

Playing Games as Cultural Expression: Mah Jong, Chess, and Bourré in the Works of Amy Tan and Tim Gautreaux

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Abstract

The opening lines of Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club, after the brief initial prologue, are: "My father has asked me to be the fourth corner at the Joy Luck Club. I am to replace my mother, whose seat at the mah jong table has been empty since she died two months ago. My father thinks she was killed by her own thoughts" (19). These lines connect for the reader, from the very beginning of the novel, the playing of mah jong to deeper considerations of culture, legacy, and tradition. While both mah jong and The Joy Luck Club are internationally popular, the opposite is the case for the Cajun card game bourré and the Cajun short-story writer Tim Gautreaux, whose story "Died and Gone to Vegas" utilizes bourré in a way that is thematically similar to, but culturally different from, Tan's use of mah jong in The Joy Luck Club. This paper examines both Tan's and Gautreaux's use of games—mah jong, as well as chess, and bourré respectively—as cultural receptacles and means of folkloric preservation.

The opening lines of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, after the brief initial prologue, are: "My father has asked me to be the fourth corner at the Joy Luck Club. I am to replace my mother, whose seat at the mah jong table has been empty since she died two months ago. My father thinks she was killed by her own thoughts" (19). These lines connect for the reader, from the very beginning of the novel, the playing of mah jong¹ to deeper considerations of culture, legacy, and tradition. Tan's book was immensely popular and inspired equal amounts of praise and criticism. Numerous scholars have examined the mother/daughter, generational relationships explored in the novel, but critics like Sau-ling Cynthia Wong have criticized Tan's "exoticising" depictions of Chinese culture (191), claiming they "enable Orientalism to emerge in a form palatable to middle-class American readers"(181). Wong may have a point, but others, particularly Tara Fickle, have recognized the value of the novel's use of mah jong as a structural and thematic anchor for the cultural themes within the story.

While both mah jong and *The Joy Luck Club* are internationally popular, the opposite is the case for the Cajun card game bourré² and the Cajun short-story writer Tim Gautreaux, whose story "Died and Gone to Vegas" utilizes bourré in a way that is thematically similar to Tan's use of mah jong in *The Joy Luck Club* in that both authors harness the culturally significant elements of these specific games, and gameplaying in general, to anchor their narratives and to deepen the connections among their characters. Folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and even literary scholars have all noted the importance of gameplay to group identity formation and to the preservation of the generational wisdom of a culture. Regardless of geography, mothers teach daughters, fathers teach sons, and, like any other cultural knowledge, the rules and meanings of a people's games are preserved by the new initiates. While many authors have used games and gameplay to make various cultural statements, this article will focus specifically on Tan's and Gautreaux's use of games—mah jong and chess as well as bourré—as meaningful examples of how works of literature can become cultural receptacles and the means of folkloric preservation.

Mah Jong—The Game of One Hundred Wonders

Suyuan Woo, the aforementioned mother two-months-dead in Tan's novel, had formed the San Francisco Joy Luck Club in 1949, two years before her daughter Jing-mei (June) was born, the same year she and her husband had immigrated to

1. There are many correct variations of the spelling of the game, but I adopt the spelling Tan uses in *The Joy Luck Club* unless it is spelled differently in a passage being quoted.

2. A trick-taking card game similar to Spades.

California from China. She had recruited the other three members of the group—the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs—from families they had met at the First Chinese Baptist Church Bible study, a church they felt compelled to join after becoming the recipients of the church missionaries' charity. Jing-mei observes:

My mother could sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English. Or at least, my mother recognized the numbness in these women's faces. And she saw how quickly their eyes moved when she told them her idea for the Joy Luck Club. (Tan 20)

The club had been inspired by Suyuan's experiences living in Kweilin as an officer's wife during WWII, where the original Joy Luck Club had been similarly formed. Suyuan, feeling stifled by the heat, by the terror of the war, and by the threat of imminent invasion, had recruited three other young women "with wishful faces" (23), surely an intentional parallel of the numb faces of the San Francisco recruits.

