Episode II: The Greatest Sound in the Galaxy: Sound and Star Wars

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

In this galaxy, two weeks ago, Leslie McMurtry published Episode I, a discussion of sound in the Star Wars films. Binge read it here! In today's post, she listens to the farther reaches of the Star Wars galaxy–its multi-media forms including radio and cartoons–as well as the newest installment, Solo!

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In this galaxy, two weeks ago, Leslie McMurtry published Episode I, a discussion of sound in the Star Wars films. Binge read it here! In today's post, she listens to the farther reaches of the Star Wars galaxy–its multi-media forms including radio and cartoons–as well as the newest installment, *Solo*!

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> *Yeah, I speak it a little.*

For the first time in the onscreen history of *Star Wars,* a human speaks Wookiee and needs subtitles to do so. There is more significance to this moment in *Solo* (2018) than might first seem apparent. To understand why, we need to think back to the Ewoks, the small furry creatures from *Return of the Jedi*. They have polarized fans, and their language feeds into potential ethical sonic/linguistic dilemmas in *Star Wars*. As Ben Burtt explains,

> *With a new language, the most important goal is to create emotional clarity. People spend all of their lives learning to identify voices. You became an expert at that, and somewhat impossible to electronically process the human characteristic, and retain the necessary emotion. To fool the audience into believing this is a real character as the basis of the sound, although you may sprinkle other things in there. It varies from character to character.*

The language of the Ewoks, however, was "rendered almost entirely from Tibetan." As Stephen Davis argues, Tibetan and other non-European languages used in *Star Wars* "were sometimes distorted" and "not used to convey meaningful content." This, says Davis, seemingly suggests "that these languages were never meant to be intelligible to moviegoers; rather, they were used to create social distance between strange characters and the anticipated audience."



https://youtu.be/02pCHkq7W4U

The process actually took a reversal when *Star Wars* was translated into Diné (Navajo) for its premiere in 2013 at Window Rock, Arizona, in front of an audience of hundreds. In *Star Wars,* a

plethora of languages have been spoken by a variety of species, but it has been rare for human characters to speak in these languages. The potential distancing at work somehow becomes much less during this moment in *Solo*.

The first part of this article has mainly focused on the "original trilogy." The next section will detail *Star Wars* in the digital era and in other media. Envisioned since 1978 as a cycle of nine films, *A New Hope, Empire Strikes Back,* and *Return of the Jedi* were given "Special Edition" makeovers in 1997 as *Star Wars* entered the digital era. These re-issues were committed to the soundworld of the original, Ben Burtt leaving "virtually untouched" such key elements as the sounds of Darth Vader, Artoo, Threepio, and the TIE fighters, while the Special Edition required the creation of Huttese dialogue for Jabba the Hutt and sound effects for his movement in *A New Hope*.

Kinda handy to have a storyteller who makes his own sound effects

As a child, Ben Burtt loved listening to his grandfather's radio, tuning between stations to hear the sounds in between, the beeps, whistles, and static. "There's something about that I find opens my mind," he said. While the radio links to George Lucas and *Star Wars* have already been comprehensively explored, what about *Star Wars* on the radio?

Since at least 1925, when the BBC began its long-standing series of adaptations, *The Classic Serial,* adaptations from media like books and stage plays have been a mainstay of radio content. Despite the one-time frequent proliferation of film-to-radio adaptation, the practice has become much more uncommon. In 1981, with organised public radio manifestations like NPR (National Public Radio) still in their infancy in the US, drama had played a much smaller part on the airwaves than public service broadcasting's equivalent in the UK, the BBC—indeed, drama was more likely to be found on nostalgic commercial throwbacks like The CBS Radio Mystery Theater. Nevertheless, when approached by Richard Toscan of USC, John Houseman, and Frank Mankiewicz, Lucasfilm quickly sold the adaptation rights to NPR for $1, including, crucially, use of music and special effects. The BBC also agreed to co-produce.

