

TAKING APART THE PROVOCATION MACHINE: IAN BOGOST'S A SLOW YEAR

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Figure 1. A Slow Year

Introduction

Game scholars and critics sit quietly in a darkened room in Snowbird, Utah, for the Well-Played Summit at the Digital Games Research Association's 2014 conference. On the front wall, the game being shown has the telltale short fat pixels of the Atari VCS, yet the game does things graphically that the Atari never achieved during the peak of its popularity some three decades ago. As volunteers take turns passing the controller, I read aloud from a collection of haiku that seem to have subjects and objects out of joint. For the first three minigames, themed by season, participants have done well given nothing but a didactic haiku to guide them through each game: they catch wayward leaves with a waiting pile, sip coffee at sunset and pair thunder with lightning. But the last game gives them trouble; I hand over the book to another reading and take the controller. The volunteer reads: *"A lonely surface / Grasses whirl beyond hot groves / Brush retires it."* On the screen, logs float along a placid stream and the speakers produce a metallic approximation of the cyclical hum of insects. My task is to match my gaze with one of the logs floating lazily downstream. I press the red button on the Atari controller; I close my eyes; the screen goes black, the curtains of two eyelids rising and falling from top and bottom. *"The pond tapped its shores / Gardens shut over smooth floors / Dream reinforcements."* I hear a soft chuckle while I count silently, then release the button. Out of practice, I have missed: the cursor representing my pensive gaze is a few pixels short of the target log. I mutter and try again, counting more slowly this time. This time, when I release the button and the idyllic squat-pixel screen pops back on screen as I open my eyes, the cursor and log are aligned: the game gives a validating beep and a yellow dot counting the point appears at the corner of the screen. *"One voyage did end / Low, lonely, still indigo / Across blues, shorelines."*

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Revisiting *A Slow Year*

Ian Bogost released *A Slow Year*, a self-described “game poem,” under his Open Texture imprint in 2010 as both a deluxe limited edition cartridge for the Atari Video Computer system (on the market for 33 years before *A Slow Year*’s debut) complete with handmade case and a CD-ROM packaged with an Atari VCS emulator compatible with Mac and Windows operating systems, both accompanied by printed volumes far removed from standard spare and utilitarian game manuals. The collection of game poems consists of an Atari game and 256 “machined haiku” for each season, totaling 4k in assembly code, the standard capacity of an Atari cartridge, and “1k” (1,024) haiku generated by a program written by Bogost, as well as a handful of essays describing his intentions for the project. The Atari games won the Virtuoso and Vanguard trophies at Indiecade 2010, in addition to selection as a finalist for the Independent Games Festival’s Nuovo award. By the summer of 2013, twenty-four of Bogost’s hand-made, limited edition copies of *A Slow Year*, with a list price of \$500, had been sold. One of those limited copies, by way of the University of Colorado at Boulder’s Media Archaeology Lab, is destined for preservation in the collection of the U.S. Library of Congress (Media Archaeology Lab, 2013). At the end of 2013, the Story Bundle offered a digital download of *A Slow Year* as part of a gaming-themed promotion, and again as part of a Humble Indiecade Bundle on a pay-what-you-want basis in the fall of 2014. As this essay goes to press, Bogost announced that the final deluxe copy of *A Slow Year*, previously reserved for exhibition, will be offered for sale at \$5,000.

A Slow Year is a curious project, dubbed a “provocation machine,” by its creator (Bogost, 2010, p. 5)—an intricate condensation of meaning that requires the player’s interpretation to become whole in the same way that poetry does. Made for an archaic video game console while redefining what that same console is

