

Animated Voices:
working for an external client in the first year of study

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Abstract

This paper represents a reflection by several first-year Media Arts students on their collaboration with Falmouth University iWrite project. The initial work was completed as part of a first year module 'Researching Creative Industries', where students developed their ideas and pitched them to the client. The best storyboards and animatics were selected to be funded for further development, using a small grant from the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE). At the time of writing, this was still work in progress, although by the time this issue is published, we expect it to be available to view on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQ5IVvxowik>. The current article reflects on the early stages of the process, when the would-be winners were completing their initial storyboards for the client pitch, and as such offers some insight into new students' creative decision-making.

Introduction

The collaborative project between Falmouth iWrite and Sheffield Hallam University educational developers aimed to incorporate genuine student voices into advice and support for academic writing, in line with Fielding's notion of students as collaborative partners in their own learning, and agents for cultural and institutional change (Fielding 2001 & 2004). Falmouth students were previously recorded discussing their hopes and anxieties in relation to academic writing, and describing their personal approaches to the writing process. Our task was to develop ideas for animations that would accompany the audio recordings and support the key messages. Based on the brief provided by the client, an Educational Developer participating in the project, we developed storyboards and rough animatics and pitched them to the client. At the end of the module, the client would select the best proposals for further development as a small employability opportunity.

During our first session we were given one week to prepare sketches which would allow the client to see the creative possibilities and distribute the topics. The second meeting showed that students' approaches differ significantly and that even a mundane 30 seconds speech about writing could be interpreted in various ways. Some interpretations deviated too far from the client's ideas, or deemed 'too creative' at the expense of the key meaning. During the first meeting the client encouraged us to be as creative as possible, but the second meeting placed a clear limitation on our freedom in delivering the idea.

In the sections that follow, we shall take turns to present some of the challenges encountered in the course of our projects, and explain the experimentation and the creative decision-making underpinning the work. The introduction and conclusion were compiled from our individual module reports, as they described the same context and similar conclusions. The project sections are written by individual authors, each describing aspects of their own project. Unless otherwise stated, all illustrations are drawn from the specific project under discussion, and are by the same author whose project is discussed in that particular section. The current version of the work can be viewed on YouTube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQ5IVvxowik>

Dan Hodgson:

Of the eight recordings available, I opted for audio number three. This track features a student describing her prolific use of brightly coloured Post-it-Notes as a method of preparing for tasks such as essays. Being a visual learner myself, I could empathise with the idea of using visual cues such as Post-it-Notes as an aid to memory and getting ideas onto paper, as such I found this particular track the easiest to visualise.

I began producing my initial storyboard by working directly into Flash CS6 using a graphics tablet. While this method was fairly restrictive in terms of the program's limited drawing and image editing capacity, it allowed me to stream the audio in synchrony with what I was drawing - providing an immediate insight as to the timing of each frame and whether or not imagery was coherent with the audio. Figure 1 shows a fragment from my initial storyboard. These initial sketches aimed to convey key features (such as basic scene blocking and colour) to enable the client make an informed decision regarding the proposed elements, and offer feedback. During the initial presentation of ideas, the shot of a character crossing a tightrope as a metaphor for anxiety received a particularly positive response from the client. However, the closing sequence was described as too 'dark, bleak' and 'empty' and it was suggested that the animatic concludes by returning to its initial shot.



Figure 1

The alterations suggested by the client involved the embellishment of existing shots, rather than producing new images. I created the finished animatic in Photoshop, which allowed to produce more refined work, and to increase my consideration for how the piece should be staged. 'The Illusion of Life' encourages the staging of characters as though working in silhouette to help make ideas 'completely and unmistakably clear' (Thomas and Johnston 1995, p47). Only a quick glance is required to suggest the basic form and premise of actions and/or characters. The advantage of this is apparent when comparing the silhouettes of characters between my draft and the completed animatic.