Why did George Lucas sell the radio rights to *Star Wars* for $1 a pop? Clearly the involvement of his alma mater USC was a factor; nevertheless, as previously argued, Lucas was invested in radio culture, not just of the 1930s serial type that was mirrored in action-adventure-science fiction films of that era, but also the free-wheeling intimacy of radio hosts such as Wolfman Jack and Bob "The Emperor" Hudson, a Burbank DJ and subject of one of Lucas' films. The dramatization's length (six-and-a-half hours) de-compressed *A New Hope*'s story, "meaning that the characters could be treated in more depth and the story told in more detail," as noted by Frederica Kushner, creating character-developing moments in transmedia long before the digital age (including completely new sequences for Luke and Leia in episodes 1 & 2 of *A New Hope* and a scene in which Luke constructs a new light saber as a prologue to *Return of the Jedi*). NPR's listening audience doubled during the broadcast of the first adaptation in 1981.

https://youtu.be/7zR7Ye7KnDY

In the era of classic radio serials, rural listeners often used film-to-radio adaptations as a way of keeping up with movie culture; as Malcolm Usrey of the Texas Panhandle recalled, "[o]nly a serious emergency kept us from hearing *The Lux Radio Theater*." In 1981, there was no way for viewers who wanted to re-watch *Star Wars* to do so, as it was long gone from cinemas. The radio adaptations would have offered the next best thing, while a more "fill-in" approach was beginning to manifest by 1996, when *Return of the Jedi* was finally adapted (in a much compressed form), by which point the original trilogy were all available on VHS.

The radio adaptations, nevertheless, remain a fascinating meditation on *Star Wars*' transmedia and its use of sound. The response to sound in *Star Wars* functions perhaps similarly to Dermot Rattigan's "macro-micro scale" in radio, the intimacy created when broadcasters address an audience of millions but seem to speak individually to YOU.

Sir, my audio sensors no longer . . .

As celebrated movie critic Gene Siskel wrote in his review of *Return of the Jedi*, "I can't think of another recent picture whose sound I enjoyed so much. [. . .] it's almost flawless. [. . .] Three is not enough." Indeed, three was *not* enough, and in 1999, Burtt became the sound editor on *The Phantom Menace,* the most expensive independent film in history, the first of a new trilogy. *The Phantom Menace* made full use (perhaps, some would suggest, over-use) of digital animation technologies and brought voices in the shape of Brian Blessed and Andy Secombe to alien creatures.

Williams' leitmotifs proceeded to weave retrospectively into this trilogy as well as the introduction of new themes, for example "Across the Stars," "a love theme that swells with the fervent romance shared by Anakin and Padmé, and which subsequently plays over the end credits" (and is only heard in *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*). To return to Bribitzer-Stull's catalogue of Williams' use of leitmotifs, thematic irony is prominent in *Revenge of the Sith* when Padmé says she is pregnant:

https://youtu.be/cECriVkNsSA

Bribitzer-Stull presents this as "a clear case of romantic irony, since the audience knows what horrible fate lies in store for the two characters, though the characters themselves do not." Another new composition was "Duel of the Fates" with three iterations of its leitmotif heard throughout *The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones,* and *Revenge of the Sith.*

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https://youtu.be/Sskr--f66ZI

Echoes of "Duel of the Fates" are heard in *Solo,* and those who have seen the film will understand why.

Civilized words can be our greatest weapon!

Long before Disney acquired Lucasfilm, *Star Wars*' transmedia success was profound. On television, *Star Wars* lived on the 1980s in *Ewoks* the animated series (1985-6) and *Droids* (1985). *Droids* were the further adventures of R2-D2 and C-3PO, set before *A New Hope*. With voice talent lent (again) by Anthony Daniels as Threepio and Artoo "as himself," the short-lived animated series featured an opening theme tune by The Police's Stewart Copeland. The final episode, an hour-long special, "The Great Heep" was based on a screenplay by Ben Burtt.



https://youtu.be/neyJB_0DsYY

The music, composed and performed by Patricia Cullen (who scored *Ewoks* and *The Care Bears*), flirts with "fantasy"/ "medieval" music as well as imitating John Williams' late-Romantic idiom. The story features humanoid characters speaking non-English languages and creatures that sound like tauntauns. Artoo and Threepio also interact with other droids in scenes that lay the foundation for later Burtt robot project *Wall-E* (2008).



https://youtu.be/QHH3iSeDBLo

As Daniels remarked, "That was my favorite episode. Ben has a particular affection for me as C-3P0 and has a natural empathy toward R2-D2." (*Ewoks* and *Droids* were followed on the small screen by *Clone Wars* (Cartoon Network, 2008-15) and *Rebels* (Disney Channel, 2014-18), whose sound worlds may be investigated in future installments.)

