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Soft Horrors: The Visual and Ludic Safety of Dark Cozy Games

Abstract

According to their most popular definition, cozy games are characterized by visual softness and relaxing gameplay devoid of combat and time-sensitive gameplay. However, with the recent increase in popularity of these games, game developers started to experiment with genre hybridity, introducing games that combine the elements of coziness with non-cozy elements such as difficult combat or horror themes, showing a need for critical engagement with the working definition of what is *cozy*. The article proposes a concept of *dark cozy games* to describe those titles that introduce visual softness and, to some degree, ludic safety to horror or Gothic, using three examples to illustrate different ways in which that can be achieved: *Cult of the Lamb*, *Dredge*, and *Oxenfree*.

Keywords: cozy games, horror, ludic safety, softness, *Cult of the Lamb*, *Dredge*, *Oxenfree*

Introduction

In April 2023, Nicole Carpenter published a piece on Polygon titled "Cozy Games Are Getting Darker," in which she noted that "the subgenre of cozy games is delving into new territory: the dark cozy game" (Carpenter, 2023, spara. 2). With more and more new games stretching the definition of coziness to encompass thematic

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genres that seemingly are as far from the definition of coziness as possible, the idea of *coziness* as a uniform concept becomes more and more difficult to defend.

Upon hearing the term *cozy games,* we instinctively think about very specific type of games and titles, be it calm, almost meditative puzzle games or farming simulators with a focus on interpersonal relationships like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) or *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo, 2020). In many ways, cozy games can be seen as counter-genre that emerged in a response to the highly competitive, fast-paced, and stressful mainstream games, offering the experience of deliberate, meditative slowness and safety. Despite the vast range of genres and themes found under the cozy games label, we usually can tell which game is cozy just by looking at it.

In this paper, I am instead interested in games that problematize the assumption that coziness is straightforward and intuitive. The three games I discuss – *Cult of the Lamb* (Massive Monster, 2022), *Dredge* (Black Salt Games, 2023), and *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016) – all at first look cozy, but partially reject the expectation of ludic safety. It seems, then, that even though they introduce elements of narrative or ludic danger, thus seemingly going against the very character of cozy gaming, they still are recognizable as cozy as long as 1) their visual style is easily categorized as cute (they fulfill the requirement of visual safety), 2) they counterbalance ludic peril with ludic safety, for example through the introduction of specific locations (or times of day) that guarantee safety, as long as the safe areas allow equal amount of play. At the same time, I argue that the three tenets of coziness listed in a detailed report by Tanya X. Short, Chelsea Howe, Daniel Cook and others (2018)[1], namely softness, safety, and abundance, could instead be reframed as visual, ludic, and narrative safety. Out of these three, ludic and visual safety seem to be the necessary conditions for a game to still be classified as cozy, with the lack of narrative safety allowing for the existence of other subtypes recognized within cozy games, such as empathy games – which feature difficult emotions – and dark cozy games, which feature ghosts, monsters, and other elements of Gothic and horror genres.

Cozy games

Up to this date, the most thorough analysis of the aesthetics and narrative themes characteristic to coziness comes from the abovementioned report. It introduces the concept of coziness as referring to "how strongly a game evokes the fantasy of

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[1]   In the previous literature the report has been cited as: (Cook, 2018). This has been now modified to reflect the group character of the work done by Tanya X Short, Anthony Ordon, Dan Hurd, Chelsea Howe, Jake Forbes, Squirrel Eiserloh, Joshua Diaz, Ron Meiners, and Daniel Cook. Following the order provided on the original blog post, it is now referred to as (Short et al., 2018).

safety, abundance, and softness." The three described concepts refer to gameplay, world-building, and the audio-visual layer, that is to the game's aesthetic. In the report, safety is understood as "an absence of danger and risk" which is usually achieved through a lack of threats, time constraints, or high penalties for mistakes. Rather, the gameplay relies on exploration and includes tasks that are easy (sometimes even repetitive) but engaging enough that they are not boring or frustrating. Second, by characterizing these games through the idea of *abundance,* their goal is a "means of satisfying unmet needs." The third aspect listed in the report, softness, describes how these games use "strong aesthetic signals that tell players they are in a low-stress environment full of abundance and safety. These are gentle and comforting stimuli, where players have a lower state of arousal but can still be highly engaged and present" (Short et al., 2018).

