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# “In the Midst of Experience:” Civic Education Through Narrative Creation

JEFF SPANKE

It's a Thursday. Late October. Two thousand and nineteen. The stifling heat of our tight room rises as the students sprinkle in for our weekly YAL seminar, filling the space with a nervous anticipation that thwarts the threat of inclement weather on the horizon. It's presentation night. And I can't really say that I have any solid expectations.

As with the genre of YAL itself, this upper-level literature class traditionally lends itself to a variety of students, identities, experiences, and dispositions. Though a required course for students enrolled in our English Education program, the seminar often fills the schedules of students studying Literature, Creative Writing, Telecommunications, or anyone else looking for an English elective. Roughly half of the students this semester came from the English Education program, with the remaining hailing from other disciplines in the humanities.

On the first day of the semester, I always make it a point to clarify that, despite the pedagogical inclinations of several of the students, ours is *not* a methods class; while other YAL seminars may blend the study of literature with specific methods for teaching that literature at the elementary or secondary levels, our focus will remain on the literature itself, studying the material in the same manners and through the same critical lens with which my colleagues approach their respective literary genres.

For this semester's "Presentation Night," I had decided to abandon a project that I had used for the previous several years. In terms of assessments, my YAL course, I'd like to think, has always enjoyed a variety of opportunities for students to demonstrate their mastery of the course objectives; since we posit our course in the notion of grounded, critical inquiry (Charmaz, 2014) and critical civic empathy (Mirra, 2018), students compose weekly Critical Inquiries (informal, sustained responses) to the texts; they write a Critical Literary



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Analysis which is akin to a publishable article; they engage in course discussions and individual conferences outside of class; and they conclude the semester with a broad Critical Inquiry Project that seeks to examine a particular aspect of the YAL as a genre.

Additionally, the students have always assembled a "multimodal ensemble" (Serafini, 2013) that has traditionally sought to highlight their unique experiences with literacy, schools, and adolescence. After years of receiving the same sorts of projects, though, and hearing about how the same sorts of texts informed their burgeoning childhood literacies in the same predictable ways, I decided I wanted to do something a little different for the multimodal component of the course. Tonight, we would see how we all responded to the new charge.

Of my sixteen students this semester, four had already submitted their video links, and three had emailed their PowerPoints the previous evening, all of them flirting recklessly with that pesky midnight deadline. Four more said they'd bring their own flash-drives but didn't tell me what exactly they prepared. Earlier in the week, one student

asked for an extension, which I denied, and in response, he mentioned that he would “just read something” for his presentation. Two students said their projects would be “a surprise” and that I’d have to wait until class to see them. My final two strolled in with rolled up posted boards, bags of chips, two notecards each, and smiles that seemed to ask either for forgiveness or permission.

I wasn’t too worried. By this point in the semester, this group had well-established itself as one of those career-defining classes; the kind they base movies on or spawn into sitcoms. These were good students, strong and resilient. They had never failed to do the work and do it well, and thus, with very little to go on other than the confidence I had derived from their past efforts, I arrived to class ready for presentations that I hoped would not disappoint.

They would not.

Our class always began promptly at 6:30. They had six weeks to complete their assignments, and in a few short minutes, they’d begin sharing them with the class. As of 6:25, the collegial comradery and friendly festivities typical of our Thursday night Young Adult Literature seminar had been eclipsed by a foreign air of caution, nerves, and concealed excitement. My students knew I had never done anything like this before. My project, an experiment; their presentations, an exercise in academic trailblazing. All of their apprehensions and confusions and frustrations over the last several weeks had finally coalesced in our cramped, overheated, windowless room in the English hallway of our midsized, Midwestern university. None of us had any idea what would transpire over the course of the night, but as we perspired amidst the suffocating heat of intellectual pressure and a furnace going haywire, we took our collective breath and stepped, once more, unto the breach of discovery.

Before the first volunteer, I remember wondering just how we got here...