Elsewhere, sound was particularly important to *Star Wars* in video game format. According to Felan Parker, since the release of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* for Atari, video games have had prominence within the *Star Wars* storyworld; as Jason Scott puts it, "*Star Wars* has been repurposed for each new technology, frequently as a flagship title to help sell hardware." In the games, the Force becomes visualized and sonified. In *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* (1994), it has, in Parker's words, a "tinkling sound" while in *The Force Unleashed* (2008), it sounds like "gushing wind." As Christopher Coleman puts it, the *Star Wars* video games were perhaps more adventurous than the films and other forms of media to break away from the John Williams score and musically innovate.



https://youtu.be/qoriud07TCg

Coleman argues that the zenith of this innovation was *The Force Unleashed* (for Xbox 360, Playstation, Nintendo Wii, or DS), set between *Revenge of the Sith* and *A New Hope,* centered around Darth Vader's secret apprentice, Starkiller. This gave players the opportunity to be "visually stunned" but also musically impressed, creating a reactive musical environment that bridged the "significant stylistic gap between the two *Star Wars* trilogies."



https://youtu.be/gi75UY43BJA

In 2012, Disney acquired Lucasfilm for $4 billion, starting a new trilogy cycle. Furthermore, Disney would begin making the Anthology films, "churning out" a new film "every two or three years indefinitely, providing the anchor for brand extensions worldwide," of which *Solo* is the second (with *Rogue One,* 2016, being the first). "The cultural box-office explosion" from *Black Panther* has reportedly carried into *Solo,* with "fascinating" African-American actor Donald Glover as Lando Calrissian inheriting the cape from Billy Dee Williams.



https://youtu.be/XEr_8-X-eJ8

However, *Star Wars* has never been able to escape, in Andrew Howe's words, "the gravitational pull of contemporary racial politics"; the original trilogy has suffered from a notable absence of human racial minorities. Howe argues, for example, that Lucas withholds from the Tusken Raiders any forms of humanizing speech, in turn suggesting that human desert races like the Bedouins share the Tusken Raiders' brutishness. "Perhaps," Howe posits, "Lucas is suggesting that it is only in areas of lax governmental control that racial minorities can exist unmodified by race-based expectations."

More infamous, perhaps, is Ahmed Best's performance in *The Phantom Menace* as Jar-Jar Binks. Patricia Williams wrote scathingly of Jar-Jar's "mush of West African, Caribbean, and African-American linguistic styles" in *The Nation*. The perception is that "Jar Jar was depicted in broad, stereotypical terms as the lazy Jamaican," if not more pejoratively. Silas Carson played Nute Gunray (*The Phantom Menace, Attack of the Clones*) as a Transylvanian, though audiences interpreted the Neimoidians as having East Asian accents which, combined with the qualities of sadism, power, and cowardice, caused some concern over stereotyped portrayals. However, as Howe points out, the main villains in the prequels are largely coded as white.

Howe argues that Lucas (and Lucasfilm, and by extension, Disney) were made exceedingly aware of *Star Wars*' potentially unsatisfying track record as regards race and ethnicity, which he believes has been addressed, with varying degrees of success, in the prequels. Perhaps more successful was the casting of Mexican actor Diego Luna, playing the heroic rebel Cassian Andor in *Rogue One,* with a pronounced accent, which Samantha Schmidt puts this way, "There was no particular reason Cassian was Mexican, or why he shouldn't be. He just was. [. . .] It was a rare example of a time when a Latino actor has been cast in a blockbuster film not simply as a token Latino character but as a leading role with no obvious ties to Latino culture," though arguably the same had occurred 14 years earlier with the casting of Jimmy Smits as Bail Organa (Smits is half Puerto Rican).