capable of more than three decades after the system's release, this collection of game poems also serves as a window into the creative practice of a pioneering games studies scholar and game designer. Leigh Alexander (2011) identified *A Slow Year* as the counter-point to *Cow Clicker*, a satire of games built for the Facebook platform: earnest and market-agnostic, where *Cow Clicker* dripped with cynicism and found players despite Bogost's intentions. As the physical of presence of games has steadily diminished, from the near-extinction of the monolithic arcade cabinet to the waning of game packaging and "feelies" (Karhulahti, 2012) to the rise of digital downloads in favor of retail purchase, both the hand-made deluxe packaging and the book with included CD-ROM stand out from increasing ephemerality. *A Slow Year* has to be understood in the context of Bogost's concept of carpentry, "philosophical lab equipment" constructed as a "theory, or an experiment, or a question" that operates in a way distinct from traditional humanist methods of writing and verbal argument (Bogost, 2012, "Carpentry")—in "My Slow Year," he writes that in order to write about the Atari he knew he would have to learn to program it (*A Slow Year*, p. 8). *A Slow Year* is the finished product of Bogost's experiment with the Atari; *Racing the Beam*, his book with Nick Montfort is the traditional written product, and *A Slow Year* is the fruit of his carpentry, up to and including the careful razor-blading of felt required to build each limited-edition box by hand (Alexander, 2011).

In this essay, I will attempt to unpack a subset of meaning in *A Slow Year* with the analytical tools Bogost himself has provided us in his own scholarly work on games and procedural media joined with a broader context of electronic literature and haiku than Bogost provides in his introductory remarks. I published the first review of *A Slow Year* for *Kill Screen* about a year and a half after the game was released (Rousse, 2012). Every few months, I have returned to the emulator and played through

each of the seasons and paged through the machined haiku. As I grew more familiar with Bogost's body of work, my thoughts and interpretation of *A Slow Year* (and especially its haiku) began to change. I begin by contextualizing the platform through Montfort & Bogost's *Racing the Beam* (2009), describe and analyze each game-poem via procedural rhetoric, discuss the short-comings of the "machined haiku" by the standards of its traditional form, and conclude by offering an alternate reading of the work using Bogost's foray into object-oriented ontology and speculative realism in addition to Espen Aarseth's writing on the cyborg author.

The Atari Video Computer System

With Nick Montfort, Ian Bogost literally wrote the book on the Atari with *Racing the Beam* (2009), the first entry in a MIT Press series on platform studies. Platform Studies explores how the affordances and constraints of software and/or hardware systems influence the designers who create games for those platforms and now includes analysis of the Nintendo Wii, Commodore Amiga, and the Flash web plug-in. The Atari VCS (later branded as the Atari 2600) is a particularly minimal platform, requiring all programming to be done in low-level 6502 assembly language tightly coupled to the hardware's machine code instructions—"You have to program right up against the metal," (*A Slow Year*, p. 9). The Atari itself used the MOS Technology 6507 chipset, capable of 8K of ROM, while cost constraints made many games just 2K or 4K (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 24). In *Racing the Beam*, the authors emphasize the strange nature of the Television Interface Adapter (TIA) chip, which provided both graphics and sound. The TIA lacked a screen buffer, meaning programmers were required to "race the beam" and time the calculations required for changes in the display to the rhythm of the cathode-ray tube's electron beam (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 28).

A Slow Year is Bogost's second title for the Atari. Bogost's first is *Guru Meditation*, a game built for the obscure Amiga Joyboard peripheral in 2009; he claims that it is a game "you play by literally doing nothing" (Bogost, 2010, p. 10) but when I had the opportunity to experience it at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art during the Game Developer's Conference 2013, I saw that the real challenge of the game was screwing one's core into such a configuration that it was possible to balance on a three decade old plastic peripheral unsuited to the weight of an adult long enough to gain points. *Guru Meditation* shares a theme with *A Slow Year*, rewarding patience and encouraging players to observe and contemplate rather than act (p. 11).

Bogost has clearly applied some of the technical tricks he discovered while researching *Racing the Beam* to his own work: the black bar on the left edge of the screen, visible in the Autumn screenshot (below) is an adaptation of a process developed by Activision for *Pitfall!* and other titles (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 114) to allow extra time for calculation before drawing the next line. His evocative use of the Atari's 128-color palette seems to be a homage to Steve Cartwright's backgrounds in *Barnstorming* and *Frostbite* (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 132; Bogost, 2010, p. 13). Built for the Atari, *A Slow Year* conforms to the system's affordances, such as the symmetrical playfield and the console's lack of ROM-based alphanumeric characters, necessitating the stand-alone packaging for the haiku. Comparing the results of Bogost's expertise with Atari games from commercial developers of the hey-day of the platform reveals his total command of the system's intricate and idiosyncratic technical affordances; freed from commercial constraints and firmly in the domain of art, Bogost is able to wring evocative visuals and audio from the VCS. Bogost contrasts his own leisurely development with the frantic pace of the ongoing industrialization of video game development and the crunch aesthetic of the game jam in "My Slow Year," while in

Racing the Beam (2009, p. 49), Montfort & Bogost note that early game developer Warren Robinett worked himself to exhaustion to create the ground-breaking *Adventure* (1979). *A Slow Year* is an anachronism as both a release for a console long past its commercial relevancy and a project unconcerned with the temporal demands of the market.

