

Directing from the Sidelines: Mentorship, Authority, and Blurred Authorship in Student Animation Projects

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Abstract

Credits may name a supervisor without showing how their feedback shaped a student animation film. This paper asks when pedagogical guidance becomes a creative contribution requiring acknowledgement, and what ethical obligations follow from the supervisor's authority over student work. Drawing on scholarship on distributed creative labour (Heller, 2019), it examines the pre-production phase (ideation and early concept development) of *Judgement Realm*, a 2023 graduation film made by three students in Vietnam. A reflexive, practice-based case study brings together versioned scripts, storyboards and character designs, message exchanges, contemporaneous supervision notes and later reflections. Three vignettes trace a framing question and risk caution followed by a change in conceptual setting; suggestions about narration and camera angles followed by revisions, including alternatives devised by the students; and an audience criterion followed by a substantial shift in character design. The surviving materials show changes to the work, but much spoken feedback went unrecorded and the students' reasons for particular choices remain uncertain. The analysis distinguishes influence from a contribution that enters the work and warrants acknowledgement. It does not claim that this single case can establish a threshold for co-authorship. Instead, it develops a vocabulary for discussing degrees of intervention, mutual justification, the content of creative contributions, and the asymmetry between supervisory authority and student accountability. It proposes a credit on the finished work and a start-of-project agreement as ways to make the supervisory relationship and its decision rules more visible.

Keywords: authorship; mentorship; animation education; practice-based research; power distance; Vietnamese higher education; distributed creative labour

1. Introduction

I have supervised graduation projects in design and animation for nearly ten years, and for the past seven I have also sat on assessment panels at universities in Ho Chi Minh City. This paper began with something I only noticed once I stopped to interrogate my own work: between what I do in the supervision room and what ends up credited on the finished piece, there is a gap I had never named.

In Vietnam, every graduation project carries the supervisor's name — on the cover page, in the review minutes, in the school's records. But look at the work itself — the finished film, the version posted on platforms like Behance, the thing that actually follows students into their careers — and the acknowledgement of the supervisory role becomes discretionary and inconsistent. Some films carry a "mentored by" line; some carry nothing; and even when it is there, the line does not necessarily reflect how much the supervisor was involved. At first glance this misalignment looks like paperwork, but I think it reflects something we have not thought through: we do not yet know what to call the supervisor's contribution — and the supervisor, too, may not have a clear sense of their own role and its

limits. If a supervisor's feedback, critique, and direction genuinely shape a large part of the work, then the silence of the credits is hiding part of how the work came to be.

The paper asks when pedagogical guidance becomes a creative contribution that warrants acknowledgement, and what ethical obligations follow when a supervisor helps shape a work submitted under students' names. I use influence for guidance that prompts further student decisions and contribution for a supervisor's content that enters the work. Acknowledgement concerns how that contribution is credited; it does not by itself establish co-authorship. This single case cannot determine the threshold for co-authorship and does not examine formal ownership. The question cuts both ways. When intervention succeeds, students may receive credit for decisions partly shaped by someone else; when it fails, the grade and portfolio consequences fall primarily on them, while the supervisor's part may remain hard to trace. Yet holding back is no solution: some professional knowledge can only be passed on through close work with the learner's material (Schön, 1987), and leaving a student stuck can also be harmful. The issue is how to name degrees of intervention and make their reasons visible.

This study approaches the question from the inside — a supervisor turning back to examine their own practice — through a single case: *Judgement Realm*, a 2D animated graduation film I was fortunate to supervise together with three excellent students at a university in Vietnam. I do not set out to resolve the tension between pedagogical duty and the limits of authorship; I set out to give it a language that can be discussed openly — between teacher and student, and within the programmes that train them.

2. Background and literature

The question falls into a gap between three lines of research that rarely meet.

The first is production studies of animation. Caldwell (2013) argues that “authorship” and “creativity” in the American film industry do not faithfully reflect actual contribution but are the outcome of institutional allocation — occupational divisions, union contracts, intellectual property law. Heller (2019) develops this through interviews with 25 practitioners at large 3D studios, and points to something directly relevant here: contributions that cannot be seen with the eye in the finished product generate a weaker sense of authorship, even when their real impact is greater. She also records a detail I will return to — animators describe influence in the early phase, shaping a character the whole crew must later follow, as producing a deeper sense of authorship than executing a shot by hand. But this whole line studies horizontal relationships among salaried professionals; no one in it both creates alongside and grades the other.

