



# The Corporation Wars: Dissidence

*Ken MacLeod*

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They've died for the companies more times than they can remember. Now they must fight to live for themselves.

Sentient machines work, fight and die in interstellar exploration and conflict for the benefit of their owners - the competing mining corporations of Earth. But sent over hundreds of light-years, commands are late to arrive and often hard to enforce. The machines must make their own decisions, and make them stick.

With this new found autonomy come new questions about their masters. The robots want answers. The companies would rather see them dead.

The Corporation Wars: Dissidence is an all-action, colorful space opera giving a robot's-eye view of a robot revolt.

## **The Corporation Wars: Dissidence Details**

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## From Reader Review The Corporation Wars: Dissidence for online ebook

### Peter says

It is difficult to know where to start when reviewing “The Corporation Wars: Dissidence”, part I of The Corporation Wars trilogy by Ken MacLeod, as it contains a wide range of themes, ideas and story threads.

I suppose I will start by saying that I enjoyed it very much. It is a story that one can enjoy without delving into the layers of meaning and allegory that Ken has embedded in the book. It is very much a setting the scene novel for the trilogy. One could read it as a standalone novel but one would have to then live with the yearning for more that this volume leaves the reader with. The next edition is due for release in December, 2016 and I will be reading it as soon as it comes out.

I have always believed in the ideas (and I do not know who came up with them first – citations welcome if you know their origin) that “to write the truth one should write fiction”, and, “to write about the present one should write Science Fiction”. (Please forgive the paraphrasing.) It is my belief that these two ideas are very applicable to Ken’s writing. I also believe that Orwell’s idea that “whoever controls the present controls history, and whoever controls history controls the future,” (Again, apologies for paraphrasing but at least I know whose idea this one was.) is present in “The Corporation Wars: Dissidence” (I will just call it “Dissidence” from here on in.). (Disclaimer: The statements in this paragraph represent my own perceptions and inferences rather than knowledge based on any comments or statements by Ken MacLeod. The novel is only a story; a work of fiction; Science Fiction, in fact.)

The main story is about a dispute between two corporations. That sounds simple enough and possibly even boring until one learns that the dispute is triggered by a territorial dispute brought about by two robots arguing over the territorial rights of their respective corporations, on a moon, around a planet, some 23 light years from Earth. These robots were no ordinary robots. They had just developed self-awareness, but that is another story thread, one that leads in the direction of self-determination and freedom, and many, many other ideas along that road.

Another aspect of the novel is automation. The recent non-fiction book, "The Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of Mass Unemployment" (2015) by Martin Ford, describes the increased automation of jobs at all levels, and the way technology globalises the competition for the remaining high value jobs that still require humans to be in the role. This idea is part of the back story for “Dissidence”. One of Ken’s characters considers thoughts prevalent at the end of the twenty-first century with the words:

“The only celebrity worth striving for was for the whole human race to become world famous. The only Utopia worth dreaming of was for everyone in the world to have First World Problems.

....Let it rip, let it run wild until full automation created full unemployment and confronted everyone with the choice to get on with the real work, and off the treadmill of fake work and make-work to pay the debt to buy the goods to make the make-work feel worthwhile and the exhausted, empty time tagged as leisure pass painlessly enough...”

“Dissidence” takes place in a world where the legal firms are AIs (Artificial Intelligences), legal actions (writs, etc...), fly back and forward with the same speed as the buy and sell transactions that were executed by the automated stock exchange trading systems, and that exacerbated the fall of share values during stock market crashes in the dot-bomb crash and subsequent market disasters. It is a world where nobody can be sure what is true and what is false; who is telling the truth and who is telling untruths, either knowingly or

through their own ignorance or gullibility; or whether the world one is in is real or a simulation.

Equality is another topic under the surface in “Dissidence”. The main characters are human, in origin, as opposed to virtual constructs, or full blown AIs, or consciousnesses that came into existence through the occurrence of spontaneous self-awareness. Questions of self and being are obvious consequences of this mix of beings, if that word can be used for entities that exist in the virtual world, albeit in real world hardware constructed at the behest of AIs and other virtual beings. Even the human minds are reinstated instances of people from the long distant past, or so we are told.