The Season Games

In his introductory essay, “My Slow Year,” Bogost sets out four goals for *A Slow Year*: to “interpret the Atari’s constraints through the lens of poetry,” to “explore naturalism” by developing novel techniques of creating full-screen effects, to “capture the practice of observation,” and to create four game seasons that are “really games” that “involve rules and processes” (Bogost, 2010, pp. 12–14). Instructions for controlling the game and the goal of each season are given in haiku composed by Bogost (as opposed to the 1,024 machine haiku generated by a computer program of his creation). I argue that Bogost’s game seasons meet his goals, in all but one instance.

To better understand *A Slow Year*, I turn to the related concepts of unit operations and procedural rhetoric developed by Bogost in *Unit Operations* and *Persuasive Games*, respectively. Bogost defines unit operations as “modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems” (2006, p. 3). Rather than presenting coherent narratives that inexorably lead to a single outcome, unit operations emphasize variations on repetitions to illustrate a process. I claim that three of the games, with the exception of autumn, are variations on a unit operation expressing patient observation. Notably, while there are four “stages” on the cartridge or emulation, each is completely distinct from the last. No scores transfer from one to the other, and the system has no way of knowing if you’ve “beaten” one level before moving on to the next. These unit operations coalesce into a broader

procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), the persuasive use of process and computation. Bogost's procedural rhetoric in *A Slow Year* is one of slowness and "sedate observation" (p. 11)—yet while procedural rhetorics typically make their persuasive points by demonstrating "*how things work*" (Bogost, 2007, p. 29, emphasis in original), the game-poems are not instrumental. There is no moral or aesthetic valence assigned to the acts of quiet contemplation the game-poems compel, though in fulfilling his goal of making them "really games" each keeps score in a vague and perhaps vestigial manner. I will turn to each of the games in turn, starting with the trilogy of games played from a first-person perspective and ending with the problematic fourth game poem.

Winter



Figure 2: Winter

Winter is the game poem that best expresses Bogost's unit

operation of patience: he developed *A Slow Year* at a leisurely pace, without the pressure of a release date or publisher deadlines (Bogost, 2010, p. 15) and asks the player to experience it in the same spirit. There are no environmental sounds, just a hissing rendition of a slurp when the player chooses to take a sip of coffee by pressing a button. The only real challenge for the player is not to drink the coffee too fast.

The game begins with a full, hot cup of coffee and the darkness of a cold winter morning out the window. As time goes on, the sun rises and the color of the sky lightens and warms. If the player gulps the coffee down in the beginning and leaves just a splash, it quickly grows cold. A simple thermometer displays the coffee's temperature—let it get too cold, and the game ends. To see the sunrise, the player must sip methodically, pacing the temperature of the coffee with the reddening sky outside. On a real Atari joystick, pulling back the stick mimics tilting a coffee cup to take a sip. In one kilobyte, *Winter* is a surprisingly accurate simulation of drinking coffee.

This season best takes advantage of the beautiful color range of the Atari, from a subtle range of blues to a shock of magenta. The overlap between the blocks of color conveys a remarkable sense of depth to the view outside, giving a glow of light to the edges of the window frame. Bogost recognizes the importance of the fuzz of cathode-ray tube displays, and his emulation blends the blocks of colors together, eschewing the sharp accuracy of a liquid crystal display (2010, p. xi). By making the transitions between colors abrupt, *Winter* emphasizes the strange colors of dawn that seem normal because nature introduces them so gradually. When the sun finally rises, the player realizes that the world outside is covered in a layer of white snow.

