discovery—not world discovery, not conquest, not high score. Perhaps this discovery is even more important than the product produced by play. Certainly women artists' games place play and content over outcome (winning), especially since artists' games as a product are themselves an awkward commodity, as they have no standardized system of distribution or mode of reception.⁴

Why has interactivity almost inherently and inescapably produced games as a form of artistic expression? The concept of games as art is not a new idea; historically, the surrealists were among the first artist groups to incorporate the game as a complement to creative thinking (Brotchie and Gooding 1995). Drawing heavily on theories adapted from Freud, André Breton and other surrealist participants sought to unite the worlds of fantasy and dream with that of everyday existence. As the seat of imagination, the unconscious could be accessed through concerted effort—for example, in consciously performing "unconscious acts." The fascination with art games has continued ever since, from movements like Fluxus to the digital art games presented in this chapter. We must, however, consider the computer in light of socioeconomic and political conditions. Computer games, like games from team sports to board games like chess, often reenact the logic of war play. Computer games have a particularly violent historical context; not only were computers developed for warfare,

but Celia Pearce (1998) notes that "the earliest virtual reality systems were developed for training military personnel" (222). Artists using the computer for games must come to terms with this history and with, more recently, the Western cultural imperialism of the American software industry.

Like Grossberger-Morales, whose computer play produced the *Endangered and Imaginary Animals* game, other women computer artists use the computer for creation and discovery. Does this reject the militaristic use of the computer, or does it replace an older mythology with a new one, one that is constructive rather than destructive? The work of artist Pamela Jennings, a professional software developer and designer, uses the technology in its purely exploratory form, trying to define the interactive computer medium as neither a tool for training nor for data storage but as a tool that recreates the organic.

Jennings's work has explored issues of identity and otherness in contemporary Western society. Her projects include the CD-ROM *Solitaire: Dream Journal* as well as installation projects. Like the popular card game of the same name, *Solitaire* is played alone; in fact, Jennings asks at the beginning of the CD whether participants are viewing the CD in a public or private space. It aims to be an intimate experience, immediately reflecting one's relationship to the computer.

According to Jennings, *Solitaire* is a "journey of self-discovery" divided into three thematic areas: "The Book of Balance," "The Book of Melancholy," and "The Book of Flight." Participants choose a corner of a triangle interface to journey to one of the "books." Each book begins with a pyramid game interaction (figure 13.8). The user must "jump" one piece in the pyramid with another piece to cause a piece to vanish; it seems the goal of the game is to eliminate, or at least work through, each of the pieces in the pyramid. In installation form, Jennings has utilized a three-dimensional version of the card game *Solitaire* as the basis for the interface.

By making a move on the board, the user is "rewarded" with an interactive scene of some sort somehow related to the theme of the section (balance, etc.) (figure 13.9). Each move exposes many layers of media bits, memory snippets, and other material: we see miniature video sequences embedded in collage-type doorways; the areas are graphically crisp but

