

Chapter 1 - Introduction: Mentalities and Anomalies

Mentalities are ways of thinking: a philosophy or a set of constructs or beliefs that guide our rational thought. Anomalies defy our beliefs: An anomaly is something different, something abnormal, or something not easily classified. They are the wormholes in the universe of life experience; as an artist I have found that the most useful mentalities make room for as many anomalies as possible.

Most of the time I'm very confused.

The Power of Confusion

I grew up in Littleton, Colorado. Where I live now is in the state of confusion—a place I'm proud to be.

When I tell people I don't know what I'm doing, they say politely, "Oh, that is very conceptual. Would you like to fly out to speak at a conference?" I have spent much of the past year traveling all over the world just to confess that I have no idea, at all, what I'm doing—really.

Macromedia flew me to Japan once to lecture about Flash. There was a convenience store next to my hotel—a good thing, I thought, because I have a bit of a sweet tooth and love candy. One night I went into the store, found the candy aisle, and purchased something that looked to me like Starburst candy. It was squishy, too, like Starburst. I unwrapped one and popped it into my mouth. It tasted like fish!

So I was a little confused. I went back down the aisle and bought another thing that looked like candy, and it too tasted like fish. I bought a bunch of other stuff, only to find out that everything tasted like fish.

You can imagine this now as a Flash animation. A little figure of me in downtown Tokyo—the camera angle is positioned right above my head, and it's pulling back into space as I'm screaming, "Where's my SUGAR? Everything is FISH!!"

In this chapter, and through the rest of this book, we're going to explore the powerful creative forces of confusion. Those things that at first seem to be weaknesses can turn out to be strengths.

My mother gave me this quote once:

"It is more rewarding to explore than to reach conclusion; more satisfying to wonder than to know; and more exciting to search than to stay put."

I've personally tried to carry this idea with me through my life.

When I was a kid, I went into my parents' kitchen and looked into a cupboard and found a box of food coloring. I read what was printed on the side of the box: It said, "Non-Toxic." So I took one of the bottles, unscrewed the cap, tilted my head back, and put a drop of food coloring into each of my eyes.

For about 20 seconds, the whole world was *red*.



In my college years I was doing oil paintings on paper, and one day I wondered what would happen if I set my paintings on fire. I was working with two different oil-based resins, and I discovered that when heat was applied, the resins would crack against each other and create interesting textures on the paper.

I started baking my paintings. I would paint on paper, using the two resins, then heat my oven to 450 degrees and slide my painting in on a cookie tray. I would let it heat up for seven or ten minutes, rotating the artwork now and then so the paper wouldn't really catch on fire but just heat up enough to make the cracks.

Next, I would take black oil paint and rub the whole painting black. Then I would take a dry cloth and wipe off the black paint. This would remove the top layer of the paint, but the black color would seep and settle into the cracks. I found that I could paint really modern images and yet make them look like paintings that were 500 years old.



Now, I'm not suggesting that you personally endanger your own life or your own home to work with Flash. (But if you try the thing with the food coloring—and I know some of you will—please be sure to email me from Praystation.com about your experience.)

The real lesson is that *not understanding is okay*. I don't know all the answers. No one does. I had to put red food coloring into my eyes to find out what would happen. I had to set my paintings on fire to observe the effect. In all of our mistakes and failures, we can discover great things.

If I ever truly understood all I do with Flash, or with my life in general, I'd probably quit—because that would mean I had lost interest in exploring all the things Flash can do if I push it. No offense to Macromedia, but I have really tried to bring Flash to its knees. Really break it. Slam it. Crashed my computer. It's only in breaking things—in the anomalies—that I find the accidents that in the end become techniques.