https://youtu.be/4f0xE_M0_0M

Star Wars in the digital era also revisited the divide between Standard North American and Standard Neutral English, particularly in the characters of Rey and Finn. Rey, the hero whose journey across *The Force Awakens, The Last Jedi,* and Episode IX has mirrored Luke Skywalker's, is played by British actor Daisy Ridley, who has maintained a Standard Neutral English throughout her performance. Finn, former stormtrooper FN-2187, Rey's friend and potential love interest, is also played by a British actor, John Boyega, who has swapped his accent for a Standard North American one. Boyega's claims that director Rian Johnson felt Boyega's accent just didn't work are ironic, considering that Lucas originally preferred an American accent for Threepio (voiced by Anthony Daniels in a Standard English Neutral accent). American-ness and Britishness were clearly a major component of the latest grouping of *Star Wars* films:



https://youtu.be/2xbifts7GdI

Among other things, this resulted in rampant speculation about Rey's parentage, her "Core Worlds"/Coruscanti accent making it clear that she wasn't the long-lost daughter of Han Solo and Princess Leia. By contrast, Kylo Ren, Han and Leia's actual son (and Rey's antagonist/potential love interest), played by Adam Driver, does *not* emulate his code-swapping grandfather Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader and speaks Standard North American (though with the same bass baritone as James Earl Jones).

Finn's accent and role feeds into a long-standing argument regarding the role of the stormtrooper, who spoke in the original trilogy with a Standard North American accent (likely because these characters were dubbed by Americans, like Bill Wookey) whereas, as previously discussed, the management structure of the Empire emulated its namesake Emperor and spoke Standard English Neutral. In the prequels, Jango Fett, the prototype for the stormtrooper clone army, spoke with a New Zealand accent, predicated on the Maori ancestry of actor Temuera Morrison, a convention carried through during *Clone Wars,* which is set between *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith.*

https://youtu.be/r8UmLwJhU5Q

To return to Ridley and Boyega, though, while both were born in London, the "suitability" of their respective accents says a lot about the endurance of class distinctions in British culture. Ridley's suitably "noble-sounding" accent, closely matching Standard English Neutral, differs greatly from Boyega's Peckham accent. You can take the stormtrooper out of the Empire, but you can't take the American-ness out of the stormtrooper, it seems.

Ridley, with a background in music performance, is a mezzo-soprano, and her speaking voice is somewhat low in pitch, in contrast to the stereotypical feminine voice, higher-pitched and lilting. This vocal quality has not garnered the attention that Carrie Fisher's voice has in her last role, in *The Last Jedi,* in which she was pilloried by some elements of fandom:

> *her voice is kerazy! It has that "I've been through some serious drugs and alcohol" tone, which, unless she can really play it down, would be pretty distracting for a "Queen". It doesn't sound like an easy voice to get away from....throaty, broken and borderline insane.*

As Ros Jennings and Eva Krainitzki note, ageism is part of contemporary society. They further argue that a binary is usually established in screen media between "ageing as decline" or "successful ageing." If an older woman on screen does not conform as either a "graceful" ager or "sexy oldie," she is effectively erased and made invisible, clearly *not* the case with a visible and powerful General Leia Organa in *The Force Awakens* or *The Last Jedi.* Nor has Fisher's voice been erased. The comments made by (usually male) critics regarding Fisher's "kerazy" voice as evidenced above clearly situates her in, as Melanie Williams puts it, "the middle of both misogyny and gerontophobia." On the dichotomy between "ageing well" and "letting oneself go," Fisher's voice is perceived as the latter and therefore not evidence of a "queenly" persona.

https://youtu.be/wbFwvTI0fCU

To break through this binary, it might be more instructive to look at the example of Vanessa Redgrave, who, like British compatriots Dame Helen Mirren and Dame Judi Dench, are examples of (in Williams' words) female "post-middle-age life [being] as equally dynamic and fulfilling as the years before." Redgrave's distinctive "husky" voice ("powerful" despite her life-long smoking) more closely resembles Fisher's, also deepened in register (though whether her self-admitted addictions to cocaine and prescription drugs have had any bearing on the timbre, intensity, and pitch of her voice is of, arguably, less relevance). While, as Williams would argue, Mirren and Dench in their public personas have attempted to "transcend age by ignoring it," Fisher as Leia in *The Last Jedi* seems to adhere more to a model Jennings and Krainitzki have applied to Redgrave in *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012-), where her voice is of paramount importance—a holistic understanding of female ageing, neither hypersexualized nor invisible.