In our 2020 article on coziness, Martyna Bakun and I discussed the relationship between coziness and other game themes, identifying three types of applications of coziness in video games, depending on their function in the game as coherent, dissonant, and situational (Waszkiewicz & Bakun, 2020). The concept of *dark cozy games* proposed in this paper corresponds the best with the second type, the dissonance, as it describes games that juxtapose with each other seemingly incompatible elements of design and narration, such as soft and non-threatening aesthetics with difficult, uncomfortable narratives or topics. Dissonant use, in which cozy and non-cozy elements such as difficult emotions (sadness or grief) or elements enticing fear (monsters and ghosts) can be juxtaposed to emphasize both through contrast, allows for perhaps the most creative use of coziness.

Dark cozy games

In this article, I focus on the instances of a specific dissonant relationship that occurs between cozy aesthetics of softness and horror narrative elements. Additionally, I consider the role of ludic safety (or lack thereof) in the discussed titles. While at the first glance the connection between horror or discomfort and cuteness seems paradoxical, the relationship between these two is stronger than one might suspect, especially when, instead of broadly understood *coziness*, one looks at two components that, while not synonymous, fall close in meaning: *cuteness* and *comfort*.

While *cuteness*, commonly understood as a quality of appearance associated with big eyes and round features, is usually not mentioned as a *separate* quality of cozy games, we instinctively tend to equate the two, even though cuteness does not have to be soft (and vice versa) – take, for example, *Animal Crossing* or *Cult of the Lamb* which, instead of typical pastel colors and low-poly graphics, feature bright colors or thick, black line art that could bring to mind certain sharpness, as

opposed to softness. Although it often describes child-like features (round faces, small bodies, big eyes) and clumsy and innocent behavior (Gn, 2016), cuteness has been long recognized for its complicated relationship to positive and negative emotions. The concept of "cute aggression," defined by Katherine Stavropoulos and Laura Alba (2018) as "the urge people get to squeeze or bite cute things, albeit without desire to cause harm" (p. 1), has drawn some attention on social media over the last years, but cuteness has also been discussed academically as a tool of consumer manipulation (Su et al., 2023) or even as a "dark pattern" in home robots design that "depriv[es] users of some degree of conscious agency at the site of interaction" (Lacey & Caudwell, 2019, p. 374). In the paper titled *Cuteness and Disgust: The Humanizing and Dehumanizing Effects of Emotion*, Gary Sherman and Jonathan Haidt (2011) analyzed the "disgust and cuteness response" arguing that "disgust shrinks the moral circle – particularly by altering motivations for social engagement and cognitive processes related to mentalizing" (pp. 245–246) while cuteness works in the opposite direction, namely, "it expands the moral circle by influencing motivations for social engagement and cognitive processes related to mentalizing", where mentalizing "refers to the process by which we perceive an agent as possessing a mind" (pp. 245–246). Although the role of disgust in this capacity has already been recognized by others (Pizarro et al., 2006), Sherman and Haidt noted that the cuteness response had not yet been well understood. However, their framing of it as a mechanism "that 'releases' sociality (e.g., play and other affiliative interactions), which sometimes (indirectly) leads to increased care" (Sherman & Haidt, 2011, p. 246).

Digital games have long utilized cute and soft aesthetics to present difficult, uncomfortable, or stressful themes. The dissonance between the content and the aesthetics framing it resulted in what has briefly been referred to as *empathy games* (Belman & Flanagan, 2010; Boltz et al., 2015; Kors et al., 2016; Pozo, 2018), though the name has been problematized ever since (Ruberg, 2020). Consider two games in which the aesthetics of softness and safety of the gameplay accompany narratives exploring nostalgia, sorrow, and grief: a cute puzzle adventure game *The Last Campfire* (Hello Games, 2021) and a more popular *Spiritfarer* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020).