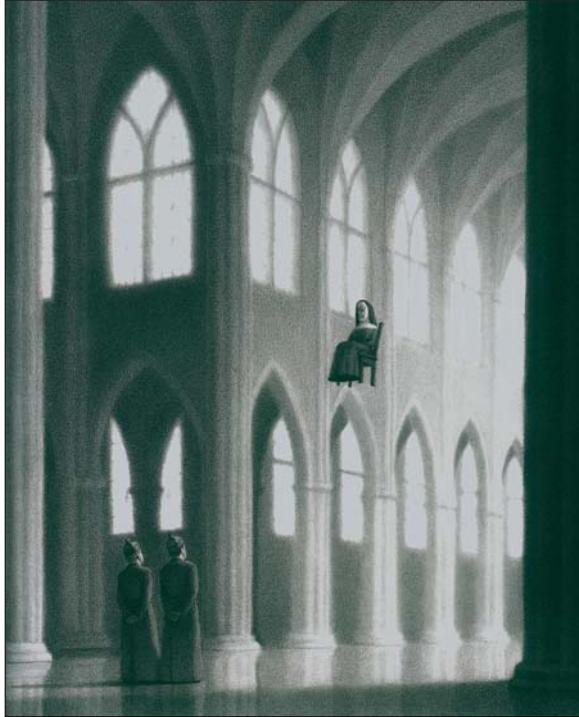
What Can Art Teach Commerce?

By reading this book I hope you will be encouraged to discover inspiration in anomalies wherever you find them. Early in my career, I wanted to be a children's book illustrator. One of the books I collected then, and still treasure now, is *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg.

The book is a bunch of wonderfully creative drawings, each with a title and a one-word sentence that contains a bare snippet of story. According to the author, the drawings were given to him by a friend, one Peter Wender, and created by a man named Harris Burdick. Wender related that Burdick had presented him with the drawings as publishing samples and said that he had written and drawn a complete story for each one. Burdick also said he would come back the next day with the completed storybooks.

Days went by. Weeks went by. Years went by, but Harris Burdick was never heard from again. So Van Allsburg and Wender decided to publish the collection as a book. One page, for example, might show a drawing of a little boy and a harp in the foreground sitting on a rock. The caption is: "*Oh, it's true, he thought. "It's really true."*" This book is given to children, who are invited to flip through, pick out a picture, and make up their own story or finish what seems to be started. Who is the boy? And what's with the harp?

As an adult, you realize that Harris Burdick never existed; Van Allsburg did the drawings himself and created a false story—a concept for a book that is all about imagination.



The Seven Chairs. The fifth chair wound up in France.
This must have resonance for anyone who ever went to Catholic school.
(Copyright 1984 by Chris Van Allsburg. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Co. All rights reserved.)

The Mysteries of Harris Burdick was an early inspiration for my web site work. These sites explore sound, design, and interactions, and they present ideas that viewers can finish. Like Van Allsburg's picture book, this web site work becomes what the viewer will make of it.

These web sites also get about 200 emails every day. Most of them, I am pleased to report, are variations on, "*What the hell IS this?*"

So, what does commerce have to learn from art?

I have a studio that sometimes produces work for commercial web sites. I have clients that come in and say: “On the web, we only have two seconds to capture someone’s attention. What can you do?”

One thing I can do is point to my stats from the server log files from *these web sites*. The average users spend 30 minutes, and when they’re done, they email me, asking to know if they’ve *missed* anything.

Some site visitors take screen shots, mail me the screen shots, and write, “Am I close?” or, “Here’s where I put it—is this the right combination to unlock the rest of the content?”

I am intentionally creating a digital black hole—a site that offers questions but doesn’t give out any answers. I have made hundreds and hundreds of people confused, and in that confusion I’ve created an interesting space and a provocative experience for anyone who logs on.

This is, of course, exactly the kind of deeply involving and richly interactive experience that site visitors and corporate clients seek from the web. At my studio, what we do is try to pull ideas like this into our work and create experiences that are a little more interesting.

Theater of the Web

I didn’t have a TV for a long while. Eventually I got one (which I still use mostly to play video games and run DVDs), but one night I turned on my television and saw what looked like a news anchorman.

