The Power of Fostering Pleasure in Reading

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The first sentence in the section on aims on the first page of the National Curriculum in England: English Programmes of Study (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-english-programmes-of-study) reads as follows:

> The overarching aim for English in the national curriculum is to promote high standards of language and literacy by equipping pupils with a strong command of the spoken and written language, and to develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment.

In contrast, the first sentence of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, the closest thing the United States has to a national curriculum, explains that the purpose of the standards is "to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school." No mention of pleasure or enjoyment here or anywhere else in the document.

Murphy (2012) descries such a neglect of pleasure:

> If pleasure is recognized as not merely important to life, but central to it, then one would imagine that educational systems all around the world, in turn, would have taken this premise to heart in the design of educational spaces and in pedagogical engagements. Certainly, as histories of play and culture reveal, pleasure was central to the educational thinking of the celebrated thinkers of the past. . . Yet, across the past 140 years or so of organized education in Canada and the United

> States, pleasure and literacy education have been only occasional partners." (p. 318)

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that neglecting the power of pleasure significantly undermines our efforts to educate our students. More specifically, we will begin with a discussion of what pleasure in reading is, explain why it is important, theorize why it has been so neglected in the United States, and then consider how it might be achieved.

What Pleasure in Reading Is

Reading for pleasure, according to Clark and Rumbold (2006), "refers to reading that we to do of our own free will anticipating the satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that having begun at someone else's request we continue because we are interested in it" (p. 5). Nell's (1988) *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* is an examination of that satisfaction that avid readers derive from their reading. On the basis of a variety of studies, Nell builds a model of what he calls *ludic reading*, that is, the state of deep engagement avid readers experience while reading books for pleasure. He describes ludic reading this way:

> These are the paired wonders of reading: the world creating power of books, and the reader's effortless absorption that allows the book's fragile world, all air and thought, to maintain itself for a while, a bamboo and paper house among earthquakes; within it readers acquire peace, become more powerful, feel braver and wiser in ways of the world. (p. 1)

He goes on to articulate the antecedent conditions needed for that engagement:

reading ability, a positive attitude to reading, and the appropriate book, both in terms of its match to the reader's ability and its match to the reader's interest. He argues that if those antecedents are in place, a reader will choose to begin reading. According to Nell, once a reader has begun reading, he or she pays a kind of effortless attention to the text (the continuing impulse to read), employing both automated reading skills and consciously controlled comprehension processes. The result, says Nell, are the physiological and cognitive changes that he describes in the quote above.

Both Clark and Rumbold (2006) and Nell (1988) seemingly assume that reading pleasure comes in only one variety. Others, however, delineate different kinds of pleasure, perhaps none more famously than Barthes (1975) in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes makes a distinction between pleasure and bliss (*jouissance*). The text of pleasure, he says, "contents, fills, grants euphoria: the text that comes from a culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading" (p. 14). The text of bliss, in contrast, provides a dramatically different experience. It "imposes a state of loss . . ., unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (p. 14).

As Sumara (1996) points out, by translating *jouissance* as bliss, the English translation of Barthes's work loses the explicit sexual connotations of the French, the implication of "playful eroticism" (p. 62) inherent in the word. Sumara explores the experience of *jouissance* he and his fellow reading group members experienced as they read *The English Patient*, illustrating how it requires "learning to be uncomfortable; learning to live with ambiguity, learning to tolerate the resistance of the literary fiction itself" (p. 70).

In our own work (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014), we have taken a different tack. Barthes's distinction between the text of pleasure and the text of bliss sets up a hierarchy that we have come to question. According to Barthes, conventional or familiar texts yield a kind of pleasure he doesn't much admire, a pleasure that's safe and comfortable. Experimental or unfamiliar texts, on the other hand, produce a more admirable kind of pleasure, a pleasure that is challenging and unsettling. Our research analyzing the nature and variety of pleasure experienced by avid readers of texts marginalized by schools--romances, vampire stories, horror, dystopian fiction, and fantasy--suggests that these familiar texts can produce profound and surprising pleasure.