The former's Steam description presents it as "a story of a lost ember trapped in a puzzling world, searching for meaning and a way home", which already hints at the tone of the game. The gameplay is intuitive enough and, at first glance, it reads as cozy with dimmed, pleasant colors and low-poly graphics. The little figure, reminiscent of the hooded, barely humanoid protagonist of thatgamecompany's *Journey* (2013), traverses what quickly becomes established as either an afterlife or some other mysterious world in-between, where the player encounters spirits of similar creatures, which got lost, were forgotten, or gave up. Thus, despite

the overwhelming cuteness and the lack of imminent threats, the game has an omnipresent ambiance of sadness, which is additionally accentuated by a slow, pensive rhythm matching the foggy aesthetic of the implied afterlife.

Spiritfarer (Thunder Lotus Games, 2020) also deals with grief, seeing the protagonists Stella and Daffodil, her cat, taking on a role of Charon tasked with helping souls of the departed to cross over by fulfilling their last wishes and helping them feel safe and cared for. The gameplay is designed in a way that keeps the player busy, making them responsible both for Charon's ship and its passengers as Stella collects ingredients and prepares meals, tends to a garden, and cultivates the relationships with the guests. At some points, the game features elements of platforming, the result of which can depend on skill but which do not allow the player to fail in a way that would stop the progress.

Arguably, it is the difference in the gameplay that additionally affects the emotional hue of the two games: *The Last Campfire*, the sadness seems to be a constant quality of the emotional environment, while in *Spiritfarer*, it is instead connected to the storylines of the specific guests. But sadness and grief have always fitted cozy aesthetics. In fact, so many cozy games take advantage of the ludic and visual safety to explore these feelings that grief- and depression-themed titles tend to be considered unquestionably cozy as long as the game satisfies the visual and/ or gameplay requirements of coziness. The need to differentiate when talking about dark cozy games appears because dark titles go against the expectation of emotional safety, allowing us to pose a question: *are dark cozy games even still cozy?*

In this sense, I use the term *dark cozy games* to describe games that, while drawing from aesthetics of coziness, borrow themes and tropes from horror and Gothic genres, but also entice some form of emotional, narrative, or ludic lack of safety. For this reason, I do not look into games that are undoubtedly cozy but borrow characters, settings, or themes from the aforementioned genres – a practice which, after all, is extremely popular in all media. This trend is also visible within coherent cozy games: it has been reported that Eric Barone, the creator of *Stardew Valley*, is currently working on another game titled *Haunted Chocolatier*, which introduces chocolate-making ghosts to the pixel graphics and cozy gameplay familiar from his first game, while another recently announced *Stardew Valley*-like game, *Grave Seasons*, will "randomly select one of [the NPCs] to be a serial killer" upon every new playthrough (Son M., 2021). While these examples show current interest in hybridization of what we recognize as cozy games, the games I refer to as *dark cozy* play with difficulty, pose challenges, or even create discomfort or fear. And so, I first look at *Cult of the Lamb*, which combines cozy and roguelike gameplay, and then compare the use of softness and ludic safety in horror *Dredge* and Gothic *Oxenfree*.

Cute ugliness and the situational safety in *Cult of the Lamb*

Cult of the Lamb makes an interesting case in regard to how it balances and juxtaposes cozy safety (emotional, visual, and ludic) with areas which turn the gameplay to the one we recognize from roguelikes, including procedurally generated dungeons, increasingly difficult opponents, and complicated bosses requiring skill to beat (or, a very low difficulty). While *Dredge* and *Oxenfree* evoke the feelings of dread and tension through the atmosphere, music, and narrative, *Cult of the Lamb* features a demonic cult, dark magic, monsters, and dark themes such as cannibalism without enticing fear in the players.

The game starts when the eponymous lamb is slaughtered as a sacrifice and then resurrected by The One Who Waits, an old god imprisoned by four monstrous Bishops. Thanks to the god's patronage, Lamb is given magical powers and missions to establish a cult devoted to them and to free the god. The two narrative tasks correspond with two vastly different gameplay experiences. On the one hand, entering the dungeons triggers roguelike parts of the game as the Lamb traverses procedurally generated maps to gather resources, gain experience, find new followers, and, finally, face the Bishops as the bosses. On the other hand, Lamb needs to establish their temple and build a village for their followers – here, the game features all the elements known from cozy farming simulator games such as growing and preparing food, building, and repairing facilities, or maintaining relationships with the villagers.