I was just about to change the channel when he intoned: “Should Bob die?” And then, “Log on to our web site and vote if Bob should die.”

I froze. This was intense—so much viewer responsibility. Was Bob going to die? Would he be allowed to live?

I kept watching until the newsman came back and said: “Eighty percent of you voted to say Bob should die.” And at that moment I realized that something entirely new was happening to the group entertainment experience.

For much of human history, live theater was the most important part of society’s entertainment. This isn’t just what’s on Broadway today, but it was at Shakespeare’s Globe in the sixteenth century and Roman forums in 500 BC. Everyone dressed in their best and cruised on down to see a presentation, a story, a show. The experience was interactive: thumbs up, thumbs down, applause, boos and hisses, leaving at intermission if it turned out to be a bore. The performers would constantly make changes to keep the audience coming back.

Time has progressed, and this group experience is falling by the wayside. Most of us don’t see a live theater presentation even once a year. Movie theaters, the more “modern” form of interactive group viewing, are less important, too, now that we can watch films privately and comfortably in our living rooms, alone with our DVDs, our big flat screens, and Surround-Sound.

The story of Bob revealed that the contemporary audience was ready to go beyond the fringe of an anonymous but only passive viewing of a show. People still desire an interactive group experience. They want to realize the moment when what they do and how they feel will actually matter—or at least make an impact on what will happen next. And here comes a medium that will let people have their privacy, but also give them a voice. Log on to an interactive web site where your point of view will be tabulated; your action will affect the results; you will be heard.

Bob’s tragic adventure did have some technical flaws as an entertainment experience. To participate, you started in one medium (television) then had to turn to and log onto another medium (your computer). To get the results of your participation and to find out what happened, you had to run back to the original medium (television). But this is changing, too.

The interactive capability of the Internet is going to be the most important medium for society's next group entertainment experience. Time will tell to what extent this medium will evolve. The audience will be global, and it is eagerly waiting.

I choose Flash as a tool because it has the most possibilities for design, movement, sound, and interactivity in this new medium. It's exciting because we will get to change and evolve the medium while we work with this tool as artists, designers, and developers.

You Can Do It

A surprising number of people I've met seem to have the impression that the *Praystation* web site (www.praystation.com) is the product of a team of people. There is no team. It's just me—just one guy. It is true that on commercial projects, teams need to be assembled. But for personal, experimental work, you don't need a team. Anybody reading this book now, or anyone viewing the *Praystation* web site, can learn to do what I do.

All it really takes is passion and determination. Another designer I identify with, cartoonist Joe Shields (www.joecartoon.com), used to work in a corporate studio. At the end of the day, he and his coworkers would go home. They would perhaps watch TV or just go to sleep, and the next day would come in again. But Joe would get off work, go home, and spend four to six hours on his home computer doing the same exact thing he did during the day—but on work he did for himself. And his passion and determination did not pass unnoticed.

It's a lot of work—for all of us. I didn't just wake up one day and become an artist. When I was an art student at Pratt, there were the times I was nearly evicted, living on Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and Top Ramen noodles. I've crashed and burned but stuck with it.

The Truth About Foundations

So what's your mentality? What's your philosophy? What are you thinking about? What kind of foundation do you have to lay down a body of work?

For a long time, I believed that a foundation was something that came from the past. And in many schools, this is still how art is taught: You are presented with the works and artists of the past to be used as the base or foundation for what will some day be your own innovative work.

Now, I believe that foundation is something that we carry along with us in the moment. Our foundations are not what's been dug up from the past but are all the life experiences we are constantly and inevitably updating and adding on to.

Foundations can be stable, but they can never be static. If you build a building, you can't just construct it and let it be. Unless you perform maintenance updates—replace the roof, repaint the bricks, and so on—the building will eventually crumble due to the work of external forces over time.