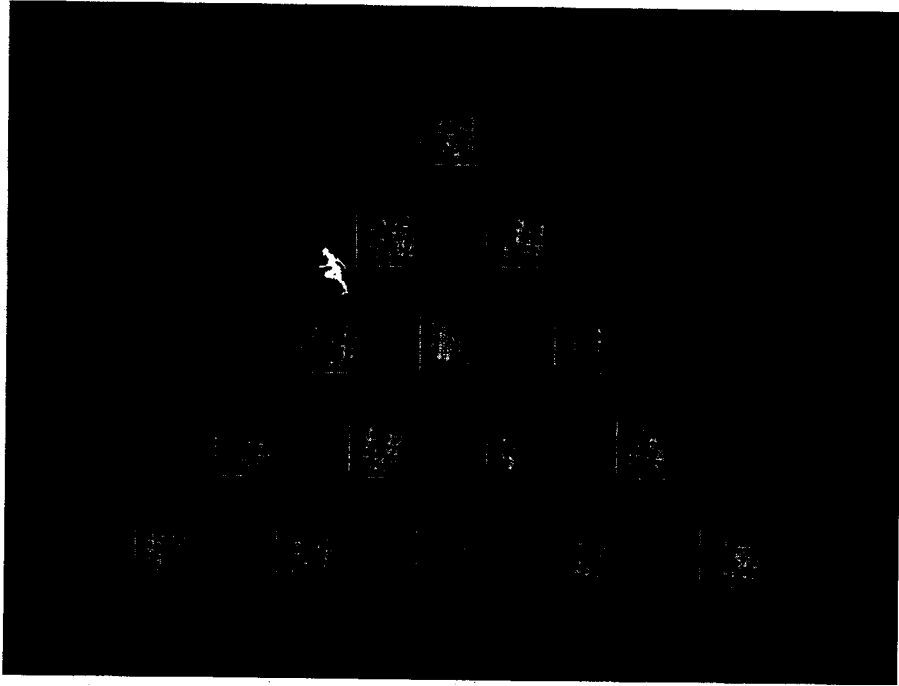


Figure 13.8

Pamela Jennings, "The Book of Melancholy," from *Solitaire: Dream Journal* (1995): game interface.

abstract, reflecting a strong personal aesthetic. Thus by playing, each user forges his or her own path by the choices made on each game board, finding minigames and interactive experiences within.

A game in "The Book of Flight" offers users a chance to construct a fairy tale figure (figure 13.10). As we add feathers to a skeletally winged creature, we receive bits of text and poetry. The interactive exercises Jennings offers seem more like meditation than "action"-packed or arcade-style games, but in the end users do finish and "win." The worlds and interactive episodes Jennings produces are rich, and unlike many technological products, have a perennial, collage-like texture rather than the look of a game rendered in 3-D. Even more important than the compelling



Figure 13.9

Pamela Jennings, "The Book of Melancholy," from *Solitaire: Dream Journal* (1995): game.

images is the rich soundtrack; nicely captured, haunting sounds and brief retellings of dreams offer narrative suspense and mystery to keep participants motivated to explore.

Each screen and environment in *Solitaire: Dream Journal* is abstract and unique and keeps its own rules and secrets. The journal's focus on personal themes of balance, flight, and melancholy creates a completely different thematic journey than that which is typical of games that feature conquest, levels, advancement, score, and skill. As Jennings (1995) notes, the journey she offers is a "quest for desire of peace with oneself and connection with another."

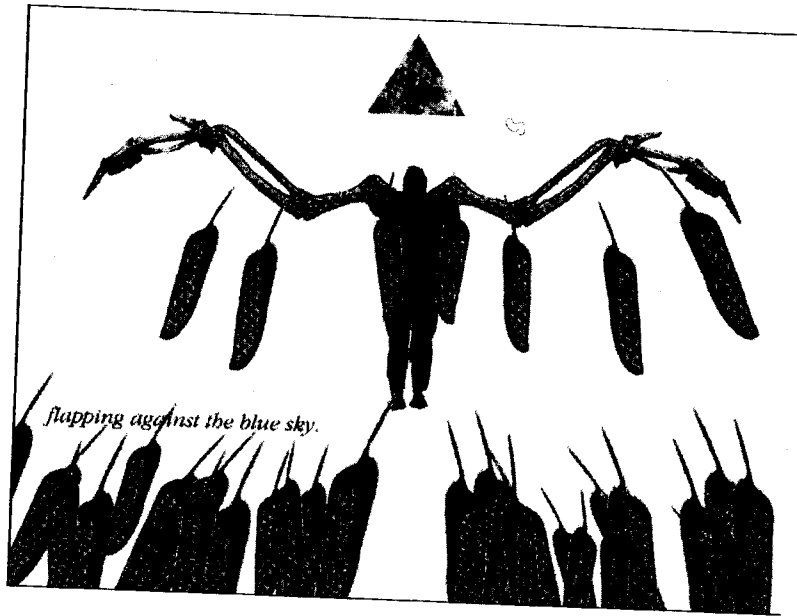


Figure 13.10

Pamela Jennings, "The Book of Flight," from *Solitaire: Dream Journal* (1995): game.

Time for Player no. 2?

Computer games represent a "continued present" that, although full of potential and positive elements, offers problematic representations and limited thematic exploration. Women's games question the cohesive narratives and speed rushes offered by commercial game culture, and the examples of work by Bookchin, Grossberger-Morales, and Jennings presented in this chapter demonstrate the significance of their approach to reworking elements of popular culture. Their games represent a new way of thinking about gaming, technoculture, and digital art. They are essential to opening up not only what we consider a "game" to be, but what is appropriate for interactive exploration; they arrive, however, in a strange context, first, because there are few serious cultural studies of gam-

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ing, and second, because the games present themselves in total opposition (technically, formally, and aesthetically) to the larger gaming culture narrative.