While the game's 2D design is undeniably adorable, instead of dimmed, soft colors it uses bold, bright colors and thick, dark line art. All believers are anthropomorphized creatures, both based on animals and more vaguely monstrous, and the transition from the roguelike dungeons (from where many are recruited and/or saved) to the cozy village is signaled through a visual change in design. Whereas the creatures encountered in the dungeons look a little less friendly, once indoctrinated, the followers are adorable, indeed: they have big, innocent eyes, make funny, unthreatening expressions, and offer mostly casual remarks about the quality of their lives in the village (although, occasionally, they express interest in consuming feces or feeding them to others as a prank). However, at the same time they defecate and get violently sick, and if they lose faith or want to sabotage the cult, their monstrous features show as their eyes become bloody and demonic, and their teeth – sharp. Bright red is an important color, being repeatedly used to emphasize the demonic or monstrous traits of the characters: not only is it the color of Lamb's outfit, but also their eyes will turn blood-red and wide when showing anger or scaring followers. Similarly, unless indoctrinated and loyal to Lamb and the cult, the villagers' eyes might become similarly non-human, red with black dots around them.

It is interesting to look at how cuteness and ugliness (which often denotes deformed, bulbous, and exaggerated shapes) are combined in designs of other monsters, especially the Bishops in their final boss forms, showing that cuteness does not necessarily denote coziness. Of course, the connection between cute and ugly is not unknown to 2D animation, being a staple element of such shows as Cartoon Network's *Powerpuff Girls* (McCracken, 1998–2005), *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (Dilworth, 1999–2002), or Edmund McMillen's and Florian Himsl's roguelike *Binding of Isaac* (2001). The latter game, offering a disturbing reading of the biblical story of Isaac, showing him as an abused and terrified child having to survive literal and metaphorical monsters, used a similar contrast between the grotesque and the cute in order to parallel the dissonance between the innocence of the protagonist and the horrors he had to withstand.

Maja Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2007) argued that cuteness and monstrosity could complement and be understood through each other, which potentially explains the presence of cute monsters in popular fiction (especially in the Japanese context), as illustrated not only by *Pokémon* (Allison, 2010), which lean strongly towards the *cute* rather than *monstrous* qualities, but also the transformation of Lovecraftian fear-striking Cthulhu from a horrifying Eldritch horror to a cute creature often produced and sold as plushie, stickers, etc. (Ward, 2013). The thin line between the bodily grotesque and cuteness was also mentioned by Sharon Kinsella (1995) in the discussion of characters such as Hello Kitty and Totoro, who have "stubbly arms, no fingers, no mouths, huge heads, massive eyes – which can hide no private thoughts from the viewer – nothing between their legs, pot bellies, swollen legs, and pigeon feet . . . [and who] can't walk, can't talk, can't in fact do anything at all for themselves" (p. 236). Cuteness is, then, contextual. Taken out of context, the same attributes could be found in both what we consider cute and monstrous: depending on its interpretation, exaggeration of features associated with the cute can become terrifying (i.e., "grotesque cute" in Sato, 2009) or be understood as weakness (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2007). This is once again visible in the Japanese language, where *kawaisô* (可哀想), which is derived from *kawaii* (可愛い), means pitiable, pathetic, and poor (Kinsella, 1995; Sato, 2009).

As Brzozowska-Brywczyńska (2007) further argues: "Wouldn't [Hello Kitty] be an *astoma*, a mouthless freak? Couldn't we interpret her lack of fingers (claws? hands?) as an actual sign of physical monstrosity?" (p. 219). Hello Kitty (and Totoro, and countless other cute creatures) does not evoke fear, but rather it is "the disempowering feeling of pity and sympathy (aligned though . . . to that of superiority and even certain cruelty) that deprives a monster of his monstrosity" (p. 219).