The second line addresses exactly that vertical relationship, yet leaves the authorship question untouched. Schön (1983, 1987) describes the design studio as a “reflective practicum,” where the teacher does not lecture but demonstrates directly on the student's work — in his classic scene, drawing over a student's design to say what cannot be said in words. For Schön this is a pedagogical necessity; but he never asks what those drawn-over lines mean for authorship. Research on the critique adds the dimension of power: Blair (2007) shows that the crit is not a neutral exchange but a status-laden ritual, where students learn to read the assessor's expectations and adjust the work to please. Manathunga (2007) goes further, criticising the very image of the friendly “mentor” for concealing how power operates in supervision. What this line shares is that intervention is treated as a matter of method or experience, not as a matter of credit.

The third line gives the cultural context. Research on Vietnamese classrooms describes a high power-distance setting: the right to distribute opportunity belongs largely to the teacher, and learners are expected not to object openly; Hoang and Pham (2018) show further that observed compliance can conceal unspoken resistance — dissatisfied students speak only to the researcher, never to the teacher. Their study was carried out at the secondary level, so a bridge to higher education is needed. In my own teaching, and in what colleagues have shared over the years, students are not a uniform group: some attended private schools with more open teaching, and many public schools are also becoming more open. Still, many students, especially those from public schools, enter university after twelve years of hierarchical classrooms and are not yet proactive or confident in discussing their work with teachers. This holds even in university settings that have moved toward learner-centred approaches, such as RMIT University Vietnam, where I now teach, and the earlier university where the case took place, which was also relatively open. Research on the reform itself confirms that its implementation remains incomplete (Duong et al., 2025).

What I observed with the Judgement Realm team is this: the team shared their views when asked and were consistently respectful towards their supervisor. I also told them clearly that if a suggestion of mine did not fit, they could look for a better solution, and at times they did (Section 4.2). What the records cannot show is whether that respect played a part in the moments when they agreed. Here, then, the mechanism Hoang and Pham describe is a possibility to watch for, not something this study observed.

The three lines meet exactly where this paper stands. Research on authorship describes distributed creative labour in fine detail, but in industry, not the classroom. Studio pedagogy describes the teacher–student relationship in fine detail, but stops at method and experience and never presses to the question of who authored what. In Vietnam, creative education has developed and is well studied; but research on supervision mostly concerns thesis supervision — the guidance of a written work, where the line between the teacher’s words and the student’s is relatively clear. When what is supervised is a film or a design — something the teacher can help shape in its very form — the authorship question becomes far harder. That is the gap this paper enters.

3. Method

3.1 Design and researcher position

This is a reflexive, practice-based case study: I analyse my own supervisory conduct from the inside. The finished film alone cannot reveal the supervision process: the boundary between guidance and intervention sits in exchanges, discarded versions, and small decisions that accumulate week by week. An external researcher could examine the surviving versions and feedback; but spoken and gestural feedback, and the reasons behind each intervention, are accessible only from within. This too is the tradition Schön (1983, 1987) built by analysing practitioners’ own work.

I have supervised graduation projects for nearly ten years and sat on assessment panels for the last seven. My way of supervising has shifted over time, from heavy, direct intervention in the early years toward prompting — and it is that shift that gave rise to the question of this paper. I now teach at RMIT University Vietnam, but the case analysed here was supervised at a different university, before I moved to RMIT. This double position — researcher and object of analysis at once — is what makes the study possible and, at the same time, a source of bias to be managed; the measures and limits are set out in 3.3 and 3.4.

3.2 The case and the data

Judgement Realm is a 2D animated film, the 2023 graduation project of a team of three students, completed and defended. The whole process ran eighteen weeks: fifteen along the school's official timeline, plus three preparatory weeks when the team began working with me on the idea. The film treats impostor syndrome through an afterlife world inspired by the realm of Naraka in Indian culture. Under the anonymity agreement, team members are referred to by the role they took, not by name. The paper looks only at the early phase — roughly the first eight weeks, from ideation to animatic. The case holds an internal contrast worth using: within a single project my intervention ran in two different modes across two areas. In the narrative area — script, storyboard, pacing — where storytelling was not the team's strongest skill, intervention was heavy and constructive. In the visual area — character and background design — where the team was strong and routinely offered many options, it was sparser and mostly a matter of helping them choose. That contrast lets degrees of intervention be compared within one project.