Méret Oppenheim, a major contributor to the surrealist movement,⁵ noted in 1955 that surrealist works, based on the psyche and automatism, "will always remain alive and will always be revolutionary" (Rosemont 1998: LI) because they are in alignment with the organic and with nature, and that explicit to Surrealism is a reliance on theory and practice. This chapter argues that revolutionary activism within art practice is prospering in the rather novel form of women's computer art games. First, women's games counter the hegemonic representation offered by commercial computer games and popular technoculture; secondly, they explore the construction of "woman" in such a setting; third, they are fascinated with land, memory, and history; and finally, they introduce tactics to celebrate notions of movement, chance, and play for self-discovery. The approach that women digital artists are employing in their work offers an essential counterpoint to digital culture; artists are making cyberspace, a distant and masculine terrain, into an area for more personal exploration. The "anxious digital artifacts" produced by these artists help us to understand not only the contemporary context that women game artists work within, but also our own cultural situations, for women artists' games differ both from commercial games and from independent male artists' games in their incorporation of personal stakes within conceptual and formalistic play.

Why do computer games play a particular role in memory and dream space? The connection between the two has been evidenced by a recent study by Robert Stickgold (2000) that focused on computer games' significant impact upon players' dreams while asleep.⁶ Stickgold's controversial work reflects a new scientific examination of the abstract and romantic concepts long purported by the surrealists and other artists interested in dream space. We take our games seriously for several reasons: they allow us to react to cultural and social rules, traverse boundaries and enter new environments, and sample new ideas without fear of injury or punishment (Sandler 1993). Games offer us a chance to explore what social scientist Sherry Turkle (1997) calls our "second self." Further, they allow us to explore our social realities, our environments, our bodies, and

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allow us fantasy, freedom, and a chance to use our imaginations in abstract, fantastic ways.

Artworks which involve interactivity almost inherently produce activities that involve play and exploration as a form of artistic expression.⁷ And some of the most compelling game activities—those from *Asteroids*, *Pong*, *Tetris*, or the other types of arcade game archetypes employed by Bookchin—do not themselves reflect specific narratives but in fact structurally reflect specific cultural narratives or issues of race, gender, or politics in that they are designed to detect collision, they are designed to shoot, and are programmed to keep a score. Women artists, however, are using these games to do precisely what they are not designed to do: through appropriation of gaming conventions, feminist game makers are able to make popular their insightful critiques of contemporary practices (see also Flanagan 2001).

It is essential to be aware that many women taking up gaming as a discourse and as a practice are women of color or are focused on the experiences of women of color. Jennings offers the user a chance to explore the dreams and ideas of an African American digital artist, a focus that within current commercial gaming culture would find little support. Grossberger-Morales takes us on a journey of biculturality and bilingualism between North and South America, and Bookchin sets the stage for a Latina rereading of Borges. There are few women of color in gaming in any capacity (as producers, characters, or consumers), and there are even fewer African American or Latina women lead characters of any computer games.⁸

I do wish to emphasize that I do not believe that there is yet an intentional, political, progressive “women’s gaming movement.” There is a large group of women online who refer to themselves this way—gamegrl and womengamers.com among them—but they are not seeking to create new gaming paradigms. Rather, they work to get women “accepted” by male gaming communities playing male games and offer camp-like readings of popular, existing games.⁹ This is not the approach I look to in this chapter. Rather, I am interested in women making games for themselves using the tools of this system, countering them, and making new meaning with them. The works presented in this chapter represent a collection of pieces I find to have commonalities with other examples

of women’s art and among themselves as electronic works. This “movement” should not to be seen as monolithic, united, or creating a counter-hegemony en masse. Rather, as with Luce Irigaray and other feminists who offer ideas about women’s liberation and feminism, if women’s gaming did become a “movement,” it would be one consisting of pluralities; as Irigaray notes, “Indeed, in the women’s struggle today there is a great number of groups and tendencies; thus to speak of them as a Movement runs the risk of introducing hierarchies amongst them, or of leading to claims of orthodoxy” (Venn 1990: 86).

What kinds of social change can we hope for through women’s gaming practices? Women game artists are in some ways the embodiment of the cyborg “weaver” imagined by cyberfeminists such as Haraway and Plant, though in an unpredictable and unromantic way. Rather than expound upon their natural affinity to technology and networks, these game makers are technically proficient women who have chosen to incorporate cyberfeminist and political ideas into their work while remaining conscious of the limitations imposed by their male-constructed and -dominated artistic platform. With their clear evaluation of social experiences such as discrimination, violence, the representation of women, and aging that traditional gaming culture stereotypes, as well as their unique notions about the body, homeland, landscapes, and social constructions as they relate to the body and to identity, women’s games celebrate the act of playing as a means of self-discovery. Through their privileging of spontaneity and combination of ironic and impossible opposites, feminist artists’ games expose an arena in contemporary artistic practice that reflects approaches for political ends.