The original club members had operated under self-imposed, ritualistic strictures—each hostess had been required to provide a feast of lucky foods such as dumplings, boiled peanuts, and oranges; once the game had begun, no talking was allowed except for the game-related exclamations of "Pung!" and "Chr!" (Tan 24); they had had to "play with seriousness and think of nothing else but adding to our happiness through winning" (24); and the money for the game had been prominently displayed in a bowl rather than kept with each player, a variation which had assigned ironic reverence to the tens of thousands of worthless yuan involved. Additionally, when the gameplay had finished, they would laugh and tell funny stories late into the night, thus participating in an ancient oral storytelling tradition. Fickle notes that coming together to play mah jong serves "in a very real sense as a form of survival and social warfare that encourages its players to re-author, if only for a few hours, their roles as disenfranchised victims" (76). They had decided to call the group The Joy Luck Club because hoping for luck in the game would bring them joy, but their true luck had been in finding joy with each other in an otherwise hopeless time.

The San Francisco Joy Luck is similarly as ritualistic as the Kweilin Joy Luck but with a different regimen. The group still rotates among hosts, the hosting family being responsible for the meal, but instead of the group's money being displayed in a bowl, it has been transformed into stock market shares and is discussed in a formal meeting at the beginning of the evening. As a result, the mah jong game is still

played “for fun” (Tan 30) for almost no money at all. On the evening of Jing-mei’s first time taking her mother’s place at Joy Luck, she approaches the mah jong table with a certain amount of nostalgia, perhaps even reverence. Without having to be told, she senses which chair had been her mother’s because it “has an emptiness to it” (33). She intuitively knows that her mother’s corner of the table was the East and recalls her mother telling her, “The East is where things begin, . . . the direction from which the sun rises, where the wind comes from” (33). In mah jong, a roll of the dice designates each player as one of the four winds, the East being the first to play, the North being last, and certain tiles are associated with certain winds, similar to suits in a deck of cards. Tan, therefore, uses the memory of a dead mother to mystify the otherwise mundane aspects of the game, namely where the players sit and the use of directional winds to designate the playing order

As the game begins, Tan captures the rhythm of the play. The first step is to symbolically “wash” (33) the tiles. An-mei pours the tiles onto the felt-topped table, and the women swirl them around with their hands; Jing-mei notices that they “make a cool swishing sound as they bump into one another” (33). The next step, after the winds are assigned, is to stack the tiles into four walls. Western mah jong players usually use long trays to hold the four groups of tiles, with the one for the East being distinguished in some way, but Chinese mah jong tiles are usually thicker and easily stand up on their own, so no trays are needed (Rep 21). The Joy Luck women then go through the process of selecting and organizing their tiles for that round, much like a card player draws and organizes his hand before beginning to play. As Jing-mei explains, “I rearrange my tiles, sequences of bamboo and balls, doubles of colored number tiles, odd tiles that do not fit anywhere” (Tan 34). Jing-mei follows her aunts’ lead as they slowly and carefully sort their tiles and prepare to play, a ritual they have had decades to perfect. Her presence at the table represents the next generation’s stepping up to receive the cultural knowledge of its forebears.

As the round finally begins, the no-talking rule of Kweilin is clearly not in effect here. Jing-mei observes: “Now we begin to play, looking at our hands, casting tiles, picking up others at an easy, comfortable pace. The Joy Luck aunties begin to make small talk, not really listening to each other. They speak in their special language, half in broken English, half in their own Chinese dialect” (Tan 34). Their small talk consists of competitive, passive-aggressive jabs at each other’s shopping, sewing, and cooking abilities born out of a decades-old familiarity with one another. Although they talk during gameplay, a crucial folkloric element from the Kweilin

Joy Luck is still intact—the storytelling impulse. At a lull in the game, Auntie Ying proclaims loudly, “Oh, I have a story” (35), but instead of being a funny tale like the ones told by the Kweilin women, Auntie Ying’s story is about a friend’s son who had been arrested for stealing TVs, a story that makes Auntie An-mei uncomfortable considering that her own son had been arrested in the past for stealing car stereos. The San Francisco Joy Luck, after so many years, appears to be a mere shadow of its Kweilin predecessor, and Jing-mei’s boredom with the game, coupled with her apathy toward her fellow Joy Luck “cousins,” seems to be signaling the unlikelihood that the next generation will maintain the group after their parents have gone.