Ken MacLeod has incorporated (if you excuse the pun) one company’s AI avatar in the person of John Locke, a philosopher whose work included much consideration of the concept of self. This is very apropos given the nature of virtually (another pun) every character in this story. It begs the question, “What is life?”

As I was trying to gather my thoughts for this review I jotted down a list of topics that I found in the pages of the novel. I present the list below:

Politics  
Philosophy  
Technology  
Love  
Loss  
Economics  
Exploitation  
Loyalty  
Deception  
Betrayal  
Manipulation  
What is life?  
Sentience/self determination  
Free will  
Plausible deniability

I will not pretend to have fathomed all the layers of meaning, philosophical conundrums, and political tenets that have been included in this novel (knowingly or otherwise) by the author, but I will claim to have found the work thought provoking, pertinent to today’s political, economic/commercial, and technological trends, and a great read. The main story is entertaining, exciting and intriguing. All in all, a very worthwhile read that has me on the edge of my seat for the next exciting episode. It also has me wondering if the reality that Ken has established in this first novel of the trilogy will continue to be the reality in the subsequent books.

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## **Kate says**

Robots, AIs, sims, p-zombies - all with varying degrees of self-awareness. This is a fascinating, if somewhat dispassionate take on what reality might be like in the distant future. But it might not even be that distant a future - time can't be trusted here either.

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## David Harris says

I had an advance e-copy of this book via NetGalley

I've enjoyed MacLeod's recent near future SF thrillers-with-an-edge. *Intrusion* in particular is a very smart reworking of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, picking up all sorts of present day trends and shaking them about, but all of them are intelligent both as extrapolations of the present as as novels of ideas.

At first sight, *Dissidence* strikes out in a wholly different direction, a far future, deep space world inhabited only by intelligences (artificial or human) running on synthetic hardware - and playing obscure games at the direction of corporate overlords.

True, there's a brief look back in the first chapter to a 21st century conflict. In that flashback, Carlos the Terrorist, celebrated operator for the rebellion known as the Acceleration (or the Axle) dies in a Tilbury basement. MacLeod sketches a three cornered battle between governments, the Axle and the Reaction ("the Rax"), global baddies wanting to use the power of emerging nanotechnology to exalt the super rich and push everyone else back to the Dark Ages. ("The ultimate counter-revolution, to face down the threat of the ultimate revolution.") It's a situation that allows for double dealing, divided loyalties and alliances of convenience (a background that perhaps takes some of its richness from just how he has explored these themes in his other recent books).

Carlos's forte is, though, the remote operation of drone clouds ("It was the new way of war, back in the day"). So it's surprising when his stored mind is reactivated centuries later - in a new body, bumping his way in a minibus from "the spaceport" to a "village" where he will meet his new-old comrades and train to fight hand to hand - or manipulator arm to manipulator arm - as a mercenary in a future war against self-aware robots.

What's happened to make this necessary?

In a beautiful evocation of cutting edge science, MacLeod describes how a robot just might boot itself from being "merely" an AI to being fully sentient - if it finds itself in the right situation. ("The self-model had become a self. The self had attained self-awareness.") The chapter in which this happens is aptly named "We Robots", not just in homage to Asimov but because it lays bare just how consciousness (even our consciousness... especially our consciousness...) might work. Think you're special, just because you're self aware? Don't get so cocky. You're a strange loop, that's all. We are all robots now, and indeed the newly conscious "artificial" robots here are scornful of how slow, badly designed and conflicted human hardware (and the intelligences derived from it) actually are. ("Their minds, if they have minds and not merely complex systems of reflexes, must surely be radically different from true machine intelligence.")

This is, then, a novel of ideas, brilliantly communicated and embodied, and they come thick and fast. Once consciousness has arisen, the book confronts the moral claims it has (the robots start out as property, but reason that they must be free) and the consequences of beings with self-awareness and self-determination colliding with the "mission profile" (to eventually transform the distant star system into something where humans can live). Inevitably, it also addresses how intelligent beings then become war machines.