Drawing on the work of John Dewey (1913), we analyzed the responses of a variety of adolescents and young adults. Those interviews focused both on reading in general and reading a favorite genre. What we found is that our participants experienced four distinct kinds of pleasure that align with Dewey delineation of different forms of educative interest; the pleasure of play, the pleasure of work, the pleasure of figuring things out, and the social pleasure of both affiliating with other readers and of using one's reading to name oneself. We will illustrate our findings by drawing on our interviews with three committed readers of vampire stories, a kind of text often dismissed by teachers and parents alike.

We called the immersive and absorbing experience of entering a story-world the pleasure of play, following Dewey (1913) who writes that play "puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond." Here's one of our informants describing that she derived that pleasure from her reading of vampire stories, focusing specifically on the Twilight series:

> What draws people to Twilight is that it is relatable. Young characters. Teenagers. Relationships. Love. The dangers of love. You need it [love] so bad but it is dangerous and can slay you. That's the interest of teenage girls. Feelings—Bella's feelings can be related to. So intense. Most of what I read in school I cannot relate to. Like *1984*. There was NOTHING I could relate to. I wasn't interested in entering into the story. But I am so interested in entering into Twilight because it is about me right now. I can relate to it.

Because Twilight was "relatable" to her, she could experience the intense visceral pleasure of entering the story.

Whereas play puts itself forth with no thought of anything beyond, in work, according to Dewey, "the thought of the finished product and of the use to which it is to be put may come to [the child's] mind, but so as to enhance [the child's] immediate activity of construction" (p. 79). Perhaps our most striking finding is that our participants took pleasure from using their reading to help them construct the kind of people they wanted to become, a kind of pleasure we termed inner work, following Jungian scholars such as Robert Johnson who explain that inner work "is the effort by which we gain an awareness of the deeper layers of consciousness within us and move to an integration of the total self" (p. 13). Here's another informant manifesting her awareness of how she uses her reading of vampire stories to do such inner work:

> Being a teenager is partly about struggling to be more adult and have more adult relationships . . . . I think a real struggle of more adult relationships is making sure they are life-giving in both directions. I mean, we all have these needs so you have to be careful about not being a vampire and sucking

> someone else dry, or hurting and discarding them. But you have to be really careful not to let someone do it to you, too, like dominate you, just because you like being liked or feeling attractive or whatever. I think it's a real danger.

A third kind of pleasure is the intellectual pleasure of figuring things out. Dewey (1913) writes: "When any one becomes interested in a problem as a problem, and in inquiry and learning for the sake of solving the problem, interest is distinctively intellectual" (p. 83- 84). A third informant explained how she derived that pleasure from reading vampire stories:

> Most of the main vampire characters become good at least to some degree. Lothaire [the protagonist of the vampire novel *Lothaire*] starts as evil and murderous and the plot goes for three-quarters and then he becomes . . . well, not good, but a grayish area—ending the book neutral. . . So it's not like humans being good and vampires being bad. There is always struggle between good and evil vampires and good and evil within a vampire. Authors give them different species names. Put them in different armies. Sometimes they right out say these are good, these are bad, sometimes they make you figure it out and in those books the goodness and evilness are more complicated and that is more interesting and fun.

The final kind of pleasure we identified was social pleasure. As Dewey (1913) points out, "social interest . . . is a strong special interest" (p. 84). We found that social pleasure has two dimensions: connecting with others and differentiating oneself from others. Our first informant explains both. She notes that while reading vampire stories

> You just get sucked into it—you focus just on the experience. You come to

> like the characters and being with them. . . . It's not like I'd want to hang out with the characters in real life but I like being with them as a reader. And I like being with other readers being with them [the characters].

She connects with the characters and with her fellow readers who are also experiencing that connection. But she also takes pleasure in using her reading to stake her identity and differentiate herself from others:

> So many male people say "Twilight is just so dumb." [They] can't believe you like "that crap." But we can resist them and say, "Hey we love it." We are not afraid to like it because of people who don't like it. Most of them have never read the books anyway; they just think they know what they are about. But we know and we like going back at them.