Finally, the last commentary is reflected in Emma Reay's (2021) analysis of the use of the "buoyant, giddy, cherubic figure of the 'Blithe Child'" (p. 132) in games

that construct the player-avatar relationship to resemble the one between a child and their toy. She notes a dissonance between the cuteness of the characters and the roughness of play in titles like *Fall Guys* (Media Tonic, 2020): "slippage between being 'carefree' and being 'uncaring' [as] the Blithe Child's hearty robustness not only withstands rough play but also seems to invite it" (Reay, 2021, p. 132). Thus, the games inherit "some of the more sinister dynamics latent in human-toy relationships, namely the desire to humiliate and mutilate the cute object and anxieties about what it means to be 'real'" (Reay, 2021, p. 131).

I would call *Cult of the Lamb* a true representation of a hybrid game that clearly connects elements of coziness with roguelikes and *cute ugly* design of its monsters. When considered as a whole, it seemingly does not provide ludic safety, an aspect which seems defining of coziness: the fights can be very difficult, and the themes can be dark and upsetting. However, at the same time, it offers the players a situational coziness by ensuring there are ludically safe spaces (the cult village) and further giving the player a choice of whether the cult will be benevolent (emotionally cozy) or whether it will become a cannibalistic place of dark magic and demon worship. During sermons, the players can choose one of two upgrades or perks which tilt the cult's character into one of the two directions. By choosing between various options (e.g., between Cannibal Trait or Grass Eater Trait, deciding what food will allow the cult to level up), the player shapes what beliefs the cult will have about afterlife, whether the followers will peacefully pass due to the old age or they will be ascended in a special ceremony, etc.

Is *Cult of the Lamb* cozy, then? I would argue that a more productive question is whether and how it utilizes the main aspects of cozy games such as themes (e.g., the cozy village that needs to be tended for and build), some elements of ludic safety (both through player choice and the separate areas of safety), and aesthetic (through cuteness rather than dimmed colors).

Coziness as a tool of deception in *Dredge*

For Nicole Carpenter (2023), *Dredge* is an apt example of a game illustrating the theses from the very title of her article, "Cozy Games Are Getting Darker". However, despite its skillful use of cozy aesthetics (e.g., visual softness), themes, and gameplay (fishing, narration carried through dialogue boxes), *Dredge* is undoubtedly a horror game, creating tension through music, themes, and monsters lurking in the sea at night.

In the game, the player assumes the role of the Fisherman, who arrives in a tiny, coastal town and takes up a job as a local angler. When docked at harbor, the player can interact with characters, sell fish, upgrade their gear, or fix the ship, but the majority of the game is spent at the open sea, fishing, collecting materials and lost

trinkets, and exploring. It does not take long before the Fisherman ventures out into the night and discovers that the underwater world is completely transformed in the darkness. Fish caught at night might be deformed and pulsating with purple, sinister light, but some people are willing to pay more for them for… various reasons (it probably is better not to ask). When the word gets out that the Fisherman is willing to brave the night waters, they are soon tasked with a special assignment that leads them to discovering some of the darkest parts of the ocean and its secrets.

The fact that fishing comprises almost the entirety of the gameplay is, of course, not accidental and creates the sense of coziness in the most direct way. In-game fishing, which can be a common part of both bigger, action-heavy or RPG games and smaller cozy titles, usually appears in a form of mini-games that can differ in regard to their complexity and impact on the overall narrative (Xiao, 2023), offering situational moments of meditative stillness. This is true also for fishing in *Dredge*, which divides its gameplay between areas of safety and peril as well. Where *Cult of the Lamb* did it through specific locations, here the division is marked by the time of day. The day can be beautiful and cozy, allowing the player to fish and explore at their own pace while enjoying the soft, peaceful colors of the sunsets, but nights transform these areas into quite a different place, leaving no trace of the serene landscape, becoming dark and dangerous to the point of life-threatening. While the Fisherman does not need to keep rigid sleeping hours and it is up to the player when they will rest and when they will work, staying too long outside of a dock will influence mental health, raising the panic-meter and causing the vision to become blurry and distorted to the point of hallucinating.

If we consider ludic safety one of the dominant qualities of coziness, one may argue that neither *Cult of the Lamb* nor *Dredge* fully classify. Unlike *Animal Crossing*, failure is not impossible, and the gameplay can become quite stressful and intense, rather than mellow and relaxing. However, that is not to say that these two games are as difficult or unforgiving as some of the mainstream action-heavy titles: the former allows the players to adjust the difficulty setting to the point where deaths could be a rarity, and for the majority of the latter, the monsters can be strategically avoided. What is the most defining difference between the two games is the emotions they aim to create: only *Dredge* aims at creating a sense of dread. Perhaps this makes it qualify more as a *cozy dark game* rather than the other way around.