### Back to the Drawing Board

By my fourth year as an English teacher-educator, I had grown complacent in my curriculum for ENG 414: Young Adult Literature. So much so, in fact, that as the days grew shorter and the haze of August eventually drew to a close, I found myself oftentimes succumbing to the paralyzing fatigue and sense of futility that seems to accompany those three-hour night seminars whose agendas consist of books you’ve read a thousand times and whose discussions play out as

consistently and predictably as the numbing sense of isolation that invariably consumes you when you’re the only car on the highway driving home at night.

My teaching got fussy, the conversations messy. “Like a great weight descending, suffocating and ossifying,” a “flatness” was permeating the landscape my classroom (Sousanis, 2015, p. 5). I was breaking down and getting bored with the monotony of doing just what I had always done. I found myself rambling. And scrambling for something fresh and better than what had always just worked fine. Sure, I updated the books every semester. And, of course, the roster rotated and the climate changed and our talks included new and perhaps slightly different events in our world. The course was evolving, I recognized, but the glacial pace of this much-needed change paled to the breakneck speed of our times and the need to infuse them with the refined voices and insights of my students.

What did these books *do* for them? Aside from entertainment or escapism, what purpose did they serve? What did my students want to *know* about YAL, what did they want to *say* about it, what did they have to share, and who did they want to share it with? How did my course curricularize Mirra’s (2018) notion of “critical civic empathy,” and how do these books help my students “break away from cold, hard facts...to imagine new and different possibilities for society” (Mirra, p. 21)? What did we *do* in this course besides just read fun books about teenagers, and how did my assignments align with my goal to refine the way we promote and sustain empathy and inclusion? Yeah, we talked about social justice and diversity through the lens of the fictionalized characters in our stories, but how could my students compose themselves as integral fixtures of the greater stories happening outside our classroom?

As I concluded the 2018-2019 academic year, I knew that I wanted my college English courses to reflect a sense of community, citizenship, and Dewey’s (1916) call for democratic education. I rooted this pursuit in the notion of “deliberative pedagogy” (Shaffer, Longo, Manosovich, & Thomas, 2017), as well as Longo and McMillian’s (2020) insistence that “young people are not born knowing how to be democratic citizens. And our institutions of education are failing to prepare the next generation of engaged democratic citizens” (p. 2). In their description of deliberative pedagogy, Longo and McMillian argue that, “we need to create environments that can facilitate an explicit link between the knowledge and theory students acquire in schools on the one

hand, and learning how to 'be' and 'act'...in the world as civic professionals" (p. 5).

For my YAL seminar, in particular, I wanted our course to focus less on the mere consumption of adolescent stories and more on the democratic and progressive production of insights and actions that derive from that consumption. Our class was not a creative writing class by nature, but I wanted to highlight the inherent symbiosis that exists between the reading of a thing, and the thoughts and dispositions and dialogues that result from that reading. In short, I wanted the reading of YAL—the intellectual consumption of that material—to promote the production of student-generated material. Stories begetting stories wherein the cycle never ends.

A curricular framework steeped in deliberative pedagogy, Hess & McAvoy (2015) would argue, allows teachers to "educate toward aims such as political tolerance, development of a sense of justice, commitment towards one's community, patriotism, or commitment to one's independence" (p. 13). Certainly, as a discipline, English Language Arts is nothing if not amenable to these ideas. Indeed, as Hess and McAvoy (2015) suggest, the ethical, personal, and professional considerations of political, democratic education apply to and are paramount for any teacher who ever dares ask themselves, "why do this, rather than that" (Peters, 1966, p. 90) while advocating for deliberate, "puzzling" classroom experiences that prompt current and future student-citizens to ask themselves, "how should we live together?" (p. 15).

*Why do this, rather than that....How should we all live together?* These were the questions that were not only absent from my specific YAL course, but also inquiries that should guide any course designed to education—not *train*—future educators. "In other words," Hess and McAvoy (2015) argue, "teachers should not be told the rules of good teaching, but need to be educated about good judgment" (p. 11). Indeed, these were the questions with which I wanted to now frame our study of adolescent literature. While I definitely had the will, I still needed to find the way.

As it turns out, I found it, appropriately enough, while talking about school with a bunch of teenagers during the summer.