Why Pleasure Is Important

Whatever conception of pleasure one adopts, we would argue that it is quite obvious that it can play a powerfully motivating force in reading. Moreover, that motivation can have profound effects. We are especially compelled by "Social Inequalities in Cognitive Scores at Age 16: The Role of Reading" (Sullivan & Brown, 2013), a sophisticated analysis that draws on data collected in the 1970 British Cohort Study which is following the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland, and Wales in a single week of 1970. As a result of their analysis, Sullivan and Brown offer what we see as a startlingly important conclusion:

> Our findings . . . [suggest] that children's leisure reading is important for educational attainment and social mobility . . . and suggest that the mechanism for this is increased cognitive development. Once we controlled

> for the child's test scores at age five and ten, the influence of the child's own reading remained highly significant, suggesting that the positive link between leisure reading and cognitive outcomes is not purely due to more able children being more likely to read a lot, but that reading is actually linked to increased cognitive progress over time. From a policy perspective, this strongly supports the need to support and encourage children's reading in their leisure time. (p. 37)

The increased cognitive processes is what accounts for the surprising finding that leisure reading was also correlated with increased math performance! Of course, people will not engage in leisure reading unless they take pleasure from it.

Perhaps we should not have been so surprised by Sullivan and Brown's finding. In his blog (http://skrashen.blogspot.com/2013/09/new-evidence-for-power-of-reading.html) Stephen Krashen points out that Sullivan and Brown's work is consistent with his own work, for example Krashen, Lee, and McQuillen's (2012) study that suggests that that "providing more access to books can mitigate the effect of poverty on reading achievement" (p. 30). However, as they point out, access alone is not enough. Children have to take advantage of that access, something, we would argue, that depends on their deriving pleasure from so doing. In their analysis of PISA results Kirsch and his colleagues (2002) report a similar result:

> Levels of interest in and attitudes toward reading, the amount of time students spend on reading in their free time and the diversity of materials they read are closely associated with performance in reading literacy. Furthermore, while the degree of engagement in reading varies considerably from country to county, 15-

> year-olds whose parents have the lowest occupational status but who are highly engaged in reading obtain higher average reading scores in PISA than students whose parents have high or medium occupational status but who report to be poorly engaged in reading. This suggests that finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change. (p. 3)

Think of it: Engaging students in reading appears to be one of the most formidable tools educators have to contribute to a more equitable society. Pretty powerful stuff. Once again we would argue that that engagement depends on the experience of pleasure.

Why Is Pleasure So Neglected?

If pleasure is so important, why is it so neglected? Cremin and her colleagues (2014) argue that "few countries appear to acknowledge the potential potency of enhancing children's independent reading, their pleasure in reading and engagement as readers" (p. 18) and they point their fingers at a foregrounding of the "narrow assessment" of reading skills. Undoubtedly, that narrow assessment has had an impact, but it seems quite clear that other arguments against pleasure have long existed.

Dewey (1913) begins his analysis of educative interest by analyzing the arguments that would be brought in what he called the "educational lawsuit" (p. 1) of interest versus effort. The plaintiff, he explained over a century ago, would offer an argument something like this:

> Life is not a merely pleasant affair, or a continual satisfaction of personal interests. There must be such continual exercise of effort in the performance of tasks as to form the habit of dealing with the real labors of life. Anything else eats

> out the fiber of character and leaves a wishy-washy, colorless being; a state of moral dependence, with continual demand for amusement and distraction. (p. 4)

The language may be a bit old-fashioned, but we have heard modern versions of this argument in the schools with which we work.

Radway (1986) explores another character-related argument against pleasure. She notes that mass-produced popular culture texts, the kinds of texts in which most readers take pleasure are seen as "capable of degrading, indeed, of corrupting those who enjoy it" (p. 7). As Nell (1988) points out, the cultural bias against popular cultural texts is so great that the participants in his studies on average rated over 40% of the reading they did as trash, with a doctoral student in English literature rating over 90% of his reading as such. The bias against what's popular is reflected in the books that are available to students in their schools. Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999), for example, concluded that "by an overwhelming margin, the students in our study preferred materials that have been traditionally scorned by literary critics and many educators" (p. 23). As a consequence, "there is an ever increasing gap between student preferences and materials that schools provide and recommend" (p. 23). This gap can only undermine the inclination to read and in so doing reduce the potential for students to experience the transformational benefits reading can bring.