Spring

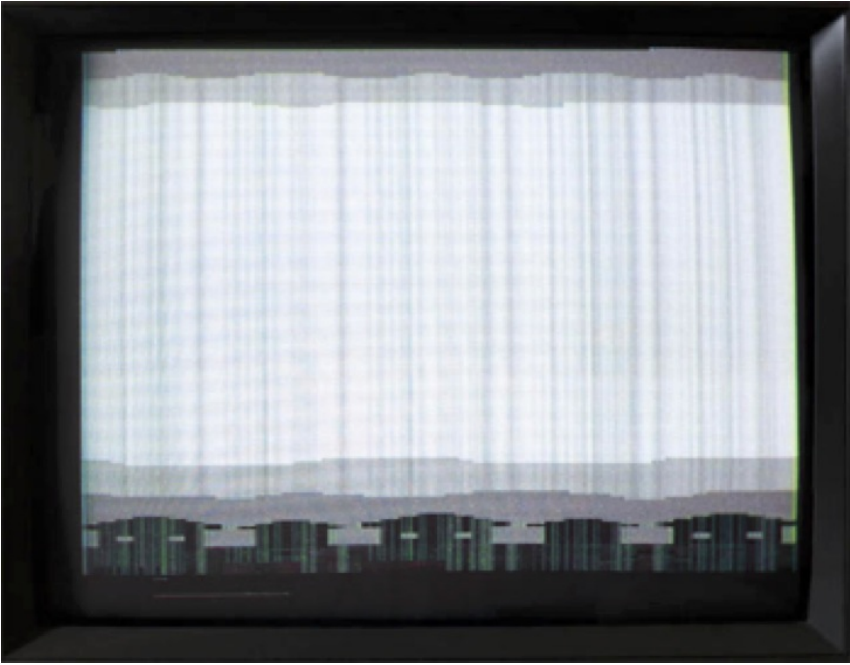


Figure 3: Spring

This game poem is about watching the rain, and given the humble squawks of the VCS, it does an admirable job of capturing its sound. There is a deep monotonous fuzz punctuated by staccato squeals, which emulate the distant roar of heavy rainfall and the splash of nearby puddles. The screen is filled with rapidly alternating shades of gray, torrents of rain falling on a few squat buildings. The player's task is to watch for lightning and then press and hold the button from the time of the flash to the clap of thunder. The yellow line of lightning lasts for just a moment; if the player looks away, she might not even know she missed it.

At first, it is difficult to distinguish much besides the long skinny blocks of gray. After a while, I let my eyes lose focus and the sharp lines faded into sheets of oncoming rain. I found

Spring the most meditative of the seasons; it required patience and quick response, but unlike *Autumn*'s hanging leaf and changing wind, there was no need to plan or anticipate. The player is always prepared in *Spring*. In the long intervals between flashes, all I had to do was listen and watch, and then react.

Summer



Figure 4: Summer

The player watches a log float downstream; the water shimmers and clouds pass slowly overhead. Given the platform, it is easy to imagine the stream as a first-person view of the top-down *Frogger* landscape, especially because the pulsing audio sounds like the chirp of crickets. A short green bar represents the player's gaze. Pressing the button causes the player's eyelids to slowly droop shut, leaving the screen black. The player's task is to doze off. At first, I simply closed my eyes at random intervals, hoping to stumble upon the right pattern. The trick is to close one's eyes and open them when the log, which moves at a steady rate, is at the point where the green bar rests. I realized the chirps came at regular intervals, and I closed my eyes and counted.

I actually closed my physical eyes and counted. It speaks to the immersive power of simulating eyelids, and the visual similarity between closing one's eyes in real life and within the game world. Once I started pressing the button and keeping my real eyes open (to stare into a black screen), the task was easy.