Soft ghosts of *Oxenfree*

Finally, although it might seem the most controversial, I would place *Oxenfree*[2] in between the other two titles, showing that despite its Gothic themes, the aesthetics of safety are prevailing enough for the game to balance out both sides, the cozy and the dark. The game follows Alex, who together with her friends arrives at Edward Island only to find out that it is, indeed, haunted. Soon, they start receiving strange, glitchy messages on the radio and witness the opening of an interdimensional rift resulting in a time loop, telekinetic events, and, of course, even more ghosts.

Unlike *Dredge*, the game does not use coziness to lure the player into a sense of safety, and it is clear from the beginning what kind of a story one should expect. However, the aesthetics of *Oxenfree* are also characterized by softness, roundness, and certain simplicity of shapes, visible particularly through the design of the characters who appear small enough that there is no need to render details of their faces. The action takes place mostly in the woods and around the small town, and, faithfully to the requirements of the genre of Gothic, everything is softened by the mist. The colors are murky and dim, but they are not dark enough to be terrifying, but instead they look beautiful, intriguing, or even sublime.

Secondly, unlike both previously discussed games, *Oxenfree's* gameplay is consistent throughout the entire game. There are no spaces that are less or more safe. It features point-and-click mechanics and relies heavily on dialogue, offering the player a choice out of three possible speech bubbles corresponding to specific buttons. While the choice is not exactly a quick time event, there is a limited window during which a decision must be made, with the silence making a fourth option to which the NPCs will respond. Thus, the player is shielded from the experiences of the characters, being able to slow down, explore in their own rhythm, or even stop the play without pausing the game: left to their own devices in the middle of the path, the characters will not venture away nor will they be attacked. The focus on the narrative, the slow pace, and the partial control of when the events will be triggered does create a sense of ludic safety that the other two games are lacking.

Dark cozy games or cozy horror?

There is no doubt that cozy games are evolving, which in turn means that more scrutiny should be placed on what we really understand by *coziness*. Understanding coziness as relational to other types of content, we have allowed the definition of

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2   Due to the space limits, I only focus on the first of the two games. However, considering the design similarities between the first (2016) and the second (2023) games in the series, the analysis can pertain to both.

a cozy game to be broadened and stretched. In this sense, *dark cozy game* could describe games that balance dark themes such as those known from Gothic and horror genres with elements of coziness, but that also raises the question: how far one can push that relationship until the game cannot be considered cozy anymore, but rather becomes a game that utilizes certain cozy elements?

I took a glance at three games that, to a varying degree, try to balance out two seemingly contradictory aesthetics: that of safety and softness with the one of fear and tension. All three games balance on the edges of coziness, with varying strength of the connection to the original understanding of a *cozy game.* All three play with fear and discomfort as representative of Gothic (*Oxenfree*) and horror (*Cult of the Lamb* and *Dredge*). They all also feature elements of cozy aesthetics: softness of shapes either in 2D (*Cult of the Lamb*) or low-poly 3D style (*Dredge* and *Oxenfree*); dimmed, pastel colors (*Dredge* and *Oxenfree*); and cute characters (*Cult of the Lamb*). Despite their narratives, they offer safety on the ludic level, either in a way that can be considered coherent (*Oxenfree*) or situational (*Cult of the Lamb* and *Dredge*).

The distinction proposed in the title for these conclusions is, admittedly, a playful one, meant to provoke a reflection rather than bring definitive answers. As a subtype that will be positioned on the intersection of cozy and not-cozy (in the broadest sense), it perhaps does not matter whether a game is a cozy game that introduces elements of horror, or a horror game that utilizes coziness, be it to manipulate the players, to strengthen the impact of the non-cozy elements, or to introduce a demanding genre to new audiences. The existence of such hybrid categories is, on the other hand, fascinating for the future discussion of what elements are crucial for one to recognize a specific title as cozy.

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