The data has four layers: versioned production artefacts (five script drafts, rows of design options, storyboards, animatics); the message exchanges between the team and me, timestamped, the only surviving written feedback; my weekly notes, written at the time of the sessions; and reflective notes written during this study, kept separate from the third layer because retrospective reflection risks reinterpreting the past through present understanding. One feature of the data must be stated plainly: much of my feedback was spoken, and unrecorded. Written feedback messages were few compared with the time spent in face-to-face sessions: in roughly the first third of the project, I met the team for up to two hours a week (the school's norm is one hour a week per group), and by my estimate more than three quarters of that time went to reviewing the work and giving spoken feedback. My weekly notes summarised that feedback only as keywords, for follow-up at the next session. When commenting on images, I would often use my bare hands to mime the change I wanted directly over the surface of the student's work — a kind of drawing-over by gesture that leaves no physical trace. Because none of this was recorded, how often such interventions occurred cannot be established with confidence; the surviving record holds only part of the supervision process (see 3.4). What can be described is the nature of this kind of intervention, not its frequency: it cannot be archived, cannot be quoted, and is not acknowledged on the work.

3.3 Analysis

I arranged the artefact versions along a timeline and cross-read them against the notes and messages to identify intervention episodes: supervisory inputs followed by traceable changes in the artefact. This sequence shows association, not causation or the students' reasons for their choices. I selected episodes across three areas—conceptual framing, narrative, and visual design—and analysed the mode of intervention, the area it touched, and the rationale I gave, drawing on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Section 4 presents three vignettes, with two episodes in the narrative vignette. Table 1 therefore lists four episodes and distinguishes the surviving record of each input from the subsequent change. All four inputs were spoken. My weekly notes summarise the Naraka, camera-angle, and character-design feedback; the narrator suggestion is described retrospectively and has no surviving contemporaneous written record. Most pre-revision camera thumbnails did not survive. The evidence can show that changes followed supervisory input, but it cannot establish how many frames were affected or whether the input caused each choice.

Table 1. Four intervention episodes across three vignettes: inputs, records, and subsequent changes

Episodes	Week	Supervisor's input	Surviving record of input	Subsequent change	Evidence of the change
Naraka (4.1)	Prep. 3	Framing question; caution about the risk of a Chinese-inspired style	Weekly notes on spoken feedback	The following week, the team proposed Naraka; their third reason matched my argument	The team's proposal document
Narrator (4.2)	2	Suggestion to consider a narrator	Supervisor's retrospective account; no surviving contemporaneous note	The team brought narration into the script	Second script draft
Camera angles (4.2)	2–4	Spoken suggestions on selected camera angles	Weekly notes on spoken feedback	Revised compositions include alternatives to the suggestion	Final storyboard; a few pre-revision thumbnails
Character design (4.3)	1	Reminder of the 18–25 audience criterion; advice to analyse other case studies and draw lessons	Weekly notes on spoken feedback	Nine new options in a wholly different visual language	Option rounds: 17, then 9, then 8, then 1; my recollection of the team's spoken explanation

Note. “Prep.” marks the three preparatory weeks before the school's official timeline; all other weeks follow the official timeline.

3.4 Ethics and limitations

Written consent for using the project materials and the exchanges as data was established, signed by the team leader on behalf of the group, with the agreement of the other two members. The form permits the use of production materials, message exchanges, weekly notes and the project's published materials as research data; the paper does not reproduce any artwork or quote messages verbatim. The form also states that anonymity is only relative: because the film's title and credits are public, referring to team members by role does not prevent a reader from identifying them, and the members agreed knowing this. I am also aware that a former student's agreement to a request from their former supervisor sits inside the very power structure the paper analyses, so the form stresses that declining carries no consequence.