My animatic begins with an emblematic shot of the narrator's room, exaggerated for comic effect while keeping props minimal to 'block the exits' from intended focal points (Glebas 2009, p180). In western contexts, the viewer's eye has a tendency to read the scene from left to right. I took advantage of this in my first shot by positioning a series of leading lines (indicated by red arrows in Figure 2) which guide the eye from the left towards the rear wall of the scene on which a poster for 'Post-it-Note Convention 2013' is placed. This provides a subtle, yet important, reiteration of the narrator's enthusiasm for this particular working process. Without the poster, the scene could be misinterpreted as an overwhelming and unpleasant scenario in which the narrator is both literally and metaphorically drowning in work. However the positive implications of Post-it-Notes brought forward by this prop sets the scene accordingly. I wanted to produce a feeling of calm in this shot suggesting that the narrator has been able to use her writing process in order to get her work under control, this was achieved through the use of a closed shot, avoiding the sensation of 'tension and suspense' (Mercado 2011, p11) conveyed through the use of an open frame. The rule of thirds has also been implemented here using sweet spots (indicated by blue dots in figure. 4) to highlight both the poster and the point at which the character will later emerge.



Figure 2

As the narrator begins to explain her anxiety regarding the use of strict plans in writing, the animatic cuts to a close up shot of the sketch held up by the character in the previous frame (Figure 3). Once again, leading lines and sweet spots are implemented here (indicated by red arrows and blue dots respectively) to draw attention to the intended focal point, which in this instance is the character. Exits are blocked here by desaturating the background slightly and adding a blur to create a shallow depth of field - yet the background still provides enough information to convey that we have simply cut to a close up, as opposed to leaving the scene. It is important that this is read as a close up in that this maintains a visual continuity between sequences.

I wanted to reflect the change in tone from the upbeat and cheerful introduction to the somewhat bleak description given regarding the use of strict plans leading to failure. In addition to helping maintain continuity, presenting the narrator's view on strict plans as a sketch produced by her character creates the impression that we are receiving a firsthand insight to the narrator's thought process, thus strengthening the viewer's empathy for her. In contrast to previous frames, this sequence utilises an open frame to emphasise the sensation of fear and tension described by the narrator in relation to strict plans.

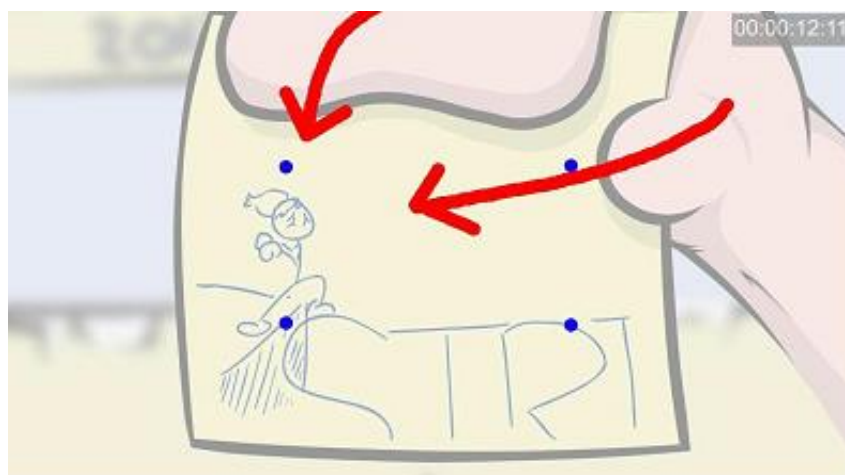


Figure 3

The primary function of the next sequence (Figure 4) is to emphasise the narrator's difficulty in staying on top of a strict plan and the apparent enormity of a task when viewed as a whole rather than being broken down through the use of Post-it-Notes. The sequence begins with a cut to an extreme long shot, causing the character to appear 'dwarfed by [her] surroundings' (Mercado 2011, p65). I used a large amount of negative space in this image in order to convey a feeling of isolation and inescapability, reflecting the narrator's view that through the use of a strict plan 'you start failing before you've even started'. In contrast to the use of a calm, subdued palette in earlier shots, colour is used here to create a feeling of conflict within the composition, conveying the narrator's struggle to stay on task. This notion of potentially failing at any second is supported through the character walking as though on a tightrope.



Figure 4

Throughout the production of my animatic I took advantage of the opportunity to experiment with new methods of working, resulting in what I feel is an accurate yet imaginative interpretation of the matters discussed in the audio. Perhaps the most important piece of experimentation being the use of a graphics tablet in the production of my first draft, which enabled me to produce a complete animatic within the first week of the project, helping to distinguish my work from that of other students early on.