Fisher's death before the release of *The Last Jedi* predicated a good deal of work cutting together Leia's dialogue in order to finish the film. *Star Wars* is no stranger to such digital wizardry, having already digitally inserted Fisher's face onto actress Ingvild Deila in 2016 for a scene in *Rogue One* and having resurrected Peter Cushing in the same film. Viewers were seemingly so struck with the visual spectacle of Cushing, portrayed on set by another actor, Guy Henry, with FACS (facial action coding system) superimposed, there was little comment on the non-Cushing vocal performance—though a number of fans felt they could tell the difference. Manuel Nogueira argued,

> *The only thing that put me off a little was the voice – the way the words were pronounced was perfect, but the tone was not. Peter Cushing had a beautifull [sic] unique voice and I suppose it's difficult for someone to imitate it exactly.*

While commentators argued about the ethics of these uncanny resurrections, the voices for these hybrid creations seemed to fly under the radar. Fisher's voice was original, having been edited together from her dialogue in previous *Star Wars* films.

I'm such a happy Chewbacca!!

John Williams has continued to be involved in scoring the newest *Star Wars* films, to greater and lesser degrees. Composer Michael Giacchino had only four weeks to complete the score to *Rogue One* as he was brought in at the last minute. Giacchino, as the first person to compose for a *Star Wars* film other than John Williams, faced the difficulty of fitting his musical style within the existing Williams leitmotif structure while contributing something new. Broxton notes that within Giacchino's score are allusions to the Battle of Hoth music from *The Empire Strikes Back* throughout the sequence "AT-ACT Assault" in *Rogue One,* including the use of xylophones and pianos, while the rhythm from the "Rebel Blockade Runner" sequence of *A New Hope* is heard in one of the new themes Giacchino composed, "Hope":



https://youtu.be/RaEzKRngCyY

Williams himself was back for *The Force Awakens* (2015), about which he noted, "It would be like writing an opera, and then writing six more based on the same kind of material and the same story . . . over the course of 40 years." Similarly to previous movies in the series, the ratio of music to scenes in *The Force Awakens* is high, with little reference to previous leitmotifs (only seven minutes). *The Last Jedi* works differently, introducing, as Broxton points out, only two significant new leitmotifs. Nevertheless, Broxton argues, "As a result, *The Last Jedi* manages to be warmly nostalgic, emotionally powerful, and daring and thrilling, all at the same time, and often in the same cue." For example, "Battle of the Heroes" returns in *The Last Jedi,* though it was last heard in *Revenge of the Sith.*

Although *Solo* makes sparing use of Williams' leitmotifs (for example, "Rebel Fanfare" in an exhilarating sequence), John Powell's score has seemingly more shading of mentor Hans Zimmer or Howard Shore. Bributzer-Stull considered Shore's leitmotif structure for *The Lord of the Rings* films the most complex in film history. Also in *Solo* we have the first (to my knowledge) onscreen diegetic use of Williams' themes, the Imperial March, which is used as part of a recruitment video on Corellia, in which a voice in Standard English Neutral tells potential applicants to join up and see the universe.

However, quite a different diegetic Williams music moment has already been heard, in Ep. 1 – "A Wind to Shake the Stars" of the 1981 *Star Wars* radio dramatization. Curiously enough, it was also part of a recruitment video, though, this time, the music was "Main/Luke A." The first non-music and non-narration sounds heard in the radio adaptation are, in fact, Luke humming along to this Imperial Space Academy theme tune which he is playing repeatedly in the techdome before interrupted by his frenemies Windy and Deke. (For an idea of what it might have looked like, and indeed, a notion of how integral the score of *Star Wars* is to the story—and how odd it feels when it's absent—take a look at one of the deleted scenes from *A New Hope:*