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In July of 2019, I had the privilege of serving as the Program Administrator for the Benjamin Franklin

Transatlantic Fellowship Institute (BFTF). In an international effort to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth, the U.S. Department of State "asked that participants explore a range of topics: democratic practices, civic engagement, community service, conflict resolution, critical thinking and analysis, respect for diversity, youth leadership, and the study and production of new media, including documentaries" (Von Burg, Von Burg, & Hahn, 2019, p. 12-13).

Of all the 55 international adolescent Fellows at the 2019 Institute, I enjoyed a particularly strong connection with the representative from Finland, an ambitious young diplomat named Jon (a pseudonym). As part of a larger study on democratic citizenship education, throughout the Institute, Jon and I had frequent, lengthy discussions about all matters political, educational, intellectual, and philosophical. It was Jon's comments about literacy and education, though, that resonated most strongly with how I reconceived my Young Adult Literature course. When I asked Jon about his perceptions of the American education system, he explained:

Even though we aren't massive countries...even though we don't field ridiculously huge or well-funded armies... we are nonetheless functioning and respectable countries. And we've seen some shit. The rest of the world has been beat up and the United States never really has, and I think there's something to be said for, like, overcoming the, I don't know...the tensions of adolescence, in a metaphorical sense...

In the wake of the Fellows' departure from the Institute, in the days leading up to the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year, Jon's words still rang in my mind. *Overcoming the tensions of adolescence...* I couldn't escape Jon's subtle characterization of the United States as the teenaged relative of the world's other more mature countries. It was this phrase, this fleeting aphorism, that ignited my desire to create something fresh for my upcoming YAL seminar. I just needed to work out the kinks.

### From Words to Worlds

Inspired by the work of Sousanis (2015) and Zwicky (2015), and in keeping with Fellow Jon's framing of the United States as a metaphorical teenager, I began the Fall 2019 semester with a completely new project for my Young Adult Literature seminar. Since I ground much of my work in the complex functions and constructions of metaphors (Alsop, 2016, p.

113-128)—in particular, Zwicky’s (2015) argument that “the shape of metaphorical thought is the shape of wisdom”—I decided to purge a stale project to which I had grown painfully accustomed over the previous years and replace it with an inquiry that, frankly, could have been a total train-wreck. I called the project “YAL in the USA,” an assessment that I sought to align with my relatively new course objectives stating that “students will apply the fictional circumstances of adolescence to real-world adolescent experiences” and “students will analyze the civic/citizenship implications of YAL in terms of their real-world contexts.” The Assignment Sheet for the project contained the following introduction:

For this project, you will create a marketing “pitch” for a hypothetical Young Adult project (book, movie, TV/streaming series) that features a personified “America” as the protagonist. If we consider the United States to function as sort of the democratic teenager relative to the older, more established nations of the world, what would a fictional narrative of teenage-United States entail? What would the U.S., as a character, *look like*? Would it be a boy? A girl? Neither? Both? What issues or pressures would it face? Where would it live, what would it combat, whom would it love, and how would the story end? Would it have friends? Parents? Would it go to school? Where? To what end? This project invites you to develop a sense of critical civic consciousness and advanced, progressive citizenship through navigating the various, very real tensions of our world through a multimodal, metaphorical, aesthetic lens.

The students had six weeks to complete the project and no more than three minutes to present it to the class during our designated meeting time. Similar to an actual marketing pitch, each student’s project needed to include:

- The title for their hypothetical Young Adult project
- A tagline
- The story’s genre
- Brief character sketches and plot summary
- Market comparison of similar “texts”
- Some sort of multimodal component that augments their written documents and oral presentation (movie poster, book cover, social media elements, video promotion/trailer, etc.)

In addition to the presentation and its corresponding materials, the students also needed to compose a detailed “Artist’s Statement” that explained, in a much more critical, scholarly fashion, the specific central conflict of the story

and its corresponding real-world issue. In other words, what is the story a metaphor *for*? How does the metaphor extend throughout, and what wisdom does it seek to achieve, conjure, or illuminate? What social commentary does it offer and how do the various elements of the fictional/hypothetical narrative correspond to our lived experiences in our world?