Anita Bruvere:

One of the challenges of this project was that we were heavily dependent on the audio. The soundtracks were of primary importance in this project, and the client wanted the visuals to match the narrative as closely as possible. That implied keeping the drawings simple, to avoid dominating the recording or distracting the viewer from the audio. Initially, this did not seem to be a problem, but it became more difficult as time went on. Glebas argues that *"if we're trying to tell a story with pictures, the problem comes because of the fact that picture can say too much. We need to be able to control our pictures so they say exactly what we want them to"* (2009, p22).

The soundtracks provided by the client were not ‘stories’ in the full sense of the word. Rather, they were very short fragments of conversations without beginning or end, with spontaneous comments about academic writing. Because the audio did not contain a developed story, I opted for a simple storyboard, a limited colour palette and some of the key techniques used by comic artists to create maximum impact. According to Eisner “*comic book art deals with recognizable reproduction of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on the reader’s stored memory of experience to visualise an idea or process quickly*” (2008, p11). I also employed principles and basic components of the storyboard described in Hart (2008), such as rule of thirds and alternation of shot angles.

There were three speakers in my chosen track, describing three different approaches to starting the writing process. The track was very short and splitting the visuals equally between the speakers would result in a sequence of poorly connected images. To avoid this and achieve a greater coherence, I accentuated attention on the second speaker and used the same character illustrating all three writing strategies.



Figure 5

Figure 5 illustrates the part of the audio describing a situation where a student is unable to engage because of lack of interest in the subject. The slumped posture and the depiction of the character from the back help to convey the feelings of depression and alienation. The logo on his t-shirt and mathematical formulas surrounding his silhouette, connote a contradiction between students' interests and the task. The colour palette was restricted to black, white and red, so that bright red elements catch the eye first. The composition of the frames is symmetric with elements located in the centre of the frame between hot spots. To draw the audience into situation more strongly, I used fast transitions between medium shots and close-ups. The subjective point of view on the monitor, displaying a blank page with a flashing cursor, aims to help the viewer to identify with the character, as this is a familiar image for many students struggling to make a start on an assignment.

By contrast, Figure 6 depicts a student actively involved into process. To emphasize her positive attitude, I used warm pastel colours, a relaxed pose and facial expression. A metaphor is employed in this sequence, when the speaker uses the word 'key' in a figurative sense, meaning a way to achieve engagement with writing. The sequence starts from an image of a key, visualising the audio quite literally, but then presents the keys of the computer keyboard and a piano. This parallels the earlier juxtaposition of 'art' ('music') and 'maths' ('technology'), but this time using continuity rather than conflict. This can suggest that 'doing' and 'writing about what you are doing' may not be completely dissimilar if the topic is enjoyable, or that writing in itself can be a creative process.



Figure 6

Hayley Humphreys:

My chosen track focuses on writing a dissertation, more specifically the importance of being able to maintain an interest in your research. The audio contains quite a lot of background noise in the form of loud birdsong that could distract the viewer's attention. Having clarified with the client that re-recording the audio was not an option, I decided to use the birds as a metaphor for inspiration, making them help instead of hinder my piece. I wanted my visuals to create a nice, warm, friendly atmosphere, making the audio more appealing and interesting. This was attempted, firstly, by using bright and inviting colours, and secondly by capitalising on the fact that the audio contained a conversation between three different speakers. Instead of bodiless voices telling the audience what to do, I would make the audience feel as though they are listening in on a group of friends happily chatting and helping each other.

I started by making a very rough storyboard that the client could comment upon, and then incorporated the feedback into a more refined storyboard and animatic. Each image was redrawn digitally following the rough storyboards as a guide for composition and posing. The client's initial feedback was very positive, with just one change request. The client wanted to make a much stronger emphasis on writing, this was a recurring comment on many other students' pieces. I was asked to include some images actually showing the character sitting down and writing (Figure 7).

