

theguardian

# Shoplifters say they steal because they need love. I need love too, but I don't wander around Tesco looking for it

Celebrity pilferers such as Antony Worrall Thompson are a source of hilarity, not outrage



**Suzanne Moore**

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 11 January 2012 20.00 GMT



Help yourself ... supermarkets are reluctant to disclose how much they lose though self-service tills. Photograph: Alamy

It was Napoleon who once called us a "nation of shopkeepers". To judge from the reaction to Antony Worrall Thompson's pilfering from Tesco, we are actually a nation of shoplifters. Still, celebrity shoplifting is a source of hilarity, not outrage.

We don't know why Thompson stole nasty coleslaw when he was buying nearly £200 worth of champagne. We don't know why Tesco watched him do this five times. The man is a mystery. Even to himself. Since being caught stealing, he says, he sobs himself to sleep. He has floated all kinds of deep-rooted psychological difficulties from childhood abuse, to the collapse of his business, to anaemia, to bereavements or even

wondering if he has Alzheimer's. He is now going to get the treatment he needs. It's a shame we don't have Shoplifters Anonymous as they do in the US. Celebrity shoplifting is seen as a cry for help. Embarrassing, yes. Evil, no. Remember the "Free Winona" T-shirts?

Such people don't steal because they need stuff or are immoral. They steal because they are stressed/addicted to painkillers/have a deep-seated need for love. I get that. I have a deep-seated need for love but I don't often wander around Tesco looking for it.

Part of our understanding reaction comes from the fact that we are more sympathetic to crimes we may ourselves have committed. Obviously, my friends and I were never tempted to shoplift even though our anarchist texts told us it was a good way to "poke a finger in the eye of big business". Consumer lust was a *bad* thing but what if you shared the proceeds? On those terms, it would have been immoral to steal from little shops, of course, but not big bad superstores. Stealing from them is victimless crime – not like burglary or mugging.

But the crime I am talking about is amateur shoplifting. The type that I, as a middle-aged woman, could find myself doing owing to my "midlife crisis". There are whole studies on "Nice Women Who Steal". It's a cheap thrill. Well, free, actually. There is a lot of "I don't know what came over me" post-crime, and some connect shoplifting to an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder with a purge/binge element coming in the form of risk/reward. Kleptomania, of course, was once explained by the "wandering womb" theory. Literally, women were thought so peculiar that we must have wombs where our brains should be. Use that one next time you find yourself in Waitrose stuffing high-end deli items into your knickers.

Actually, this pathologising of deviant individuals masks the scale of the problem. There is a massive amount of professional shoplifting and the cost of it is paid by the consumer, often in the form of deeply unimaginative crime prevention. What was Tesco doing watching CCTV four times before they nabbed Thompson? Professional thieves know how to get around most tagging and alarm systems. Ever since goods have been put on display instead of behind counters, so we can touch and feel them, shoplifting has gone up and the shops underwrite the price.

All crime is opportunistic and shoplifting depends on perceived risk. Some shops look to me as if they are asking for it, even though I am not a criminal. Or stressed. Innovative crime prevention strategies are coming out of places such as Design Against Crime (DAC), a research centre at Central St Martins, run by Professor Lorraine Gamman, which asks retailers to "think thief" and understand what "the criminal gaze" sees.

That means seeing what is easy to swipe. Thompson was caught at a self-scanning till.

Big supermarkets are reluctant to say how much they are losing with them. They simply say that self-service tills enable them to cut jobs and that some customers love them. Especially those who buy "embarrassing items". I guess this means condoms and tampons, not Fray Bentos pies. Personally, these machines drive me insane and I always need to call for help.

Somehow, though, service has come to mean a Mary Portas type of middle-class obsession. Really, service for many just means some human interaction. Supermarkets are the only places some people get it. Would we be less likely to steal while chatting to someone? Or in a recession do we expect more theft?

All post-riot analysis was keen to make a distinction between looting (criminal and damaging) and shoplifting. Yes, we know that there were many stupid acts of defective consumerism. Yes, small, local shops were wrecked as well as big chains. But the sentencing of some who wandered into already vandalised shops and took something in a Worrall Thompson-type moment of madness seems disproportionate. We care little about the traumatic childhoods of those people, or "the stressors" that caused the shoplifters of the world to unite. Custodial sentences, not treatment, have been given and largely backed by the public.

Perhaps, though, random acts of stealing such as Worrall Thompson's, of taking because we feel taken from, make us question some of the basics. There is a free market in morals here. There are fine lines between deviance, desire, debt and duty. The barcodes on these items are not always so easy to identify.

This is how daylight robbery happens. Not in a riot, or a revolution. It's a mistake! It's the menopause! For look here, I am the consumer but doing the work of the cashier. Everything is at my fingertips ... until I hear the demon robot voice in the machine. I ring the bell for assistance while it taunts "Unauthorised item in the bagging area". And there always is. And it's not just me.