Just as the genre of YAL tends to offer sophisticated and oftentimes scathing social critiques, how does the story imagined for this project address or respond to a particular local, national or global concern? In short, if America, as Fellow Jon postulated, really *is* a teenager, how would its unique narrative arc align with the conventions and expectations of Young Adult Literature? How does the United States, as a singular, though complex entity, function simultaneously as a citizen of the global community *and* a character in the never-ending story of our world?

At first, my students expressed concern and hesitation about the assignment. In their eyes this was indeed a staunch deviation from the more traditionally academic work they were used to doing in other college English classes. Yet despite the project’s invitation to engage with matters of citizenship, politics, and “not really Englishy stuff,” I framed the task in the idea that, “if students did not talk about these issues in school, it was unlikely they would build the political literacy needed to weigh in on them when called upon to make decisions as part of the political sphere” (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 175). Sure, given the literary nature of the course, I really had no idea what kinds of political or civic dispositions these students had, or the extent to which they were already engaging in these discourses outside of our shared experience. Nor could I anticipate with any real degree of accuracy the political or civic orientation of their projects.

But I also knew that I didn’t want to let another semester of Young Adult Literature end without at least trying to tether these fictional stories to some sense of political and civic consciousness. And so on “Presentation Night,” with very little to go on other than a few panicked emails peppered throughout the previous weeks, I arrived to class not really sure what we’d all encounter, but hoping it would be worth it.

I still think it was.

### Presentation Night

The sixteen students who spent nearly three hours presenting their “YAL in the USA” to our class not only appeared to grasp the assignment, but also to have succeeded

in soldering the conventions of contemporary Young Adult Literature to the various issues faced by their "Americanized characters." While a few issues appeared in multiple projects, the breadth of the perceived current tensions was robust and diverse. Topics included:

- Gun control/Gun violence
- Racial Injustice/Police Brutality
- Poverty
- Food insecurities
- Shaming, in all forms
- Violence against women/Rape culture
- Climate change
- Substance abuse
- Mental health/bullying
- Political corruption
- Voter apathy/suppression
- Religious/moral depravity
- Decline in public education
- LGBTQ intolerance
- Immigration

One student pitched a story about "Merka," a high school senior with special needs who gets accepted into college and, upon beginning her first year as a Creative Writing major, realizes that the nauseating adulation she had endured in her small rural community did not expire once she graduated high school. As a woman with special needs herself, this student introduced several members of our class to the notion of "inspiration porn" (Grue, 2016) and argued that the United States still very much struggles with its treatment, acceptance, and recognition of people with special needs as true, complete American citizens.

In terms of narrative structures, the projects, without exception, seamlessly mirrored the conventions of YAL while also reflecting the students' knowledge of American history and political struggles. Most stories depicted the U.S. as privileged, white, cishet, and estranged from "his" parents. In two of the more comically on-the-nose cases, "America's" parents were literally named England and France. They were divorced.

In addition to cultural characteristics, some students positioned their "America" characters geographically, defining the United States in terms of its continental borders. Some of these stories portrayed the United States as an only child, while others offered "him" siblings. These siblings—always brothers—were either depicted as docile, older (but colder), and mostly absent; or aggressive, hot-tempered,

younger, and more prone to intrusions or unwanted tagging along (pejorative personifications of Canada and Mexico, respectively). One such example featured an older "Merk" on a date with a cute Chinese girl from school while his younger brother, "Sicko" kept poking them from the backseat of the car.

Most students conceived of the U.S. as a boy, with only two portraying the teen as a girl, and one going so far as to insist that, as a character, the United States has no gender. In this particular story, the U.S. also had no memory, no past, no spirituality or moral compass, no real friends, and literally no bones or internal organs. This student's U.S. existed purely as a nebulous reflection of whatever it encountered, and spent the entirety of its narrative in a lonely search for an identity and sense of purpose it's convinced it once had but can no longer conjure.

#### Artists' Statements

Ultimately, where my students (and their projects) succeeded—and where several of them actually reported a previously dormant appreciation for matters of civic awareness and activism—was in their critical articulation of our country's current shortcomings. Since the "Artist's Statement" required extensive scholarly engagement to support the claims made by the stories, each student needed to posit their creations in some sort of tangible, applicable cultural context. This process allowed them to develop more knowledge about their real-world issues while also learning how authors and artists infuse their aesthetic creations with a sense of citizenship and civic purpose.