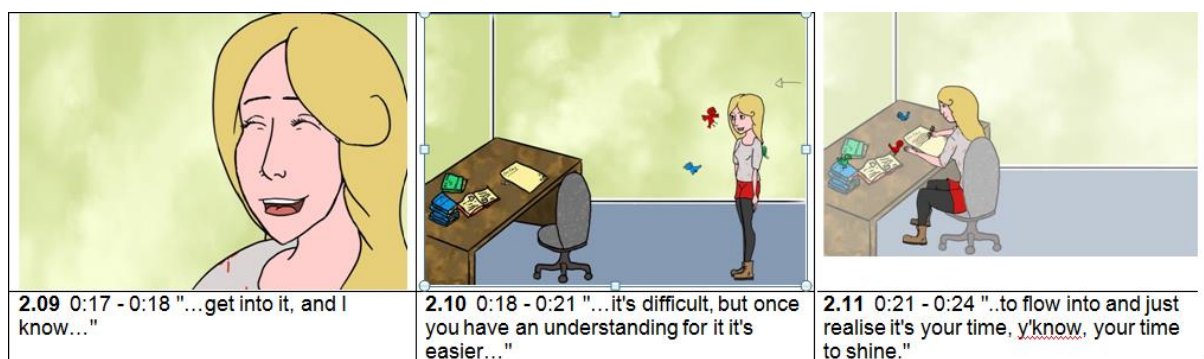


Figure 7 - Final storyboard (the image on the right was included on the client's request)

Now instead of my original idea, I have the birds actively pushing and leading the girl towards the desk, where she then happily sits down and starts writing notes. Upon reflection, I believe this makes the sequence as a whole stronger, although I still think that if animated fully there would not be enough time to show the girl walking, sitting down and writing. On the other hand, this could be rectified by extending the scene and shortening the close-up of the bird on the table after it, or by editing from the birds motioning the girl towards the desk, straight to her sitting and writing and cutting out the walk.

When creating the more finalised storyboard/animatic, I started by digitally drawing up and painting the backgrounds, using the free art program GIMP and free user-made brushes and textures. I saved the backgrounds as high resolution individual images so they can be reused later for other frames. For all of the frames in my storyboard I have only used two background images, the inside image with the desk and the outside image with the table, with small changes applied to the base images, such as cropping and morphing them to fit different shot ranges and perspectives. Characters were added to the backgrounds by using separate transparent layers for line art, colour and even facial features, so that posing and expressions could be easily changed without redrawing an entire character.



Figure 8 - Empty background, and flat characters on textured background from my animatic

Several basic compositional techniques were used to create a dynamic and flowing storyboard. Glebas (2009) stresses that “the most powerful way to direct the audience’s eyes, is to say, *Look where I am looking*” (p180). In this sequence the viewer is drawn to the desk covered in books, by using the character’s line of sight and editing from long and mid-range shots to close up. The ‘sweet spots’ were utilised in my storyboard fairly regularly, making

sure the characters and points of focus were often offset from the centre, whilst still giving them plenty of breathing room. Using this compositional technique helped to keep my storyboard dynamic and prevented images from seeming confusing or boring – something I also help to alleviate by varying shots between mid-range, close up and long-range.

To add visual interest and appeal to the piece, I used flat coloured characters and objects against textured backgrounds with a water-colour feel. I drew influence for this from *The Secret of Kells* (2009), the backgrounds of which give the film a unique and vibrant style, whilst not diverting too much attention from the main action.



Figure 9

Carl Jones:

I began the process by analysing the material I had to work with, before deciding what style would suit it best. The immediate and most obvious challenge was the poor sound quality of my chosen track. At times, it was difficult to understand what it said, yet understanding the message behind the narrative was of the utmost importance.

One typical way of achieving clarity is through subtitling the narration, but the drawback of having to read subtitles is that the audience would not be paying attention to the animation, making my creative work pointless. I therefore chose to use kinetic typography, which means *"the expression of a story, song, or idea through animated text"* (Bailey, 2012). This allowed me to combine the subtitles and the animation into one easy-to-follow text-based narration, reinforced by the audio but not dependent on it. Kinetic typography brings movement to the text, expressing a story or ideas in an interesting and impactful way.

The fonts I used were intended to reflect traditional methods of writing, and the familiarity of a typical typeface found in books. Although I do not particularly like Times new Roman and find it to be overused in media, it became one of my choices to maintain the feeling of familiarity in the viewer. I also wanted parts of the script to be written in a handwritten font, which would suggest the idea of a student going back over work and annotating it. I employed this technique during my first draft of the animation, and after talking with the client, incorporated it we felt it would be best to also include the word ‘write’ in this typeface too (see Figure 10).