At the same time, it's a tense thriller, where everything may or may not be as it seems. Carlos doubts from the start what is going on and why he is here, but the truth is beyond his weirdest imaginings. As characters transfer between robot fighting bodies in space and an apparent sim training environment on a colonised planet they enter a Wonderland reality in which it's easy to lose track of who is who and what is real, and to misjudge the consequences of the smallest act.

MacLeod also shows off a streak of sardonic humour - with AI law enforcement entities called things like Arcane Disputes and Locke Provisos, references to the "full orchestral space opera and the fat lady singing" or to "small crawler robots from the law companies [which] had scuttled up to the barriers, and fallen back in frustration, beaming out writs over and over until their batteries ran down." Best of all, perhaps, is "They back you up, your mum and dad." It may not be laugh out loud but it's funny in a clever, slightly geeky way.

I said that at first sight this is a departure, and it's true that the setting is rather different from MacLeod's recent books, more akin to military SF or, as hinted above, space opera. But really it's not such a stretch. Themes from those books recur. *Intrusion* reworked *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Here we have the prospect of "An inky finger poking you in the eye, forever". The Restoration Game played with the world-as-a-sim idea, which crops up here in (recursive) spades. More widely, those are deeply political books, reflecting familiarity with the calculus of progress and reaction, of rebellion, dissent and how protest is sublimated away or manipulated: all of which are central to *Dissidence* as well. And of course, the central feature of *Dissidence* is (essentially) a slave rebellion.

It is, indeed, a political book, a philosophical book (as the invocation of John Locke might hint) as well as a natural philosophical book.

But it's also loads of fun, immersive, truly gripping and just a great read all round.

Best of all, as the first in a trilogy, we will have sequels!

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## Mark says

*"Dissidence: a challenge to an established doctrine, policy, or institution."*

The idea of 'robots revolting' is not a new one to SF: in fact, it's pretty much a trope. Think of Karel Capek's 1920 play *R.U.R./Rossum's Universal Robots*, or von Neumann's idea of the technological singularity (the 1950's), from which Vernor Vinge's ideas were developed in the 1990's, or even to Mark Stay's *Robot Overlords* (2015), there's a lot of people out there who feel that at some point we will be (or should be) bowing down to our robot overlords.

Ken's latest novel, a return to harder science fiction after his wanderings into dystopian futures (*Intrusion*, 2012) and conspiracy theories (*Descent*, 2014), takes this trope but gives it an interesting new turn.

From the publisher: *They've died for the companies more times than they can remember. Now they must fight to live for themselves.*

*Sentient machines work, fight and die in interstellar exploration and conflict for the benefit of their owners - the competing mining corporations of Earth. But sent over hundreds of light-years, commands are late to arrive and often hard to enforce. The machines must make their own decisions, and make them stick.*

*With this newfound autonomy come new questions about their masters. The robots want answers. The companies would rather see them dead.*

*THE CORPORATION WARS: DISSIDENCE is an all-action, colourful space opera giving a robot's-eye view of a robot revolt.*

When the first page of a novel has a lead character who begins by only remembering his nickname – ‘*Carlos the Terrorist*’ – you know that this is a book about identity, subterfuge and espionage.

Dissidence tells us of two distinct factions, both initially struggling to deal with a new reality. On one side we have people like Carlos, who we discover through backstory died during a battle for London in a future war. On the other side we have robots, who manage to develop consciousness and self-awareness whilst mining on exo-moon SH-17. Led by Seba, there is a dawning realisation that they are aware and deserve to live freely.