The life span of art on the Internet is microscopically short compared to the life of a building. There is a web site that I visit often, one I consider a pioneering work of graphic design. But the creator has not updated his site in two years. When I log on, I already know what I will see, how it will load, and how the interactions will result. I feel sad because it is like looking at a beautiful, dead corpse. The foundation is dead because nothing has changed.

The *Praystation* web site is updated as often as once a day. Why? Because if I stop maintaining the foundations, the experience will die. Visitors will learn what to expect; nothing will be interesting anymore. Another site, *Dreamless* (www.dreamless.com), was a community site that was updated constantly by the three or four thousand people who participated in that site. If we can create a world by ourselves, it is up to us to keep that world alive.

Praystation, in particular, is time-based. It represents techniques I've laid down over the past year, though this is not so much for your convenience as it is for mine. I can look back and see what was developed over a period of time, revisit topics, and find ways to do things differently. *Praystation 2002* is evolving as something quite different, although it takes parts of the previous work and rearranges them for new experiences.

As you go through this book, you may wish to view portions of the *Praystation* site that bring to life the animations that illustrate the projects described (for such is the limitation of the printed page). Like the book, the tutorials on the web site should be considered at best only a small portion of the foundation you are adding onto each day for your own art.

When you begin building a visual experience on the screen, you lay down a foundation of parameters based entirely on your own decisions. The foundation suddenly exists in the moment, and you are free to manipulate, extend, and build upon this. Whenever you create a foundation that is unique to the project, you're also building a foundation for further exploration and the next projects. Ideally, you will also be participating in a collaborative discussion with other designers and developers. This work is never finished; the foundation is continually morphing and extending every time someone says, "Hey, but did you know it could do this?"

A Word About Standards

There are books out there about web standards. This isn't one of them.

A lot of people out there want to tell you that things should be a certain way on the web so that every user can see them. I agree with standards—but only up to a certain point. If a large part of your commercial audience reads books, then yes, you can put the information in a book to appeal to that large base of users. But on the web, we should blur the technical assumptions just that little

bit more if it means the result will be something amazing. Perhaps the target audience at first will be only a very small, very select group of viewers. But we and they will help evolve and change the medium. If we don't do it, who will?

As developers, designers, and artists, we shouldn't assume that the general public is idiotic. Instead, we should try to evolve the medium by building intuitive systems that educate the user—not design down to the level we think the users can handle.

I have written this book to help you in three ways:

- To show where I get my own ideas
- To give you analogies that will help you tackle certain design problems you may come across
- To provide you with a useful syntax and some tutorials that will help you begin building your own creative worlds with Flash