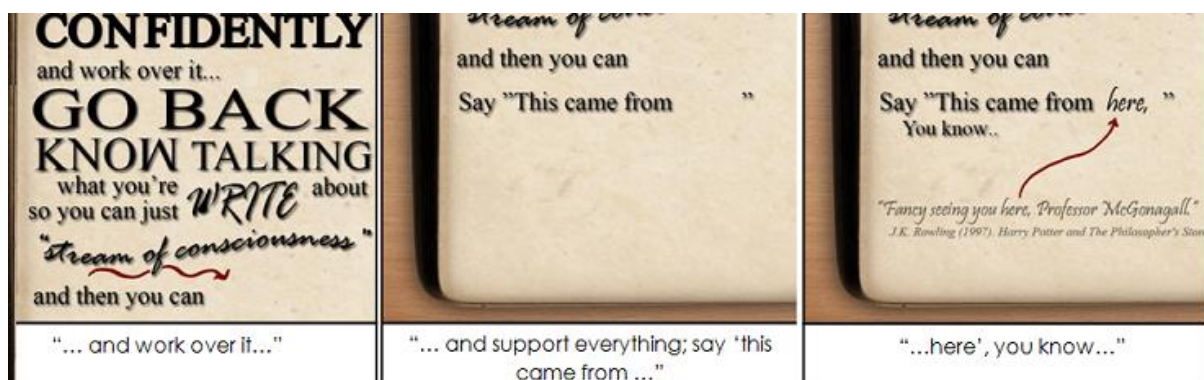


Figure 10

As with most kinetic typography animations, the main words of the script are animated to emphasize additional layers of meaning. For example, the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’ is literally depicted as fluid and wavy, but at the same suggests that this particular method of writing is particularly fluid and natural. I needed to include as many of these metaphorical text movements as possible, without making the scene too hectic and distracting the audience. So rather than applying isolated movement to each individual word, I tried to have words work together, so that the whole piece flows from start to finish, whilst still echoing specific meanings.

The client suggested I include a title shot in my animatic, and this has been designed to look like the front of a notebook, to emphasize the idea of handwritten notes (see Figure 11). The transition to the following frame shows the book opening and revealing the blank pages underneath. The second frame intends to prepare the stage and the audience for the upcoming movements. I left space between the words 'you' and 'can' so that the transition to the third frame could happen. The looping action of the 'M/W' (making room for N) in the third frame created a sense of fluidity and movement that I hoped would carry throughout the piece.



Figure 11

Elsewhere, the client requested that the word 'talking' be given more life, by making it float or dance. I incorporated this into the animation, without wasting the space around it, by having it float into position and stay there. The upwards movement provides a subtle contrast to the generally downward movement of the piece; as the animation pans down the page as the voice-over reads the words. This was not intentional, but after some experimenting, I found it worked for the better.

Figure 12 illustrates one of the creative challenges and my solution. At this point in the audio, the speaker is talking about losing notes. Since my whole project is text-based, I needed to find a way of visually representing the idea of losing work, without actually destroying the text. After experimenting with various metaphors, I decided to use an ink spill to represent an irrevocable change and emphasize how serious losing work can be. The ink spill is positioned in such a way that it partially obscures some of the text, whilst still leaving it legible, so the narrative can still be understood.