The study has four main limits. First, it is a single-perspective analysis with no member checking — especially serious given that Hoang and Pham (2018) themselves show compliance can conceal resistance; so I speak only about my own conduct and the observable changes, not on behalf of the students' experience. Second, spoken and gestural intervention was not recorded and can only be reconstructed indirectly. Third, the reflective notes carry the risk of hindsight. Fourth, this is a single case in a specific context; it aims at analytic generalisation — offering a way of seeing and a vocabulary that can be tested elsewhere — not at statistical generalisation.

4. Three vignettes of intervention

The three vignettes below are chosen to cover three areas — conceptual framing, narrative, visual — and different modes of intervention. Each closes with the authorship question it leaves behind; Section 5 gathers those questions together.

4.1 Naraka — the lightest end of the spectrum

In the third week of the preparatory phase, the film’s theme — impostor syndrome — had been the team’s own choice from the start and was not something I intervened in. The open question was which setting would carry it. The team presented a wish to use an afterlife world inspired by Chinese Buddhist culture. I did two things that differ in kind. One was a framing question: why was the afterlife concept chosen to carry a story about impostor syndrome, and, if they wanted to use it, they should research it to its roots. The other was a risk caution: Chinese-inspired artwork has already been worked over heavily and at a high level, competing there would be very hard, and they should think carefully. In form, I forbade nothing and prescribed nothing; the decision went back to the team.

After a silent week of research, the team came back with exactly one option: Naraka — the realm of judgment in the Indian-origin faiths, with the figure of King Yama. The proposal was thorough, and I approved it, with a technical caution that the detail-heavy Indian style would make the later animation harder. Had it stopped there, it would be a fine story about facilitation: the name Naraka was entirely the team’s find. But their document preserves a trace. In the section on why India, the third reason given is that India is less competed-over than Japan or China — the very argument I had made the week before. It was, in itself, a fairly subjective judgment of mine rather than an objective fact; and yet there it was, appearing as the team’s own reasoning, unattributed, even extended. The documents show that the team’s reasoning overlapped with mine, but not why the team adopted it. They may have been genuinely persuaded, they may have complied under the weight of the person speaking, or there may be other reasons the documents do not show. From my side — the only side this study can reach — these readings leave the same trace. The name is the team’s; the filtering criterion matches the argument I made the week before; the question of who authored the decision “not China, but India” has no clean answer.

4.2 Narrative — intervening in the telling, not the story

The script was the area where the team was less strong than in their other skills, and where I intervened most: two script-only review rounds, three alongside the storyboard, three on the animatic. The first thing worth noting is what did not happen — the core beat chain, from the stone that stands for a life to the encounter with the judge, was present in the first draft and survived intact into the film. The story is the team’s from beginning to end. My first large intervention aimed at a different layer: after the first read, I raised whether the film needed a narrator, since the content was complex. The team thought for a week and agreed to bring narration in — and that shifted the story’s economy, freeing the plot once explanation could move into the narrator’s voice.

At the storyboard stage I ran a three-step routine. First, I asked about intent: why this camera angle, what are you trying to achieve — if the team could defend it, the frame was theirs. Second, if the reasoning did not hold, I offered an option in the form of a question that carried a suggestion (“why not try a very long shot, it gives more information?”); some frames drew comments of this kind, although the surviving record does not support a reliable count. Third, I made clear that the team could revise further if they

found my suggestion unfitting, as long as they had reasons — the same standard for both sides. The third step was not documented as a rule: in the surviving before-and-after comparisons, some final frames match neither the earlier thumbnail nor my suggestion. Those frames show an alternative to both the earlier thumbnail and my suggestion. I read my input as a provocation, while the final composition was the team's decision. The resulting account of contribution is layered: the team authored the story; I proposed narration, which the team wrote into the script; and the surviving storyboard evidence suggests that some camera choices were shaped by my feedback, although its extent cannot be counted reliably.

4.3 Visual — authority relocated into criteria

Character design was the team's strongest area, where I intervened least. The options for the protagonist went from seventeen in the first round down to nine, eight, then one. The most telling part is the first round: the seventeen options were really one option in seventeen outfits — the same proportions, the same silhouette, differing only in detail. I chose none and rejected none; I noted that the film aimed at an 18–25 audience — a target the team had set themselves — and that they should check whether this drawing style suited that age group, and I advised them to analyse other case studies and draw lessons for their own project. A week later, nine new options came back in a wholly different visual language.