During Jing-mei’s first night at Joy Luck, she mentions that she had learned to play mah jong from some Jewish friends, and a brief exchange takes place in which her aunts, and her mother in her memory, decidedly denounce the Jewish version of the game as “not the same thing” (Tan 33). When she asked her mother the difference between the two types of mah jong, her mother answered cryptically that the difference was in the way the game is played: “Jewish mah jong, they watch only for their own tile, play only with their eyes. . . . Chinese mah jong, you must play using your head, very tricky” (33). While Suyuan’s sentiments here seem harsh, Chinese mah jong players are understandably protective of the traditions of the game. Mary C. Greenfield examines the “Mahjong craze” in the United States in the 1920s, which saw a game once reserved for the upper echelons of society explode into a mass-marketed phenomenon (329). Jelte Rep explains how traditional mah jong sets were handcrafted out of the shin bones of cows in small, family-owned shops in China. Each shop would focus only on a particular phase of the process—cutting and bleaching the bone, cutting the bamboo backing, carving and painting the symbols, etc.—and young boys would be apprenticed to learn one of these skills as an artisan. When American businessmen were frantically trying to fulfill the demand of their American customers, they would ship crates full of bovine shin bones to the shops in China, but the workers, usually multiple generations in one shop, could not be compelled to work faster or take shortcuts. So, enterprising mah jong investors ultimately bought the smaller shops wholesale and moved all the operations, including many of the workers, into larger factories in Shanghai. This way, the methods could be preserved while increasing the speed of production exponentially. Eventually, synthetic materials replaced the natural ones, and designs began to be stamped on the pieces rather than carved (Rep 24-27).

Almost a century later, there are dozens of variations of mah jong, and guidebooks often feel compelled to divide gameplay advice into regions. Fickle suggests, “By

treating Chinese mahjongg as ‘real’ (or at least more perfectly realized) mahjongg and its Jewish counterpart as a bastardization, ... Lindo reveals from the beginning that ludic strategies are inextricable from cultural ones” (77). Game-playing techniques are taken seriously as cultural artifacts through which cultural knowledge is passed down: “It is through mahjongg, then, that the nuanced question of what it means to be Chinese and to be American first gets articulated in the novel’s opening pages” (Fickle 78). When Suyuan and the aunts dismiss Jewish mah jong, their real intent is to delegitimize the popularized Western version of the game, preserving instead the game as an element of their culture which belongs to them.

Fickle has noticed that the very structure of the novel is arranged like a game of mah jong. She claims that from “the outset, in fact, *The Joy Luck Club*’s structure very explicitly invites a reading of the novel as a game of mahjongg” (70). The story is split into sixteen sections, like the sixteen rounds in a standard mah jong game, and grouped into four larger chapters which could represent the four winds embodied by the four players at the four corners of a traditional mah jong table. Additionally, the eight women who tell their stories in turn mirror the eight bonus tiles in a mah jong set, which “are also called *The Eight Apostles* by the Chinese, a reference to the eight immortal followers of the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tse (from the second century B.C.E.) who, through their ascetic and devout practice, became saints in their kingdom of heaven” (Rep 17). The book’s structural parallels to mah jong are unmistakable and highlight the aunts’ preoccupation with balance as well as legitimize the playing of a game as a serious cultural artifact. Fickle suggests that imposing “a sense of order, affiliation, and teleological progress on what appears to be an otherwise meaningless jumble of eight different sets of stories and memories, Tan’s use of mahjongg as a unifying structural element is by no means her only foray into the counterintuitive possibilities of making the real world comprehensible by turning it into a game” (74). Indeed, if mah jong, which is exclusively played by an amiable group of friends in the book, represents to the reader the cultural knowledge and memories of the novel’s older generation of mothers and aunts, then Waverly Jong’s foray into the individualistic, competitive world of championship chess might serve as a metaphor for the younger generation of daughters’ disconnection from their folk traditions brought about by being raised in America.