https://youtu.be/4-j4P4Ch-Ew

Beyond musical motifs, sound design in the newest films builds heavily on previously established conventions. *Solo,* the first *Star Wars* film not to feature Artoo and Threepio, gives us our first female-voiced droid, L-3 (voiced by Phoebe Waller-Bridge). L-3 speaks with a Standard English Neutral accent, which would lend credence to our "Core Worlds"/Coruscanti accent hypothesis. However, in all other respects, the film seems to muddy the waters considerably regarding consistency of accents. For example, soldier-of-fortune Val (Thandie Newton) speaks Standard English Neutral, though she could have easily been raised in the Core Worlds and fallen from grace. However, characters like Qi'ra (Emilia Clarke), who grew up a street orphan in Corellia, speak Standard English Neutral, which hardly fits the hypothesis that it denotes the supposed Core Worlds linguistic training that the Empire (and the First Order) value. Surely Beckett's (Woody Harrelson) disguise among the Imperials should have fooled no one, given he is the only officer there with an American accent. Some characters don't really seem to know what accent to put on, such as Paul Bettany's Dryden Vos, who appears to be speaking Standard North American with some difficulty.



https://youtu.be/JgzZBU-cbgA

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In writing this article, I have realized the emotional impact of sound in *Star Wars* not just generally, but upon myself. The most intimate sonic moment for me is the Force/Obi-Wan/All-Purpose leitmotif, also known by the visual scene in which it first appears (or, in Bribitzer-Stull's terms, the "prototypic statement"), Binary Sunset in *A New Hope* [However, if you watch the films in chronological rather than release order, you will not fail to recognize it in *The Phantom Menace* onwards]. At this moment, according to Bribitzer-Stull, "we have no idea of what this musical signifier actually signifies, but we know it means *something important*." "Rey A/Primary" (from *The Force Awakens*) is linked via chords to "Binary Sunset." I would argue the frequent use of "Binary Sunset" titillates the film-goer in scenes like the one in *The Last Jedi* in which—apparently astrally linked across space by Grand Leader Snoke—Rey and Kylo touch hands. By invoking "Binary Sunset," does such a moment argue that the two will bring long-desired balance to the Force, given this leitmotif's frequent and long-standing association with the Force? Or does it have another meaning? There is another musical echo when Rey and Kylo work together rather than against each other in that movie—a short reference to "Duel of the Fates" from *The Phantom Menace*:

https://youtu.be/7rowkMpohoY

However, Broxton best describes the emotional power of "Binary Sunset" in *The Last Jedi* by linking it cyclically with the title of the film:

> *as Luke watches Ahch-To's twin suns rise in his final moments before he becomes one with the Force, [this] is a heartbreaking mirror of the legendary 'Binary Sunset' scene from 40 years ago, and allows us to reflect on the life of that young farm boy from Tatooine, dreaming of a life of adventure.*

Interviewed in 2018, Ben Burtt noted that, "despite the digital age, I still emphasise field recording real, physical objects." As has been previously argued, Burtt's commitment to creative sound

design which is still rooted in the experience of the physical world helped locate the fantastical elements of *Star Wars*. Coupled with George Lucas' keen sound awareness and vision (or sonic vision), *Star Wars*' sound has come to be an integral part of its ontology, whether in audiovisual media or its countless other incarnations (ahead of the release of *Solo,* children could clamour for a Nerf Blaster, Lightsaber, and Millennium Falcon Playset, complete with appropriate sound effects). No longer is it necessary to create one's own sound effects during play, and one can roleplay as Chewbacca just as easily as Han Solo. According to Alexis C. Madrigal of *The Atlantic*, "Humans being humans, once Chewbacca's voice had been manufactured by Burtt, people began to imitate it with their own vocal chords." And while "Chewbacca Mask Lady" (Candace Payne) seems to revel as much in her appearance as Chewie as in the Wookiee sounds her mask makes, it's surely through the sound of her exuberant, irrepressible laughter that we enjoy the YouTube video that has currently received more than six million views.



https://youtu.be/y3yRv5Jg5TI

May the Force (and all its accompanying sounds) be with you.

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Featured Image made here: Enjoy!

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