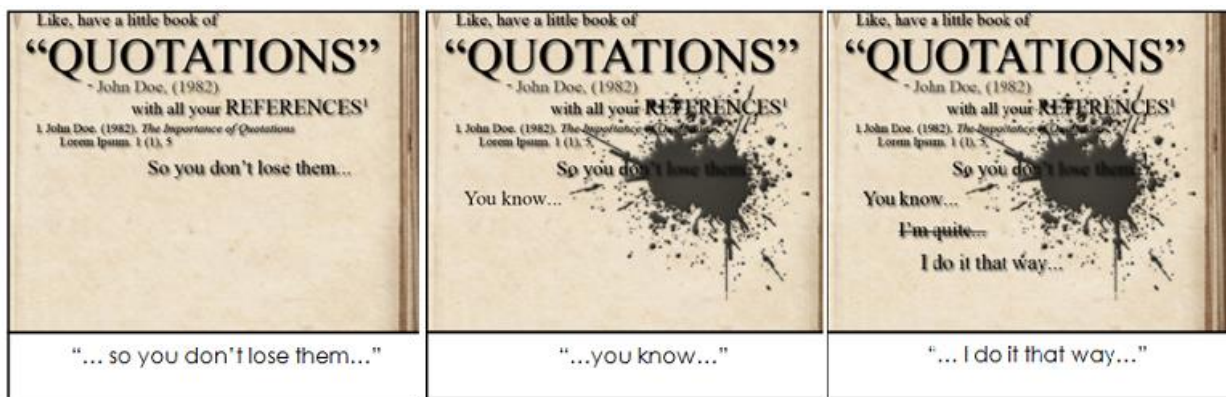


Figure 12

Nearer the end, around Frame 28, I would need a new page to work on. There were certain drawbacks in having the notebook literally turn a page, so instead of this, I decided to utilise the part of the audio where the speaker loudly inhales and exhales. I used the inhaling sound to visualise the 'sucking in' of the existing characters into the spot in the middle, and the exhaling sound to 'spit them out' around the edge of the paper. This left me with plenty of room for the final narration. This movement helped to overcome the need for more space in a very economic fashion, but also added visual interest to the piece. At the request of the client, I have applied a similar technique later on, in Frame 31, where the word 'read' absorbs the characters around it, growing larger, and clearing space. This creates the mental image of absorbing the information that you read, as you would when preparing to write an essay. This image was extended further during the final frame. There is still work to be done fine-tuning certain movements and images, but overall I feel the animatic works well to represent the key messages and overcome the imperfections of the audio. The experimentations with movements and the overall experience with working for a client proved to be invaluable.

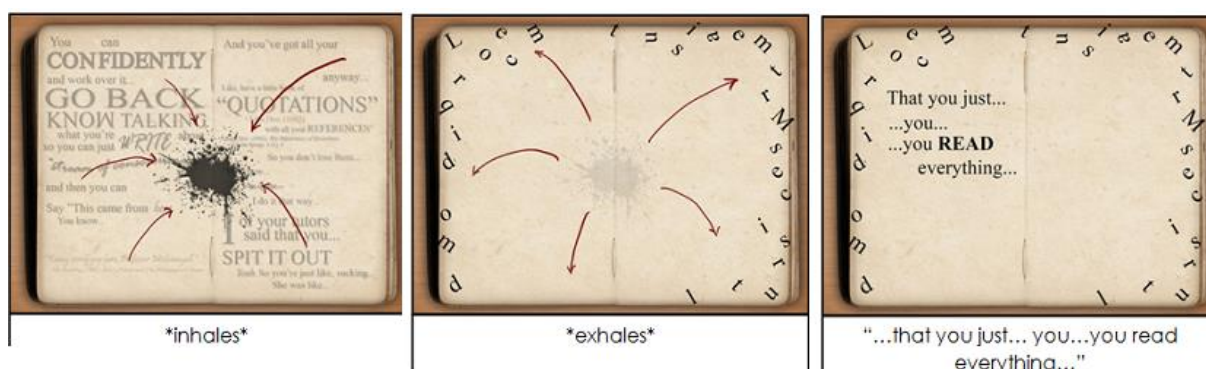


Figure 13

Conclusion.

The experience of working with the client has been beneficial, giving us an opportunity to apply in practice some of the techniques and principles learnt in the first semester. We have found the experience of working with a client very enlightening and increased our confidence in creating work for an external source. Working on this project offered some valuable lessons for future, most importantly the value of communicating with the client and clarifying questions and expectations. Frequent and direct communication with the client helps to prevent costly mistakes at an early stage. This is particularly important in animation, because it is such a time-consuming and expensive process. Changing rough thumbnails is much easier than redrawing coloured and polished frames. Most importantly, it helped us learn to negotiate between several competing requirements, for example exercising creative judgment, and at the same time complying with the client's vision, which may not always coincide with our own.

The current version of the work can be viewed on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQ5IVvxowik>

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