Chess—The New American Rules

Tan presents chess as the cultural negative of mah jong. When Waverly’s brother, Vincent, receives a chess set from one of the missionary ladies at a

charity Christmas party thrown by the First Chinese Baptist Church, Lindo is gracious to the woman's face, but when they arrive home, Waverly remembers, "My mother told Vincent to throw the chess set away. 'She not want it. We not want it,' she said, tossing her head stiffly to the side with a tight, proud smile" (Tan 93). Although chess has nearly as rich a history as mah jong and has its origins in India and the Persian Empire, this scene clearly associates playing chess, at least for Lindo, with the West and, more specifically, America. Lindo is not interested in allowing her daughter to play chess in tournaments because she knows they will be playing by American rules, which she does not trust. When Waverly begins to win and to earn notoriety in the neighborhood, however, her mother, perhaps subconsciously, tries to coach her to adopt the language and strategies of mah jong. Not fully understanding how chess is played, she encourages her daughter to try to lose fewer pieces, and she discusses her attack strategies using the four winds, similar to the four winds used in mah jong.

Fickle's interpretation of Tan's game metaphors is that "the salience of *The Joy Luck Club's* use of games like mahjongg and chess lies in how it indirectly broaches the concept of the 'race card' and Asian American identity by suggesting that what it means to be Asian or Asian American is inextricable from what it means to be a game player" (71). In other words, according to Fickle, Tan perhaps exaggerates the connection between the skills needed to excel at strategy games and the fundamental nature of the Asian/Asian American experience, her twin intention being both to expose and embrace an unfavorable, trickster stereotype. Fickle, however, has inadvertently reduced the Asian culture to a series of tricks and strategies for survival, a disservice which misses Tan's tone and diminishes the status of the games as folkloric reservoirs. Fickle suggests that "it is only through games and game terminology that the aunties and their daughters can even begin to articulate their own ideas about identity and filiality" (71), but in fact it is more plausible to see Lindo attempting to adapt her own cultural knowledge to her daughter's game-playing atmosphere. Lindo's obvious ignorance shames Waverly, however, which causes her to assign her mother outsider status when she tells Lindo that she should "shut up" because she "doesn't know anything" (170). The result is a devastating rupture in the mother/daughter relationship that lasts into Waverly's adulthood and destroys her gift for chess as well as her connection to her heritage.

Furthermore, rather than representing cultural community like mah jong, chess is an individual sport that actually isolates Waverly from her family and her culture as she becomes more successful. She does make a temporary friend in her

teacher from the park, Lau Po, but she moves on when she learns all that he has to teach. Waverly's community rallies around her when she begins to win tournaments; for example, various businesses hang congratulatory signs in their windows and volunteer to sponsor her, but she seems just as embarrassed by the attention as by her mother's ignorant public boasting. When the offers for sponsorship begin to arrive, Lindo decides Waverly will be exempt from chores and from meals, a change which understandably irks her brothers. Lindo responds that Waverly is subject to the "new American rules. . . . Meimei play, squeeze all her brains out for win chess. You play, worth squeeze towel" (Tan 97). Later, when Waverly does attempt to spend time with her brothers, they treat her like an outsider and an annoyance. Finally, the tournaments, where she should be surrounded by peers, are full of nemeses, not friends. Chess, then, is presented in the novel as a draining force that dismisses communal bonds as strategic weaknesses, while mah jong is presented as a low-stakes pastime that encourages community and cultural preservation. Neither depiction is wholly accurate, however, as there are obviously amiable chess-playing communities as well as cut-throat, high-stakes mah jong tournaments.

Bourré—Nobody Plays to Lose

Although mah jong has been widely written about in history books, how-to books, and articles, the opposite is true for the Cajun card game bourré. Besides Roy J. Nickens's 1972 book *Bouré*, mentioned in Rick Bragg's 1996 *New York Times* article "In Louisiana, Card Game Reveals the Cajun Spirit," the National Cajun Bourré Association published the now-difficult-to-find *Official Rules and Techniques of the Cajun Card Game Bourré (boo-ray)* by Preston Guidry in 1988, and both his and Nickens's texts were preceded by Henry Engler's self-published pamphlet, *Rules and Techniques of Bourré* in 1964. Many collections of American, and even specifically Louisiana, folklore and traditions—such as Terry Ann Mood's *American Regional Folklore: A Sourcebook and Research Guide* (2004) and Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (1968), which even has a section on folk games—include no mention of the game, and those that do acknowledge the game as an element of the region's folklore offer, at most, a paragraph or two briefly explaining how the game is played. Curney J. Dronet's *A Century of Acadian Culture: The Development of a Cajun Community: Erath (1899-1999)* (2000) features one small passage which mentions the game in reference to the leisurely activities of the town on Saturdays. Dronet explains that "the women did the shopping while the men usually frequented the local bars. Many would indulge in the Cajun card game of 'Bourée,' a card game that is still very popular in Erath" (54).