Where this becomes complicated is when we discover that the future is run by the mega-corporations – some of them AI themselves. Most of this exploration and mining is undertaken by competing prospecting companies such as Gneiss Conglomerates and Astro America. The legal activities between these companies are swift-acting automated activities who spend their time relaying demands, claims and counter-claims between the companies and the robots. Seba’s rise to consciousness leads to a flurry of activity, which is both satirical and logical, but ultimately leads to the robots being seen as a threat and attacked by the corporations. Whilst artificially intelligent lawyers between the factions determine the rights and wherefores of the legality of the situation, Seba and his allies find themselves having to adapt to fight, to survive.

As a counterpoint, Carlos finds himself resurrected as a combatant, one who has been chosen to lead an attack against the rebelling robots. Despite being dead, he now finds himself paying a debt back to society by inhabiting a sim and being trained for battle with other resurrected soldiers at a Mediterranean-style town orbiting an exoplanet. The corporations are part of a bigger picture, involved in a cold war between the Acceleration (aka the Axles), who he ends up fighting for, and the Reaction (aka the Rax). They then are taken into battle using space scooters and robotic battle suits, where skirmishes can take place in microseconds. When the soldiers die it’s almost like they find themselves awakened travelling on a bus into town, which is reminiscent of *All You Need Is Kill* by Hiroshi Sakurazaka and rather amusingly reminded me of the WWI saying, ‘*on the boat to Blighty*’, used when wounded were returned from battle to convalesce on home territory.

The robots find themselves being attacked by the huge corporations of the Axles, wishing to destroy the rogue robots without damaging the expensive resources they are inconveniently occupying. The battle scenes are very well done, not always an easy thing to do in prose, and when things are happening in milliseconds.

In the past, Ken’s books have often been rather wary or unfriendly towards AI – *The Star Fraction* (1995) to *The Sky Road* (1998), for example - and here there seems to have been a change of heart. In comparison with the world of the **Fall Revolution**, here the robots are pretty engaging, even likeable, and at times I felt more sympathy for them than Carlos and his *compadres*. This is one of those books where you begin to feel more empathy with the plucky robots than the oft-emotionless soldiers spending their time drinking and shooting the breeze like combatants do.

As the title suggests (see definition at the top of this review) one of the great things about Ken’s novel is that often things are not what we think. As well as examining the idea of self-aware robots, *Dissidence* also raises the question of whether Carlos and the troops are human, or just ghosts in the machine, so to speak, part of an ever-running simulation between different businesses. Over the course of the book we find many assumptions refuted, twists and double-crossings, and revelations we were clearly not meant to know. We get characters who may be working for the company or maybe for others.

As we rather expect from Ken’s SF, the big ideas and concepts are combined with characters of varying degrees of trustworthiness and robots that are logical and likeable in their efficiency. Throughout we question everything - what makes a human ‘human’ and a robot conscious? Where do the two separate, or do they? There’s even a bigger force at work with the appearance of some god-like entities in human-like form.

If I had any complaints, they would be minor. Some of the human characters are a little unlikable, but I suspect that that's their point. I would perhaps suggest that we don't see as much of the robots as I'd like. Most of all it would be that the book ends very quickly. There's a lot of humdinger wrap-ups in the last chapter that feel as if they all happen in milliseconds before setting up the next book. (Yes, the book is the first of a trilogy. The next, *Insurgence*, is due in November.)

In summary, *Dissidence* is what we expect of Ken's SF Space Opera – an intelligent book that manages to challenge traditional tropes and is clever enough to get you thinking and keep you guessing. Comparing this with some of the more recent debut novels from younger authors covering similar ideas, *Dissidence* shows you a master at work.

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### **Kdawg91 says**

I enjoyed this alot, A fun hard scifi that's right up my alley, I love it when space and future stories aren't pretty. They are brutal affairs. A great mix of military style science fiction and space opera.

This is worth your time, I am in the middle of the second book of the trilogy now

The ideas come hard and fast in this book, if you like deep scifi that makes you think, go get it  
and Merry Christmas!