In the area of sparsest intervention, a major change of style followed directly after a short piece of feedback. At the next session, the team explained that they had adjusted in response to the reminder about the target audience. Beyond what the team said, I cannot know whether they had other reasons; the reminder may have acted as a trigger for them to research other case studies, analyse their direction, concept and design, and work out their own adjustments. From the second round on, the team chose and I recalled the criteria, and we never once diverged. That was not a matter of shared taste but of the criteria being anchored in the project's objective reference points — the story's message, the character's information, the audience, the feasibility of animation — rather than in my preference, so the selection sessions never turned into disputes of taste. Authority here lay not in any single move but in the choice of which criterion to raise, and when. I must also admit that, careful as I was with wording, it was at times hard to avoid phrasing that nudged the team toward my own view. The visual area thus inverts the study's first intuition: sparse intervention does not mean thin influence — here influence becomes systemic.

5. A vocabulary for thresholds of intervention

The three vignettes let me name four structures that, I think, mentor–student pairs need words for. A few of them resonate with ideas from other fields; the paper's contribution is to bring them into the supervision of a creative work and make them usable.

5.1 The escalation ladder

Intervention is not an on/off switch between “guidance” and “intervention” but a ladder of rungs: asking a question, recalling a criterion, cautioning about risk, suggesting outright, and at the top, demonstrating on the work itself. The ladder metaphor is not new — it has roots in escalation theory (Kahn, 1965) and in the “ladders of intervention” used in school behaviour management; its nearest pedagogical relative is scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), support raised or lowered with the learner's capacity. The case highlights what governs a move up the ladder. All three vignettes open on the lowest rung; what tells them apart is the highest rung reached. In these moments, the decision to climb followed the quality of the student's reasoning rather than my own wish: at the storyboard stage, a frame the team could

justify stayed as it was, and only where the reasoning did not hold did I offer a suggestion (Section 4.2). A possible second variable is the time left. I draw this proposition from supervising other projects; the Judgement Realm case does not establish it. One example: in some projects I set a high bar for originality in character design, and the search sometimes ran into the time set aside for the storyboard, so the storytelling suffered because there was not enough time to find the best solution. From those other cases I drew a rule: when it is time to move to the next stage, the search stops and an option is chosen from what the team already has, based on the project's criteria; the final decision is mine as supervisor. The Judgement Realm team kept to schedule; even so, in my view, at the stage of locking the storyboard and animatic we did not have enough time to polish the story to its most compelling. If this principle holds, facilitation is a time-boxed mode — it lasts as long as the project clock allows. This reframes the threshold question: what matters is not a fixed line but whether both sides know which rung they are on and what licenses the next. The ethical problem is not climbing but climbing in silence — when the ladder exists only in the teacher's head, and students may experience the rungs as moods rather than rules. The ladder also has a floor: staying on the lowest rung while a student is stuck and time runs out is not respect but neglect — some professional knowledge can only be passed on by climbing (Schön, 1987). In Judgement Realm itself, notably, I never had to climb to the fifth rung — demonstrating directly on the work.

5.2 The symmetric justification rule

At the storyboard stage, the right to keep a creative decision came with the ability to justify it — and the standard applied to both sides: a frame I suggested could be overridden if the team had reasons. Treating reason-giving as a standard is not foreign to the dialogic tradition in pedagogy (Freire, 1970); what is rarely framed is the symmetry — the same demand for justification laid on teacher and student alike. This is the only mechanism I observed that could partly neutralise the power gap, because it moves the dispute from the axis of position (who speaks) to the axis of argument (what is said). But the symmetry is complete only on paper: the one who sets the rule, asks first, and judges the reasoning is still one side. It is a commitment made by the party with power, not a structure that stands on its own.

5.3 Influence, contribution, authorship: the content threshold

The third-option frames suggest that influence and contribution can be distinguished. My suggestion may have prompted further consideration, but the final compositions were the students' choices. The reverse direction: when the mentor's content — an argument, a composition kept as given — enters the work, it is no longer only influence but a contribution that calls for acknowledgement. I call this boundary the content threshold. The idea that authorship attaches to those who contribute to a work's meaning-bearing features has long standing in the philosophy of film authorship (Gaut, 1997); this paper brings that principle into the supervisory relationship, but uses it to decide when acknowledgement is due, not who counts as a co-author. There are, then, three levels: influence, contribution requiring acknowledgement, and co-authorship. The paper does not draw the line between the second and the third; that would require comparing many cases and including the students' perspective, beyond what a single case can establish. Together, the three vignettes suggest that supervisory influence differs in degree and kind.