Next Level Discourse

To close this chapter I would like to look to possible ways of realizing in the critical and theoretical sphere the methodology women game makers are creating and using in their practice. The movement from critique to action means a shift in practices. This of course means reshaping academic discourse and even popular language. For as Irigaray notes, “So long as one does not question the overall functioning of . . . all theoretical discourse—even unconsciously—one only guarantees the continuation of

the existing system" (Venn 1990: 81). The same can be said directly about the day-to-day discourse of technoculture and gaming specifically.

Political implications arise when we look to interactive art forms such as multimedia works and even computer-generated art itself. Only recently have women begun producing interactive electronic artwork in large numbers. Early practitioners in the field of electronic art, such as Peter Weibel, David Rokeby, Simon Penny, and George Legrady, established practices, and international venues such as ISEA and SIGGRAPH helped establish a forum for this emerging form of art during the 1980s. But rarely do the myriad interactive electronic works venture into critiques of popular culture; rather, they tend to stand as conceptual works in their own right. Take, for example, the *ArtIntact* book and CD-ROM series created by ZKM throughout the 1990s. The works collected in this series provide a representative cross-section of the interests of interactive artists: interactive narrative, conceptual architecture, nature versus culture, the nature of media and memory, the beauty of virtual space. But although these works certainly are positioned in a very distinct and alternative creative space than that of commercial media, they have not inherently addressed the forms of computer games or other pop culture media.

Indeed, just as forms of electronic media (commercial games and the very distant interactive artworks) are produced almost in denial of the existence of the other, writing about interactive work falls into two distinct categories: writing about commercial work from an "insider's" view and writing about them from an academic point of view. Moving back and forth between these two categories of practice, however, is perhaps a powerful, hybrid way to approach them. The gap between commercial, popular work and alternative artistic praxis must be breached in critical discourse surrounding interactive media. Indeed, whether artists like it or not, their work will be read in the media context created by Hollywood cinema, advertising, and U.S.-dominated global commercial interests; likewise, commercial production will be read from the standpoint of a cultural studies, conceptual, or other sociopolitical critique. Women's praxis traverses these two sets of seemingly opposite arenas of discourse smoothly. Women's computer games have worked to challenge both their location alongside the generic arena of electronic media as well as the commercial world of pop culture gaming. Yet what are the conceptual

and theoretical frames within which to analyze this relatively new kind of work? And how could these particular approaches inform the field of new media in general?

Three broad perspectives are helpful here for proposing an overall disciplinary revolution inspired by the women game makers' example: the purposeful use of hybrid spaces can be an effective strategy for change. First, the writings of feminist studies of science and technology offer a larger context within which to rethink inherent power structures in technologies themselves. The interdisciplinary space created by such research encourages cross-disciplinary fertilization and inquiry that investigates authorship, representation, and philosophies perhaps not fully investigated in earlier approaches. In multimedia discourse in particular, we need to locate our approaches in between many types of dichotomies: amidst commercial work and conceptual or independent work, in between feminist studies and queer studies, and in between the ideologies of team production and solitary production. In these in-between spaces we should find better languages and methodologies for quality media making.

A second approach to creating a framework for new media innovation is the exploration of the interplay between fiction and theory, and in the case of women in cyberculture, between cyberfeminist studies and cyberfiction. In the collection *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture* (2002), H. Austin Booth and I set out to create a site for such cross-disciplinary investigation, believing it to be a fertile area for scholars and makers alike. The writings of cyberfeminist critics provide a detailed challenge to both commercial and personal media artists, beginning a useful critique of new media practice; the writings of cyberfiction authors provide alternate visions to those produced by contemporary cyberculture and offer a much needed voice in envisioning the future.

Finally, real-world social commentary and the investment in and investigation of political themes are the key to innovation in both reading and rethinking new media theory and practice. Theory and practice must come together, and the science behind technology creation must understand the political implications inherent in the tools. Media makers must take responsibility for the images they create and creatively break the stereotypes so commonly offered by popular genres. Only recently have women begun producing interactive electronic artwork in large numbers;

there are even fewer people of color in the field. Opening up opportunities for new business models and new content models will enable change and encourage a variety of voices to create media.