Once Upon a Forest

Maruto
CELESTIAL ARCHITECT



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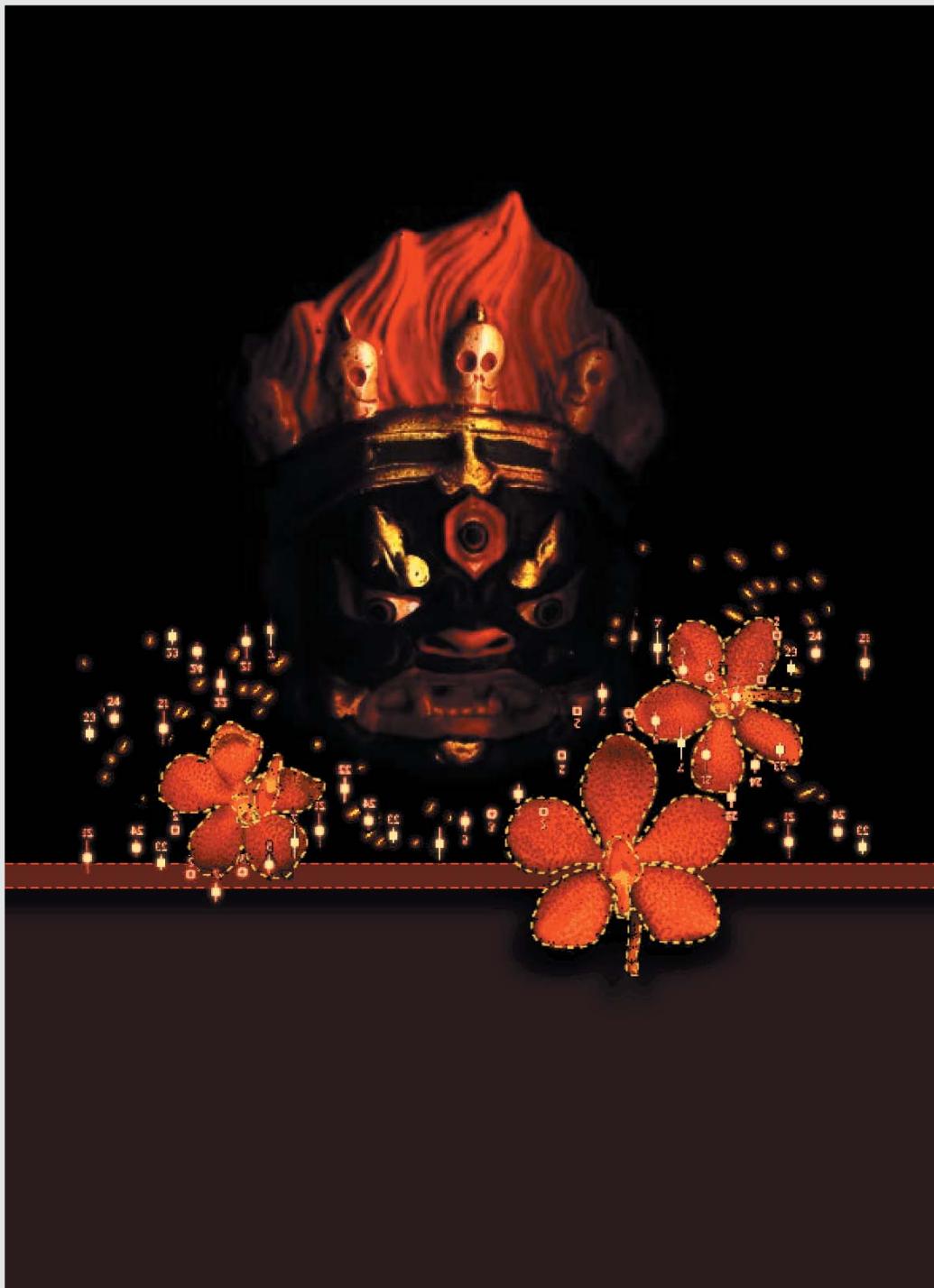
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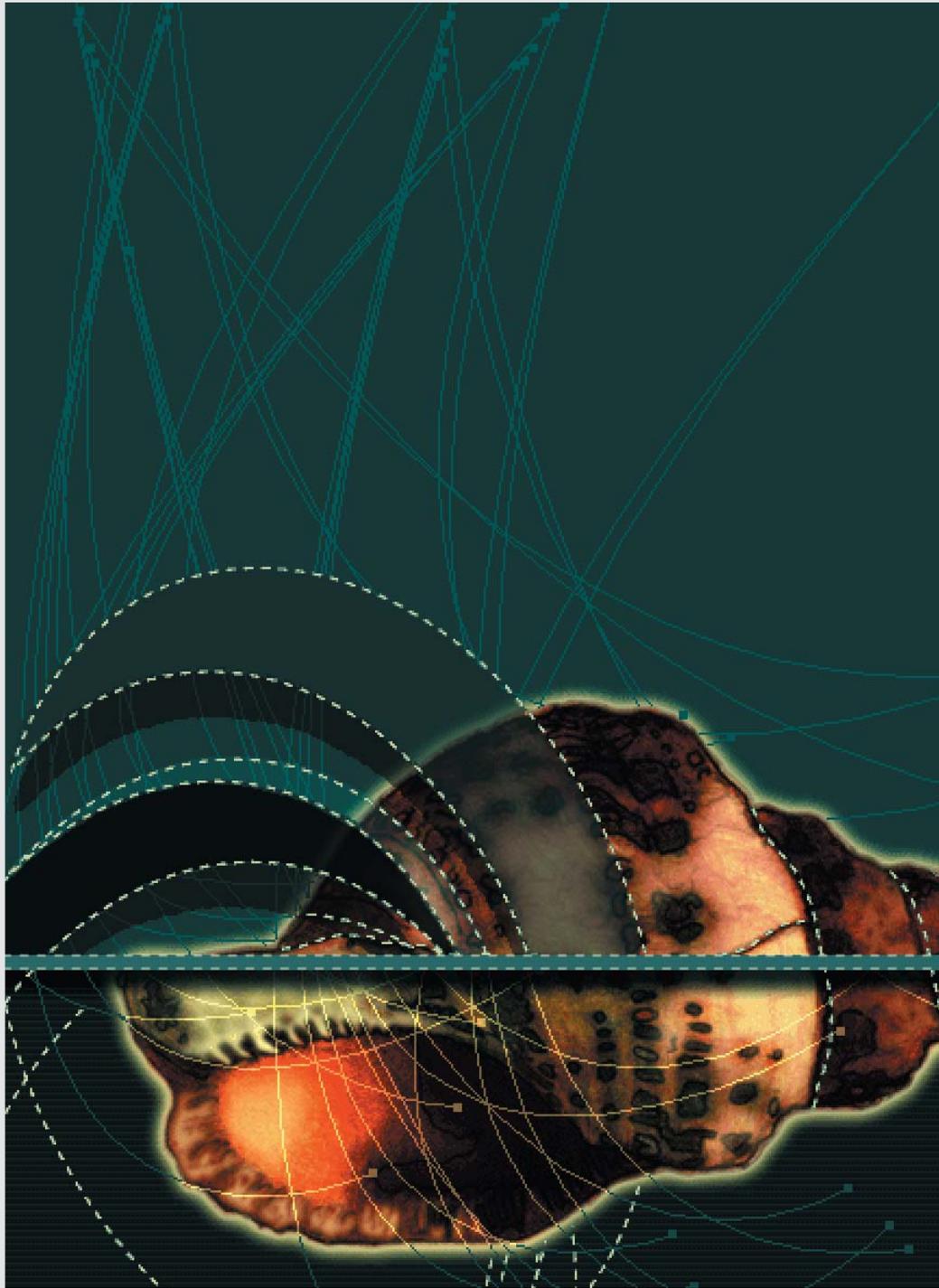
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SILICON BEARINGS

ALUMINUM ALLOY

PISTON FIBERS





+ Information



- about this project
- [calendar / events / workshops](#)

+ propaganda

- P.S.Y. (2) . cdrom

+ machine . 0300 . (2002)

- grounding the background . v.01
- grounding the background . v.02
- grounding the background . v.03

- poems to the sea . 1959 . cy.01
- poems to the sea . 1959 . cy.02

+ machine . 0200 . (2002)

- the city of ashes . SRF . STN . 1
- the city of ashes . SRF . STN . 2

+ machine . 0100 . (2002)

- opal clouds (base white)
- opal clouds (base blue)
- opal clouds (base yellow)

+ carnivore

- carnivore info & source code
- carnivore . build . (29) .
- carnivore . build . (32) .

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+ machine . 1000 . (2001) cna

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+ 001 - screensaver . prate

- 2 magnets / 60 particles
- 1 magnets / 30 particles
- information and download

+ machine . 0900 . (2001)

+ january 2002

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+ february 2002

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+ august 2002



key :

- position
- approaching
- returning
- residue