5.4 The authority–accountability asymmetry

This is why the distinctions above are ethical, not merely academic. The term “accountability asymmetry” has appeared in Vietnamese education research (Özdere, 2026), but in the opposite direction: there the teacher bears responsibility while lacking enforcement power. Here the direction reverses — the supervisor holds authority on every rung, but the main consequences of the project fall on the student: the grade, the portfolio, the professional identity formed by the project, good or bad. The supervisor bears some of the consequences too, but not to the same degree. If intervention turns out well, the student may receive credit for decisions partly shaped by someone else, and this can have some bearing on their later work. If it turns out badly, the consequences still fall on the student, while the supervisor’s name remains in the records — but the records only note that the supervisor was present, not what they did or which direction they pushed. This asymmetry cannot be removed from the pedagogical relationship; what can be done is to acknowledge it — the subject of the next section.

6. Practical implications

Let me say one thing at once, to avoid a misreading: the paper does not call on supervisors to intervene less, but to acknowledge the part they did intervene in. Intervention is legitimate — what needs fixing is that it happens in silence. The paper proposes two light practices.

First, bring the acknowledgement into the work itself. Vietnamese project regulations already require the supervisor’s name — but at the level of the records; at the level of the work — the film, the publicly posted version — it is discretionary. Judgement Realm carries a “mentored by” line by the team’s own choice, not by any requirement. A line naming the supervisory relationship, placed on the artefact itself as a minimum standard, does not measure the degree of influence but breaks the worst case: total silence, before every later viewer, about there having been a second hand. One must be honest, too, that a credit line is a convention, not a measure (Caldwell, 2013): sometimes the supervisor influenced far more than the line suggests, sometimes they are named while having done little, and not every team keeps the line when posting the work beyond the defence. It breaks the silence but does not calibrate the degree — which is why the second practice is needed.

Second, a start-of-project agreement. Before the project begins, mentor and team settle two things in a short written statement: which decisions belong to the students, and what licenses the mentor to move from asking to suggesting, from suggesting to demonstrating. This makes the escalation ladder a shared rule rather than something in the teacher’s head; and in a culture where refusing a teacher openly is costly (Hoang & Pham, 2018), it gives students a document to point to rather than a personal confrontation to mount. The agreement assigns the final say but does not exempt anyone from justification — to keep a decision of their own, students still need reasons. Both practices can be piloted at the mentor–team level right away; raising them to a standard would need faculty or institutional approval.

Beyond a single project, a question stays open. If supervisory intervention shapes aesthetic decisions at the level of each project, then repeated across many cohorts — the same teachers, the same set of criteria — could it pull a department’s graduation films toward a shared look? That would be a kind of “school authorship” (Christensen, 2008) that a single case cannot prove, only raise; and if it were real, the central promise of art education — that each student develops a voice of their own — would need to be read more warily.

7. Conclusion

The distinction between pedagogical guidance, creative contribution, and co-authorship needs clearer language. This paper offers four structures for that language, in the order of Section 5: the escalation ladder to describe the dynamics of intervention; the symmetric justification rule, which asks for reasons from supervisor and students alike; the content threshold to separate influence from contribution requiring acknowledgement; and the authority–accountability asymmetry, the reason these distinctions are ethical. Alongside them are two practices for bringing invisible influence into view. To the opening question, the paper answers in three levels: guidance leaves influence; when the supervisor’s content enters the work, it becomes a contribution that calls for acknowledgement; the boundary of co-authorship remains open. The paper does not aim to resolve the tension between pedagogical duty and the limits of authorship, but to help make it nameable.

What matters more lies elsewhere. Naming influence is not about policing merit but about letting a young artist know which parts of the work they can truly stand on alone — the condition for entering the profession with a voice of their own. And on the other side of the relationship, it forces the supervisor to see their own role and its limits clearly. A shared vocabulary, in the end, is so that both sides can name what has been going on, in silence, between them.

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