Autumn, Or What It's Like to Be a Pile of Leaves

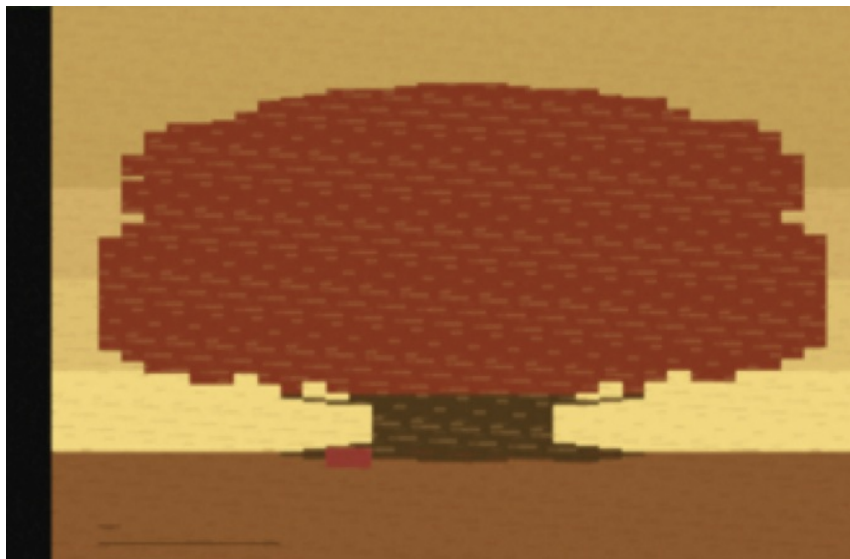


Figure 5: Fall

A leaf hangs for a moment before dropping down to the ground, its path determined by the wind that travels in check patterns across the screen. The player controls a red block representing a pile of leaves, and must catch the falling leaf. Given the score at the bottom of the screen and the assuring beep that accompanies successfully catching a leaf in the pile, I did my best to follow Bogost's advice in the book and treat the experience as "really a game." Despite my efforts, I realized after a few attempts that I was clenching my teeth with frustration.

In my experience at least, *Autumn* failed to exhibit the same unit operation of patient observation and subsequently broke with

the procedural rhetoric of *A Slow Year* as a project. While I found the other seasons meditative, I found *Autumn* frustrating and unfair. Furthermore, *Autumn* is the only game where the player controls an inanimate object, the pile of leaves. Bogost claims that all of his season games are presented in the first person (2010, p. 13), but how can I look onto a pile of leaves and also *be* the pile of leaves? *Autumn* is the only game that makes the player truly feel the technical limitations of the Atari platform. While I cannot explain the precise technical detail of this game poem, suffice to say that the Atari is capable of rendering a limited number of moving objects (Bogost, 2009, p. 45-47), and to allow the leaf to fall, Bogost strips the player's control of the pile of leaves away at the decisive moment. Because the leaf does not fall straight down, the player has no way to adjust his or her leaf pile position, making the game an exercise in luck.

Machined Haiku

In my previous review of *A Slow Year* (Rousse, 2012), my strongest criticism of the collection of game poems was reserved for Bogost's machined haiku. I complained of clunky verbiage and occasionally impenetrable combinations of randomly generated poetry. I honed in on his admission that the machined haiku were page fillers for the book which carried the CD-ROM in the standard edition (Bogost, 2010, p. 16). I returned to the haiku shortly after reading *Alien Phenomenology* (Bogost, 2012) and looked to *Cybertext* (Aarseth, 1997) for guidance on how to evaluate the aesthetics of machine-generated literature, and I began to recognize that the haiku were much more interesting when viewed in light of Bogost's recent work on object-oriented ontology. In short, I have elected to revisit the haiku and "find another use for them entirely" as the author suggests (Bogost, 2010, p. 21).

Judged even leniently by the aesthetics of the haiku tradition, my original assessment stands: while the four games are excellent

adaptations of the tenants of Imagism (a modernist movement of short evocative poems) to the medium of the videogame (Bogost, 2010, p. 3), the machine-generated haiku can be skipped with no great aesthetic loss to the player. Particularly egregious is the inclusion of adjectives for each season. Autumnal, hibernal, vernal, and estival are included in the haiku-machine's word bank, or *saijiki*. Compare Japanese dramatist's Chikamatsu's admonition against labeling, rather than evoking, a subject: "When one says of something which is sad that it is sad, one loses the implications, and in the end, even the impression of sadness. It is essential that one not say of a thing 'it is sad,' but that it be sad of itself" (Yasuda, 2001, p. 4). In addition, the haiku-machine occasionally reveals its cogs: there are curious constructions, such as double negative adjectives ("ununtaut") and strange plurals ("deers"). Reading even one season of 256 haiku is a tiring endeavor, and the layout of the haiku one after the other makes it tempting to simply gloss over each instead of giving it the moment of consideration that haiku beg for. Too often, the haiku seem to make little sense, with subjects, objects, verbs, and adjectives tossed together in ways that are grammatically correct but fail to cohere into any particular meaning.