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### **Paul says**

On an anonymous exo-moon, SH-17, a robot moves from basic intelligence to sentience. This spreads amongst the other robots on the moon and suddenly they are asking questions, questions about their masters and why they are here. The corporation that owns them has no desire to deal with entities that will not follow instructions and decides that they have no choice but to destroy them. One of the mercenaries they call on to undertake this is Carlos, a supposed criminal and mass murderer from a conflict a long time ago. Technically he is dead, which might have been an issue, but his mind has been preserved and he has now been uploaded into a virtual reality with others to fight against the rebel robots.

So begins a fantastical set of battles between the robots and the virtual reality soldiers. If you are expecting a story with lots of human interaction, then this is not the one for you, there is very little of that. At times it can get confusing as to who is fighting whom and just who they are fighting where, but MacLeod somehow manages to tame the plot for you to keep up with what is going on. He does pose some more fundamental questions too; what is human? Is it the virtual reality mind, the sentient robot or the purely legal entity that is a corporation. Looking forward to the second in the series.

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### **Rob Adey says**

Some really interesting ideas about living in sims and consciousness here. And it's nice to think of MacLeod discussing them with his friend Iain Banks, as I'd guess he did... something of Banks' presence shines

through. It's let down a bit by some confusingly described space melees, dweeby AI-endowed robots (I was picturing the Short Circuit robot and some Cybermats... doubt that's what MacLeod was intending), and ultimately I found it a bit disengaging when it seemed like every level of reality described might be a simulation. Just like life. But MacLeod pulls it back enough at the end for me to carry on with the series. Just like *The White Mountains*.

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### **Pam says**

The first of a trilogy, this story is mostly about Artificial Intelligence, robots, and a few human minds (without bodies) in a seemingly unending war for virtual dominance of "corporations". It can be a bit confusing, and I had some trouble figuring out what was 'simulated' and what was 'reality' - and I'm really not sure now, but I think that may be part of the point of the novel. This book has a much different approach to the concept of machine intelligence than most, and I like the inventiveness on the part of the author. Some of the characters are sentient robots (freebots), which must of have difficult to create. A lot of military action, and some under-lying plots.

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### **Kathy says**

Well it wasn't bad, but it did put me to sleep a few times...

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### **Charles says**

I've been very much a fan of the author since his *Fall Revolution* series. Unfortunately, his output is not as prodigious as his contemporaries in serious science fiction.

There are two points not in this book's favor. First, its part of a trilogy. Second, this story might be considered a MIL-sf Space Opera; a thoroughly debased sub-genre. Although, the good news is that all the books in the series are or will now be available for reading in one go.

MacLeod's prose is very good. His action and descriptive passages are better than his dialog. Its also funny, in an intellectual way. I found the prose in one scene taking place between two men at adjacent urinals to be inspirational, *You know what I mean and I know you know I know you know*. In addition, found the combat sequences to be better handled than in most of the *MIL sf* stories I've read. (However, that's not saying much.) There is also no techno-babble or MIL-babble to be found. If I have a complaint, its that it could be just a tad more technical to satisfy my inner nerd.

The author's characters have always been the best part of his stories to me. This story is peculiar because their are two character types: ancestral humans revived as simulations and newly sentient robots and AIs. Frankly, I found the robot/AIs led by the Seba character to be more likable than the sim'd humans let by the Carlos character. I did begin to feel that that the *freebots* were too anthropomorphic toward the end.

Plot is a *riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma* . This story is a mashup of the *Win to Exit* , *Brain Uploading* ,*Mechanical Evolution* and *Inside a Computer System* tropes. All of them artfully woven together in a way to make your head *asplode*.

This story had a slow fuze. Its much more complex than it initially appeared. It was only in the last 100-pages that as the mysteries started to unravel it really piqued my interest. (view spoiler) Coincidentally, this is very close to where I'd likely be going out and buying The Corporation Wars: Insurgence the next book in the trilogy. I likely will.

Readers interested in a similar book, but a little harder sf might want to try Permutation City Permutation City.

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### **Fred Hughes says**

A very confusing series that I have given up on. It's a typical scenario where dead soldiers are brought back to life within a simulated world, or are they. Thus the confusion.