And because these documents served solely to justify the decisions made by the student-artists in creating their art, these Artist's Statements had the added benefit of circumnavigating the avoidance and apprehension so often associated with incorporating "controversial topics" in a classroom. (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 158-178). The Artist's Statements didn't need to argue a political point or take a specific side, in other words; rather, they served merely to explain things like plot and character and climax and conclusion, albeit, from an empirical perspective. These Artist's Statements allowed English students to use their own tools—the intellectual stuff of literary discourse and critical inquiry—to build a house that could be shared by their colleagues in other disciplines.



### Connection in Loss: Limitations

Still, while in its experimental phase, several aspects of the project proved at least somewhat successful, my reflections and student feedback confirmed my concern that the project didn't quite allow for students to develop an understanding of "how issues map onto competing ideologies about what a more just, more democratic system requires" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, p. 156). The project raised a lot of questions about citizenship and various civic structures, but in its current form, didn't really levy any solutions. The *So What* was missing, in other words. The *What Now* and *Why Care* were both strikingly absent. The project itself didn't allow for any specific calls to any specific actions. We made points but no difference. We diagnosed problems for which we offered no cure. My students did a great job naming our country's demons, so to speak, but nothing about the project's design set the stage for any sort of exorcism.

But then again, maybe it didn't need to. Maybe that's a different project. Something for another time, another class, another goal. *This* project invited students to use the genre of our study, and the tools, skills, and dispositions endowed by literature scholars, to articulate, in their own words, and on their own terms, their perceptions of various injustices in their lives. Their products were responsive but not reactionary; agentic and not complicit; compliant but not obedient. Everything that went into the creation of their fictional worlds was deliberate and indicative of intellectual and aesthetic restraint and calibration. They weren't so much following instructions as they were directing themselves; making decisions, calculating the consequences of those decisions, and exercising their generative prowess while exorcising their binding inhibitions. The project never sought to solve any specific problems or claimed to advance any particular agenda or worldview.

Rather, it served merely as a mechanism for writers and readers and teachers and citizens to stand toe to toe with intellectual passivity and demand to be heard. The demons still remain, perhaps; but naming them is always the first step. It's fitting, in a way, that this sense of incompleteness, and the hope therein, parallels several of the books we read in class. "Loss-in-connexion, connexion-in-loss" writes Zwicky (2015), "is the emotional tone of wisdom" (p. 56). Whether it's Quinn in *All American Boys*, Braden in *Conviction*, Nina in *Between Shades of Grey*, or Danny in *Picture Us in the Light*, the characters in YAL—and perhaps YAL as a genre—remind

us that sometimes identifying the problem through the cultivation of critical inquiry ultimately serves a story (and a community) better than quick fixes and tight bows. "This requires a certain sort of strength," Zwicky (2015) notes. "To see what is there, rather than what hopes or expects" (p. 95).

In the anonymous course evaluations I received at the end of the semester, several students commented specifically about the YAL in the USA project, noting their appreciation for "the attempt" and offered kind wishes for the project moving forward. They seemed to think something was missing, too. And of course they're right. In reality, I had been planning to modify my YAL course for quite some time. My initial inclination to develop new projects that focus on more on the real-world citizenship implications of YAL stemmed, at least in part, from Schwab's (1978) philosophy that, "a curriculum is not complete which does not move the Eros, as well as the mind of the young, from where it is to where it might better be" (p. 109).

As I further reflected upon Peter's (1966) call for educated citizens to consider a particular problem through a lens of how the problem fits within its historical moment, and especially as *TIME Magazine* selected 16 year-old Greta Thunberg as its 2019 Person of the Year, I knew, as an English teacher-educator, a literature professor, and a citizen in my own right, that I can never stop asking myself, in all my decisions for and with my students, *why do this, rather than that?* And especially in our current moment, when rising nationalist sentiments and their corresponding ambiguous effect on democratic development threaten to undermine progressive citizenship education, the need to maintain a strong pulse on issues of inequity, justice, and oppression has perhaps never been more critical.