Although I am a U.S. citizen living outside the United States, I am struck by the U.S. tendency to make monolithic and singular each narrative, story, election, or slice of culture. This is true for electronic culture and space as well, a site dominated by U.S. interests. Whereas the early-twentieth-century film industry took over twenty years to develop fixed standards, formats, conventions, and even genres, it took only about two years for the same "fixing" to occur with respect to commercial Web sites. We do not seem to allow for fragments, gaps, or contradictions. Indeed, "cyberculture" seems predefined to be constructed as "U.S. technoculture" in academic and pop culture representation. The detriment of this quick conventionalizing is again the tendency toward singularity; it has been difficult to bring into discussion experimental practices such as Web art, artists' CD-ROMs, and non-Western and noncommercial or alternative uses for technology. Thus, artists' voices, non-Western voices, the voices of people of color, gay and lesbian voices, differently abled voices, and economically disadvantaged voices—these are not present. This absence allows for further assumption of virtual space for the consumption of mainstream stories that continue the cycle of oppression. In one way or another, the games discussed in this chapter poke holes in this seamless ribbon, for which I for one am grateful. Now it is time for fresh theorizing about the way interactive media are created and thought about utilizing a hybrid approach of theory, practice, and activism.

Notes

1. The Advertising Standards Authority upheld a complaint against a poster for SEGA's *Dreamcast*, headlined "Spank Johnny Foreigner Online," saying it could be seen to condone violence against foreigners.
2. See, for example, the July 2000 statement by *Computer Gaming World's* editor, Jeff Green, in which he notes that a document by the American Psychological Association's *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* "claims to have found a link between video game violence and an increase in aggressive thoughts

and behavior. My initial thought, upon reading this, was to find the scrawny, know-it-all eggheads responsible for this gibberish and kick their freakin' asses" (136).

3. Examples of works that involve memory are numerous (and an exhaustive list of them nearly impossible to produce) but include Mona Hatoum's 1995 installation *Recollection*, in which the artist uses her own hairs, collected over the years, within a gallery space, and Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas Works* in Mexico (1973), a photograph in which the body and the earth become one, covered with flowers and vegetation. Memory, the body, and landscapes are also topics of artwork by surrealist women; for instance, Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Breakfast* (1936) and *My Governess* (1936) deal with memory and fetishized, unexpected objects in a psychoanalytic fashion, Eve Andrée Laramée's *The Eroded Terrain of Memory* (1990) explores geological history and civilization's relationship to geographic faultlines, and Rosie Leventon's *Souterrain* (1986) refers to the earth and ground through broken floorboards.
4. Compared to artists' distribution systems within galleries, publications, or festivals, digital art is still defining its mode of distribution and reception.
5. Oppenheim (1913–1985) is probably best known for her fur teacup and spoon (*Fur Breakfast*, 1936), one of the most recognized of surrealist objects. Many of her objects and paintings created during the same period have since been lost.
6. Stickgold and his colleagues researched the dreams that people experience while learning the computer game *Tetris*. The aim of *Tetris* is to rotate differently shaped blocks as they fall down the screen so that they drop into the spaces left by shapes stacking up below, leaving as few gaps as possible. Many of the trainees said that they saw images of the *Tetris* blocks as they fell asleep, most vividly on the second night of the study. The images seemed to represent some salient feature of the game. For example, one trainee said she frequently saw the piece she had the most trouble placing. Another said he saw the piece he needed most often to fill gaps. And the trainees who reported the most imagery were also the ones who were worst at the game when they started—the ones who seemed to have the most to learn.

7. Surrealists and those involved in Fluxus are two examples of this, along with digital interactive media (see Breton 1978).

8. One exception is the African American character D'Arci Stern of *Urban Chaos*. *Urban Chaos* was released by Eidos (the makers of *Tomb Raider*) in late 1999. Representation of women of color in technoculture is still unfortunately rare, and of course since the portrayals of women characters in games are already rife with problems, perhaps adding women of color to this milieu would not be a progressive act; some exceptions are works by artists Pamela Jennings, Leah Gilliam, Betye Saar, and Carmin Karasic; in addition, the author's own online game for girls features girls and women of color only. See at (<http://www.josietrue.com>).

9. Typical of my interviews with women in online gaming communities is this response from Nanogirl: "I admittedly don't like the 'girl' games and I would rather thrust myself out in the 'guy' community trying to get girls more accepted."

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