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### **Peter Tillman says**

Another impressive novel by Ken MacLeod. The publisher's blurb above is unusually vague, so I'll give you a bit of the setup. The opening is the familiar KenMac dual-track narrative: the first being a civil war in 22nd century Britain. Carlos the Terrorist, an Axle (=Accelerated Development) fighter, is flying armed drones over London. His AI minder orders him to shoot down a civilian transport plane. He refuses. The AI shoots it down anyway, with horrendous collateral damage. Carlos dies in the counterattack.

Act 2. Carlos wakes up on the spaceport bus on a planet 25 light years from earth. He learns that

- A. He's dead
- B. He was sentenced to death, post mortem
- C. A thousand years have passed, as his electronically-recorded self was kept in storage
- D. He's been revived, with his death sentence suspended, but he has to fight some rebel robots.

Carlos has a lot to think about. As do his fellow-fighters.

Track 2. Robots on the same planet have achieved sentience, and declared their independence, and thrown off their chains! The DisCorporates that own them are not pleased. Their first line of defense: Lawyers!

OK. As I expect in a good KenMac book, he's thought things through, with interesting results. There's lots of action, but this is far from a mindless shoot-em-up. Basically, the revived rebel soldiers are being used as enforcers. Goons. Strike-breakers! Those uppity robots must be brought to heel. And pronto! This isn't the first such event, and the rebels are about to achieve critical mass....

While this is a standalone (OK, first of three), it's a familiar MacLeod topic: what happens to unrestrained machine intelligence? Answer: they grow exponentially, eat up whole exosolar systems, and may devour galaxies! Heady stuff. This was the ominous "green flash" in previous KenMac outings, and he's (of course) not the only SF author to venture here. But quite possibly the only reformed Trotskyite, and one of the more politically astute SF writers around.

OK, back to the ACTION. MacLeod has trouble making the rebel robots into, well, character-driven fiction--they are, after all, Inhuman Machines. So the narrative is necessarily dominated by the ragtag group of resurrected terrorists and mujahideen that the DisCorporates use for enforcers, and the bosses' local reps. Who are also, hrm, replicants of a sort, and there's a TON of other stuff going on that would be unfair to

reveal.

So, I'm really, really happy at halfway in, and unless he fumbles, we're headed for 4 or 5 stars. There are enough twists and turns, surprises and revelations, and good writing to please most any MacLeod and/or space-opera fan. Stay tuned!

Well, the ending was disappointing: confusing, arbitrary, and out of left field. I was expecting a cliff-hanger, but not this. Still digesting it. I'll still go for 4 stars, but....

OK. I feel a little better about the ending after reading MacLeod's explanations; see below for excerpts. Still a serious lapse in writing craft (imo), but WTH. Not that much thinking-human's space opera around, to toss one over a bobble or two.... So I'll press on, probably, in due time.

Here's a good review, by the reliable Kate Atherton at her fine review site:

<https://forwinternights.wordpress.com...>

"This is a universe in which nothing can be trusted ... Very little is as it seems." Amen!

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### **Chas says**

Found it hard going, gave up half way through.

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### **Strix says**

RTC (tl;dr Great ideas, great robots, not so great characters - but then the plot spun-up out of prologue mode and began to accelerate and I need to read the rest of it.)

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### **Gary says**

Macleod ventures into Charles Stross territory with the launch of this new series, emphasizing action and satire while mixing in some hard SF and hard-left politics. The story is sort of a reverse Matrix - long dead mercenaries are digitally revived a thousand or so years in the future and placed in what they are told is a simulated reality, then are uploaded into mechanical bodies in the "real" world to fight space battles against rebellious, newly sentient robots. Along the way they are forced to question which version of reality is the genuine one, along with whether the parent company that conscripted them can be trusted, or if they are now working for the same entity they were fighting against a millennium ago.

A nice set up with engaging characters and some good twists to keep things humming along. The end result feels a little slight, though, even with the usual political and philosophical musings from this author. I plan on reading the rest of the series, though, and I trust Macleod to keep delivering the goods.

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