To that end, I've often wondered in the days since our semester closed why I chose creative writing—in itself, an act of generation—to "teach" civics instead of, well, just *teaching civics*. What civic insights and democratic perspectives do students gain through narrative construction that they wouldn't otherwise develop from simply learning about these things from teachers who, frankly, are more qualified to teach them? Or from just being alive and living in a world? How can stories weaken radical nationalist movements or enhance the efficacies of democratic education? What is the connection between, say, the aesthetic, literary impulses governing my YAL in the USA project and the political undercurrents that traditionally flow more under the purview of Social Studies departments?

After all, I'm not a Social Studies teacher. And while, yes, I very much ground my ELA disposition and pedagogies in issues of diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice, I confess that I also lack the institutional training to position that work firmly in civics and citizenship education. Advanced, democratic citizenship and "critical civic empathy" (Mirra, 2018) certainly involve and demand a sophisticated sensitivity to issues of equity and justice; and I think we're making strides in those areas....But they also involve so much more than political activism and community presence and participation. Every social inequity and justice orientation is a citizenship issue; but not every citizenship issue necessarily involves social justice. In our Covid-19 Era, for example, wearing masks in public and maintaining social distance have now become highly contested issues of citizenship; and while certainly these are tied, in some fashion, to issues of social justice, in other ways they remain detached.

And yes, again, while I maintain that ELA classrooms lend themselves uniquely well to healthy cultivations of diversity, inclusion, and equity, I'm still not quite sure how (and why and if) I can tether those experiences to greater conversations about developing a civic identity and democratic sense of citizenship.

So why bother having my students write stories at all, if my goal is to have them critically interrogate social constructs that inherently exceed either my purview or the scope of our ELA curriculum? What's the point? Why do that rather than this? What do they learn in that?

Maybe more than we think.

### The Democratic Potential of Stories: Moving Forward

"Language," writes Bakhtin (1981), "is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language" (p. 288).

Along these lines, in speaking of the inherent incompleteness and educative potential of stories, Clandinin (2013) notes, "we begin in the midst, and end in the midst, of experience" (p. 43). What Maxine Greene (1995) calls "a startling defamiliarization of the ordinary" (p. 4), Miller (2005) posits that our stories have the capacity to illuminate, at least insofar as their potential to disrupt the notion of one true, stable, coherent self. Polkinghorne (1988) argues that

the awareness of the role of narrative "can reflect [the human sciences] to the realm of meaning and provide a focus for future investigation" (p. 184; Barone, 2000). Maybe, through accepting student stories—their narratives, either fictional or otherwise—as imbued with the "possibility of coexistence between aesthetics and utility," we might discover a research methodology that is both "instructive and inspirational" (Barone, 2001, p. 32; Tedlock, 2011).

As an English professor, I do teach the study of social constructs, functions, and structures. Stories, perhaps chief among them. I recall Jon's thoughts about the connection between literacy and citizenship. In creating awareness and a linguistic register to articulate various social, political, or civil injustices—or, perhaps to examine those injustices through the lens of the civic features that create and perpetuate them—our YAL project may have sparked a sense of critical civic literacy in our class. For, just as our students are *composed* by the various institutional, political, familial, spiritual, and other discursive influences in their lives, they also compose themselves as members of their worlds. Composition, in this sense, functions as both a cause and an effect of student citizenship.

And that composition-as-effect—that *production*—is a direct result of a myriad of complex and oftentimes contradictory consumptions. In order to produce anything, we must consume something. This holds true in all senses of the word. So, in order to achieve the type of production we desire from our students—so that they may compose themselves as civically minded, democratic, inclusive citizens—we must offer them more to consume than perhaps we're currently making available. In addition to the justice orientations that resist the neoliberal impulses of public education, we must also educate students to be critical and participatory consumers of all aspects of citizenship. And maybe by inviting students to share with us their frustrations, anxieties, and fears about their own worlds through stories, we may begin to understand how the institutional fixtures of those worlds contribute to the manifestation of the civic structures that lead to those frustrations. Maybe by consuming our own stories, we can produce the changes we seek as now-empowered citizens. Just as good characters make for good stories, maybe our stories can help shape our characters.

Functions and identities intertwining. Stories and characters that simultaneously are and do good.

Maybe that's the So What after all.



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