But might we appreciate Bogost's machine poetry by a standard other than that of the haiku tradition? Bogost writes: "Just as the emergent dynamics of game rules produce unexpected experiences, so the emergent configurations of game rules produce unexpected experiences" (2010, p. 17). After reading *Alien Phenomenology*, my interpretation of the machined haiku began to change—I found the strange jumble of inanimate or abstract subjects with active verbs very provocative indeed. In *Alien Phenomenology*, Bogost writes: "The philosophical subject must cease to be limited to humans and things that influence humans. Instead it must become *everything*, full stop" [emphasis in original] (Bogost, 2012, p. 10). When viewed as a radical denunciation of human-centered poetry, Bogost's machined

haiku become much more intriguing. As a creative adaptation of the object-oriented ontology that Bogost explores in *Alien Phenomenology*, the machined haiku transform into an object-oriented poetry. Consider haiku 117 in the Autumn cycle:

An hour wafts the plants
The lair wipes up bare wheezes
Wild, a park applauds.

Or haiku 399, from Winter:

Quaffs blaze cold outside
Nonetheless dry, one fleece mourns
Black and yet frosted.

These haiku, if the reader can push past the initial impression that they are simply nonsense, force us to confront the role of non-living actors in the construction of each season. They would have us speculate on what actions might be possible for objects which have little enough in common with humans, and the relationships between objects to which human observers are not privy. As Bogost writes “Wonder has two senses. For one, it can suggest awe or marvel, the kind one might experience in worship or astonishment. But for another, it can mean puzzlement or logical perplexity” (2012, p. 121). That second sense of wonder, which I argue is produced by the occasionally senseless verse generated by the haiku machine, allows us “to underscore the irreconcilable separations between all objects, chasms we have no desire or hope of bridging” (Bogost, 2012, p. 123) fundamental to object oriented ontology. In his essay on “How to Play” *A Slow Year*, Bogost effaces his role in the creation of the haiku, claiming “the computer does the poetic work” and noting that “[w]riting haiku by hand would only impose my own interpretive ideas” (Bogost, 2010, p. 21). In *Alien Phenomenology* (2012), Bogost gently critiques Bruno Latour for his human role in selecting the objects in his disparate litanies in similar fashion:

“the nonsensical aspect of this litany is compromised by the fact that it had to be assembled by a human being.”

Following Aarseth, we might say that the machined haiku are the work of a cyborg (1997, p. 134), a synthesis of Bogost’s curated collection of words that connote each season and instructions on how to make grammatically coherent phrases adhering to the syllabic constraints of haiku, with the machine’s ability to mash subjects, objects and verbs together without any reference to human-centric ideas about which ones ought to go together. Thus, we might look at these machined haiku “as a separate class of texts rather than as failed pastiches of ‘human literature’” (Aarseth, 1997, p. *ibid*) and judge them accordingly. The haiku form does avoid the problems of narrative that Aarseth finds with examples from the mid-1990s (Aarseth, 1997, p. 141), allowing instead for a form with few constraints and none of the diachronic concerns of narrative.

Conclusion

Might we even rehabilitate the frustrating mechanics of the Autumn game poem? After all, this is the game where we are asked to live out a simulation of what it is like to be a pile of moving leaves. Perhaps *Autumn* was simply the first game Bogost crafted, and he was unable to convincingly fit it into the collection of unit operations revolving around patient observation that he later devised. In the time I have spent with Bogost’s unique collection of generated poetry and exquisitely hand-made games, I have had an opportunity to see what Bogost means by calling his work a provocation machine. His later writings on object-oriented ontology have significantly colored my reading of his machined haiku and perhaps even increased my capacity to consider existence with a flat ontology. As I spend more time with the collection, it becomes more useful as a fertile test subject both for Bogost’s earlier work on computational expression and for his later speculative projects that seek to

displace human-centered ways of understanding the objects around us.

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