A focus on reading pleasure as a major aim of instruction runs afoul of preparation for high-stakes tests and on the cultural bias both against interest as an appropriate motivator and against highly popular texts that many readers find pleasurable, biases that exist both within and outside schools. Yet the power and importance of pleasure is clear enough for schools and teachers to strive to resist those biases.

How to Cultivate Pleasure

Although, as Clark and Rumbold (2006) state, the investigation of "reading for pleasure has not been a research priority" (p. 9), a number of studies have addressed it in some fashion or another. The findings from these studies paint a consistent pattern. We'll discuss a handful of them that we have found evocative and then do a cross-study analysis to elucidate that pattern.

Cremin and her colleagues (2014) undertook perhaps the most extensive and certainly the most targeted study of how to foster a reading for pleasure pedagogy. Their study included teachers of beginning readers to teachers of students as old as 11, so it explores the effects of pleasure reading on both emergent and developing readers. The study had two phases. The first was a survey of 1,100 teachers on their reading and teaching practices. The second was extensive work in 27 schools to support the development of a reading for pleasure pedagogy that ultimately centered on four core practices:

- reading aloud to the class for pleasure rather than for instrumental literacy teaching purposes;
- creating diverse, supportive and social reading environments;
- talking about books and making recommendations to individuals and the whole class;
- creating frequent opportunities for children to read independently for pleasure and giving them choices about what to read. (p. 90)

The linchpin in their efforts was working with teachers to reflect on their own reading and to develop a richer knowledge both of materials that are available and of children's everyday reading practices. They conclude with this recommendation:

> Reading for pleasure and reader engagement urgently require a higher profile to foster readers who not only can, but who choose to read and who grow as readers, as learners, and as young people as a result. This is not an optional extra but a basic requirement and one which deserves increased professional attention. (p. 159)

Ivey and Johnston (2013) studied the impact of a program designed to take up Cremin et. al.'s challenge to foster pleasure and reader engagement. Their study is based on the premise that middle schools students who are given the opportunity to select personally meaningful reading will become engaged readers. They conducted their study in five middle grade classrooms with teachers who had committed to giving students control both of the materials they selected to read from the 150-200 titles available in each classroom library and of how they would respond to that reading. The teachers devoted class time to independent reading, teacher read-alouds and student responses to their reading.

The primary data for the study were 71 end-of-year interviews. They found that students read for extended periods of time both in and out of school and outside of sanctioned times, for example, after a teacher had moved on in activities or after parents had told a student to go to bed. According to Ivey and Johnston (2013), students' engagement extended beyond the time they spent reading, for students reported deep involvement in their reading manifested in their talking about books in English class, in

other classes, in the lunch rooms, at home with family members, with friends from other schools. Those interactions led both to the deepening of existing friendships and the development of new ones perhaps because students reported what Ivey and Johnston term, an expanded social imagination that is, "the ability to imagine what is going on in others' minds and to imagine the logic of social interaction" (p. 262). In addition, students began to relate to teachers on a reader-to-reader basis rather than on a teacher-student basis. One teacher explained it this way:

> They are so excited about what they're reading, and they love what they're reading. They sit and tell you everything. They don't care whether you know the book or not. They don't love the affirmation. They just want the avenue to talk. (p. 261)

Students also reported a host of academic benefits from increased reading and writing abilities to an increased knowledge of the world. Significant increases in performance on the state's standardized reading assessments suggests that the students were not overstating the case. In short, Ivey and Johnston (2013) documented significant shifts in how students saw themselves as readers and an increased understanding that through the exercise of their agency they could shape their futures beyond their identity as a reader.

Strommen and Mates (2004) also take up the issue of reading identity. They administered a 10-page survey to a total of 151 6th and 9th grade students to determine whether they could categorize them as Readers or Not-readers, that is, students who can read but chose not to and then did follow-up interviews with an equal number of Readers and Not-readers. The Readers talked about reading in terms of the pleasure they took

from it. The Not-readers also saw reading as important, but they talked about it in terms of purpose rather than pleasure. That is, they saw reading as a means to some functional end, for example, improving their vocabulary or filling out a job application.