He then provides a short paragraph outlining the rules of the game before moving on, without further comment, to the typical activities in Erath on Sundays. Perhaps most surprising is the absolute lack of a *bourré* presence in Frank de Caro's *Folklife in Louisiana Photography: Images of Tradition* (1990), a fascinating photographic profile of the region which offers images of various cultural activities such as cooking, dancing, playing music, river baptizing, farming, and even an image of a woman playing a slot machine, but there are no images of anyone playing cards. This sparse folkloric treatment of *bourré* suggests that the game, while regionally popular, has remained within the boundaries of the Acadian culture and has not experienced a mass-market expansion like mah jong, making attention from regional authors like Bragg and Gautreaux that much more important for its preservation.

Bourré, according to Bragg, is a descendent of a French card game called "rams" and has been in Acadia since the 1800s. Hoyle's *Modern Encyclopedia of Card Games* (1974) claims, however, that *bourré* is descended from a French card game called "Écarté" (39), but the entry in no way mentions the game's regional ties to Cajun Louisiana, a lack which makes the entire entry rather suspect. As Bragg notes, practically every household in Louisiana has its own variation on the rules of the game, but *bourré*, which means "to trounce," is basically a trump game like hearts or spades where "tricks" are taken, but it is more "like poker in its spirit and drama" (167). Nicolae Sfetcu calls *bourré* a "game with imperfect information" (n.p.), which is likely the most accurate description available. With so many regional variations spread over such a small geographical playing area, *bourré* really is a cultural phenomenon rife with folkloric potential.

Tim Gautreaux's short story "Died and Gone to Vegas" takes place on a steam boat during an employee *bourré* game. The boat's cook Raynelle Bullfinch, the lone female crewmember, hosts the game, and the story opens with her initiation of newcomer Nick Montalbano into the mysteries of *bourré*, which she says even "a pet rat can play" (37). The extended scene of the story bears a striking resemblance to Jing-mei's first time attending the San Francisco Joy Luck Club. As the other players begin to arrive and to take their places, the participants settle into a comfortable ritual. Like the Joy Luck mah jong game, everyone seems to know his expected role and assigned seat, and as the game progresses, the players playfully insult one another and intersperse small talk into the rounds. The reader perceives that this *bourré* game is a ritual which the participants have been observing for a long time and which contributes to the unique identification of their culture. As Bragg demonstrates, *bourré* is

“a social game, mostly, played at a more congenial pace than poker, yet nobody plays bourré to lose” (169). Like mah jong, bourré is a community game played in a group of friends most of the time, though there is only one winner, and the stakes can get rather out of hand.

Throughout the game in Gautreaux’s story, Nick’s status as an outsider, like Jing-mei’s, is emphasized. Like Jing-mei, he is a college dropout, and even though he has had only one semester of college, Raynelle uses Nick’s partial education to separate him from their circle. While explaining the rules of the game, she ribs him, “This ain’t too hard for you is it? Ain’t college stuff more complicated than this?” The chief engineer, furthermore, calls Nick “fresh meat” while good-naturedly squeezing his neck, indicating that his presence, even though he is a newcomer, is accepted (38). Although Raynelle claims the game is simple and teases Nick about being able to understand, she nonetheless takes the time to explain all the rules and to answer his questions. Eventually, like Auntie An-mei, she simply says, “Trust me, you’ll catch on quick” (38). However, perhaps the most significant indicator of Nick’s outsider status is that, even if he had been familiar with bourré, he would still lack all the information necessary to succeed at Raynelle’s version. She reveals that every “hand has five tricks to take. If you take three tricks, you win the pot. Only on this boat, we got a special rule. If only two decide to play that hand after the draw, then it takes four tricks to win” (38). So, even if Nick had been an experienced bourré player, he would have been at an initial disadvantage within this small bourré community until he acclimated to their rules. Similarly, Jing-mei has played mah jong before, but she will remain an outsider among her aunties’ smaller mah jong community until she learns to play the game in a way they accept. Granted, the Joy Luck Club’s defense of their way of playing mah jong is more of a cultural statement than the steam boat’s additional special rule. In both works, though, the reader is granted access to a closed community through the eyes of the outsider character.