Their research questions focused on the factors that supported the development of Readers. Not surprisingly Readers had regular interaction about books with members of their social circle who read for pleasure. Those interactions demonstrated the pleasure people can take from reading, helped the Readers choose their future reading, and connected the Readers to the culture of book lovers.

McKool (2007) also investigated the difference between avid readers and those who choose not to read outside school through the use of a survey instrument and follow-up interviews. Like Strommen and Mates (2004), McKool found that "avid readers. . . were more likely to see adults or siblings reading novels and other materials more associated with pleasure" (p. 122). She also found that students reported few opportunities in school for informal discussions about what they were reading. However, avid readers did talk positively about uninterrupted reading time when they were given choice about what to read. Unfortunately, the reluctant readers reported that they were seldom given real choices because their teachers prohibited them from reading from their favorite materials, for example, comic books or magazines.

Gabriel, Allington, and Billen (2012) take up the issue students' preferred reading materials in a fascinating way. One hundred and ninety-seven middle schoolers were given surveys about their leisure reading habits. Then about half were randomly selected to select two free magazine subscriptions from a list of 31. During and after that time,

additional surveys and interviews were conducted about how, when and why they read the magazines they chose.

Gabriel and her colleagues (2012) found that that students tended to read their magazines on the very day that they arrived. They argue that this behavior suggests that "the novelty factor is a consistent reason to initiate leisure reading" (p. 187). From this finding they make two suggestions about how teachers work with more conventional materials: unveil new books in a classroom in installments and simulate the thrill of receiving a mailing by periodically "delivering" a book to a particular student and making it clear that it was chosen just for them.

As we found in our study of boys' reading (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) the students in Gabriel and her colleagues' (2012) study read to deepen existing areas of expertise rather than to develop new ones and they took pleasure in exporting what they read into their conversations. They argue that this finding suggests the importance of providing opportunity for informal talk about what students are reading, including their out-of-school reading.

Although magazines suffer from the same negative bias as do other popular cultural materials in the eyes of many teachers and parents, Gabriel and her colleagues (2012) found that students were applying just the kind of strategies teachers seek to develop in their work in school when they were reading outside school. They argue that this suggests that magazines can be a powerful instructional resource that contributes to the goal of cultivating capable and engaged readers.

Pitcher and her colleagues (2007) are more sanguine about the possibility of schools positively affecting students' attitude toward read. The eleven authors worked

together to revise the Motivation to Read Profile which is used with elementary age students to create the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile and then administered it to students in eight sites in the US and Trinidad. When they asked "Have any of your teachers done something with reading that you really enjoyed?" students responded by citing reading aloud, literature circles, sustained silent reading time, and being given the opportunity to choose their own books. The interviews also made it clear that teachers' enthusiasm can have a tremendous positive impact on the way students feel about their reading. Teachers who shared their knowledge of and enthusiasm for reading positively affected students' attitudes. The authors make it clear that that knowledge ought to include an understanding of the multiple literacies in which students are involved outside class so that they can include reading material of varied formats in the classroom.

Lapp and Fisher (2009) take the impact of school a step further in their case analysis of their own 11th grade class. They too discuss the power of choice, but the choice they provided their students was embedded in a more structured framework. More specifically, their inquiry-based curriculum was built around essential questions such as "What's your life worth and to whom?" and "What are the consequences of your decisions?" The instruction they provided was designed to ensure student engagement and involvement through instructional tasks such as whole-class jigsaws, reciprocal teaching, book clubs, online chats, independent reading, poetry raps, and plays. They used a variety of different kinds of texts to engage students in the questions, from novels to newspapers, and had a weekly book club. They also provided time for independent reading of books chosen from a list constructed for each unit. Students compared what

they were reading in the novels with the facts being presented in the nonfiction and the news articles being read as a whole class.