The most folkloric element of the bourré game in “Died and Gone to Vegas” is the oral storytelling ritual which accompanies it. Like both of Suyuan’s Joy Luck Clubs, oral storytelling is an indispensable part of Raynelle’s game and preserves the cultural tall tales of the region. Additionally, the storytelling ritual allows each player to distinguish himself among his peers, to establish his credibility within the culture, and to compete for the biggest reactions from his audience. Ed Piacentino calls “Died and Gone to Vegas” the “Cajun *Canterbury Tales*” (123), and indeed the steam boat’s

name, cheekily, is the *Leo B. Canterbury*. Each player takes a turn telling a tall tale in the style of what Gautreaux himself calls “energetic hyperbole” (Levasseur and Rabalais 22), and the tales grow increasingly unbelievable as the game progresses. All but Nick’s story are designed to incite laughter at the expense of a bumbling protagonist who incurs unbelievable, sometimes slapstick, misfortune because of his greed. Similarly, the Kweilin Joy Luck women had told each other humorous stories about “a rooster that ran into the house screeching on top of dinner bowls, the same bowls that held him quietly in pieces the next day! And one about a girl who wrote love letters for two friends who loved the same man. And a silly foreign lady who fainted on a toilet when firecrackers went off next to her” (24). Jing-mei does not participate in the oral storytelling when she plays mah jong, nor is it necessarily expected of her, but Nick is pressured into telling a tale, which he does reluctantly, as a necessary completion of his initiation into the bourré group. He does, however, assert some individuality and control over the ritual by telling of a tale based on selflessness and success rather than on greed and misfortune. The tale seems to be Gautreaux’s way of pondering the future and adaptability of the culture, but as soon as the tale concludes, Raynelle wins a wealthy pot and immediately begins making plans to head to Vegas. Nick’s daydream prediction about the misfortunes she will encounter, which include losing her money, getting in a fight with a blackjack dealer, and hitching a ride home with a group of Jehovah’s Witnesses in a broken-down car, is the final tale of the story and assures the reader that the storytelling tradition as it exists is firmly planted.

One final, fascinating correlation between mah jong and bourré, which is not necessarily represented fully by Tan or Gautreaux, is their similar approach to game-playing ethics; namely, both games prohibit mercy or sympathy towards one’s opponents. Paul Festa explains, in mahjong

any form of cooperation among players is prohibited and speaks poorly of a person’s ‘game character’ (*paipin*). Indeed, one important measure of skill and talent in mahjong, Sheng tells us, is precisely the degree to which one player is able to impair the game of another—and “the victim will then turn around and praise the victor.” (20-21)

Similarly, Sfetcu explains that bourré generally has a “must play to win” rule which “can have contentious results if a player is playing ‘nice,’ trying to keep others from bourréing. Most games disallow such ‘nice’ plays; players must attempt to bourré [to cause another player to take no tricks] as many other players as possible” (n.p.).

Though mah jong and bourré are both social games with deep, cultural heritages, there ultimately can be only one winner at the table. However, the mah jong groups in *The Joy Luck Club*, while ritualistic and steeped in tradition, are not ultimately cutthroat, and Raynelle's bourré game is concerned more with the stories than the money. So, perhaps the documentary burden of cultural, regional fiction extends only so far before the loyalty to narrative takes over.

Mah jong and bourré are only two examples of regional games studied by folklorists and historians and preserved in fiction. Additionally, scholars have found meaningful work studying other areas of gameplay, such as children's schoolyard games, board games, and video games, not to mention sports. Works of literature featuring games bring them to life with vivid detail while honoring the cultures surrounding them. Clearly, game playing traditions are fertile fields for scholars to harvest, and hopefully more authors will follow Tan's and Gautreaux's example and produce fiction which highlights under-utilized regional games.

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