Lapp and Fisher (2009) report that their students took ownership of the topic and were actively engaged in the work of the class, even to the point of their bringing in new texts to contribute to the inquiry. Lapp and Fisher conclude that the students "enthusiastic participation cemented for us the fact that adolescents, just like adults, will read if the book is a good read, if the book is accessible, and if they can have some ownership in the selection" (p. 559).

Lapp and Fisher's (2009) findings about their 11th graders are consonant with those that emerged from Guthrie and his colleagues' (2005) investigation of their Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) with much younger children. They argue that situational interest, that is, the interest that one derives from a particular reading experience "may be re-experienced for another book in a series, or an alternative text on a slightly different topic. If the situational experience is accompanied by delight, and learning, the opportunity for developing long-term motivation may occur" (p. 93).

A centerpiece of the CORI model is that students were free to choose the reading that they did that related to the concept under investigation from a wide array of texts of different genres. In addition students were able to collaborate with classmates, to interact with challenging texts, and to engage in hands-on activities connected to literacy.

Putting It All Together

Taken together, these studies paint a rather uniform picture of what teachers and schools can do to foster pleasure in reading. The first principle is to provide time for reading, both independent reading by students and read-alouds by teachers. As we tell the

preservice and inservice teachers with who we work, time is a zero-sum game. That is, every minute one spends doing something is a minute one cannot spend doing something else. The teachers in the studies we cite here demonstrated their commitment to a reading for pleasure pedagogy by devoting time to it. Frequent opportunities to read was a centerpiece of each classroom, and as Pitcher and her colleagues (2011) discovered, students appreciated that time.

Second, all of the studies talked about the importance of choice, although there were some differences among the choices provided. Cremin et al. (2014), Ivey and Johnston (2013), and Pitcher and her colleagues (2011) talked about allowing students a wide choice of books. Lapp and Fisher (2009) and Guthrie and his colleagues talk about choice, but in their cases, the choice is somewhat more restricted in that students' selections need to be relevant to the inquiry the class is pursuing. McKool (2007) and Gabriel and her colleagues (2012) push the envelope a bit further by suggesting the importance of giving students real choices of the materials they most want to read including magazines, comic books, and the like. Though the studies differed somewhat in the nature of the choice they suggest providing, they were united in proclaiming the critical importance of providing more choice of reading materials than students typically get in school.

A third component of a reading for pleasure pedagogy discussed here is the opportunity for informal conversation about their reading. Reading is so often thought of as a solitary act. That's quite clearly not the case in the studies we have presented here. Cremin and her colleagues (2014) explain the importance of spontaneous talk about books. Ivey and Johnston (2013) document that the students in their study talked about

books in English class, in other classes, in the lunch rooms, at home with family members, with friends from other schools. Interestingly, students shared instances of when they talked about their books with kids to whom they would otherwise not have spoken. The importance of talk is so great that Ivey (2014) notes in an article on the implications of her research that teachers should "expect that students will want to talk, allow it to happen even during 'silent' reading, and arrange for it to happen regularly with the whole class, prioritizing what students bring to the conversation from their own reading" (p. 169).

Finally, all of the studies here document the importance of enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers who are readers themselves who model their reading and share their passion for it. These knowledgeable and enthusiastic teachers became conversational partners, book recommenders, and the recipients of students' recommendations. They opened up their classes to a wide array of texts that their students enjoyed. They created a culture of book-loving in their classrooms.

Of course, it's important that schools help prepare students to be career and college ready. But we worry that this vision of the future results in too narrowly understanding what's important for students. This narrow understanding undermines important goals like promoting lifelong reading while at the same time undermining our capacity to meet goals such as those expressed in the Common Core State Standards. These goals are profound cognitive achievements that cannot be achieved without engagement and practice over time. This engagement and practice will not occur without the motivational power of pleasure.

Studies from around the globe teach us that students' inclination to engage in reading for pleasure outside school is a powerful predictor of their life chances. Other studies document the importance of reading for pleasure in the immediate situation. Understanding what reading pleasure is, resisting the forces that have turned schools away from it, and taking affirmative steps to cultivate it will help students reap the myriad benefits of reading both in the here and now and throughout their lives.

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