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 Staff

 Contributor



[Swedinburgh](#)

11 January 2012 8:11PM

Especially those who buy "embarrassing items". I guess this means condoms and tampons...

Eh? Don't people grow out of that by the time they're 16?

[Recommend?](#) (117)

Responses (0)

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[PaddyMcGintysGoat](#)

11 January 2012 8:13PM

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[StrokerAce](#)

11 January 2012 8:19PM

Especially those who buy "embarrassing items". I guess this means condoms and tampons

Or the Mail on Sunday.

[Recommend?](#) (485)

Responses (1)

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[davidabsalom](#)

11 January 2012 8:21PM

Custodial sentences, not treatment, have been given and largely backed by the public. Backed by Worrall Thompson too. Though he doesn't seem to be demanding a custodial sentence for himself.

[Recommend?](#) (160)

Responses (1)

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[Deckard72](#)

11 January 2012 8:22PM

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[zombus](#)

11 January 2012 8:22PM

"I need love too, but I don't wander around Tesco looking for it..."

I do.

The big question is whether it's going to be a bottle of cider or a bottle of red.

[Recommend?](#) (101)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip

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[PaulBowen](#)

11 January 2012 8:22PM

Why did the chicken cross the road? Because it was under Antony Worrall Thompson's coat.

[Recommend?](#) (347)

Responses (0)

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[zombus](#)

11 January 2012 8:22PM

Bought, I mean, not nicked!

[Recommend?](#) (15)

Responses (0)

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[fingerbobs](#)

11 January 2012 8:23PM

I have no love for Mr Worrall Thompson however, I can find very little funny about a man who clearly has mental health issues.

[Recommend?](#) (126)

Responses (2)

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[zapthecrap](#)

11 January 2012 8:24PM

Response to [PaddyMcGintysGoat, 11 January 2012 8:13PM](#)

I think you have not understood the article,your response is very Knee jerky.

I think we are discussing the reasons why people who can afford not to shoplift do so and often under therapy they use the excuse that they lack sufficient love.

[Recommend?](#) (34)

Responses (0)

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[exsanddancer](#)

11 January 2012 8:26PM

I didn't know there was a "treatment" for being a tea leaf? Is it available on hte NHS and

can he get it in prison?

Recommend? (23)

Responses (0)

Report



| Link



suzannemoore

11 January 2012 8:28PM

Indeed @zapthecrap. I did NOT write this headline.

Recommend? (39)

Responses (1)

Report



| Link



zapthecrap

11 January 2012 8:29PM

What do you expect from a Tory, an apology and then let off, if that were me with his form I would be in the clink.

Recommend? (77)

Responses (1)

Report



| Link



kendrew

11 January 2012 8:29PM

But Tesco? Jeeze if one is going to take the risk aim high for fucks sakes. Fortnum and Mason for Foie Gras, Harrods Food Hall for the cheeses, the Waitrose Food Hall at John Lewis Oxford Circus for anything and everything.

Tesco; how pedestrian.

Recommend? (84)

Responses (1)

Report

[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[geoffo](#)

11 January 2012 8:29PM

Many of those caught up in the riots last summer and who helped themselves to stuff on the spur of the moment (as against those who deliberately broke into premises to steal the stuff) got custodial sentences.

It does therefore seem odd that Mr. Thompson gets lighter treatment. It is not as if in his case it was a spur of the moment thing; he was seen on five different occasions to be pilfering. Presumably this is because in admitting his guilt and receiving a formal caution it saves Tesco the cost of prosecuting and a court case. Perhaps someone with more legal knowledge than I have could explain it.

Is it not possible he simply realised after the first theft that he had got away with it and thus returned again for the thrill of it? I am sure I have read somewhere that the thrill is part of the fun for serial shoplifters.

[Recommend?](#) (144)[Responses](#) (1)[Report](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[HowardD](#)

11 January 2012 8:30PM

Celebrity pilferers such as Antony Worrall Thompson are a source of hilarity, not outrage

If shoplifting is an illness, why are you mocking it? You got indignant enough over Tourettes.

[Recommend?](#) (108)[Responses](#) (0)[Report](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[dcntr](#)

11 January 2012 8:33PM

What is this column's central thesis, I don't get it, and is it meant to be funny or serious? Anyway, Worrall Thompson's shoplifting definitely does not need to be pathologised, shoplifting is blatantly fun and a cheap thrill.

Also you can kind of see why they watched him on CCTV five times before doing anything. You'd be too busy going "wtf is that really Antony Worrall Thompson... shoplifting coleslaw?!"

[Recommend?](#) (93)

Responses (0)

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[crinklyoldgit](#)

11 January 2012 8:33PM

Anthony Worrall Thomson doesn't need to pilfer to be hilarious (but not in that good stand up comic sort of way).

Honestly, is it not the case that anyone sensible has a moment, sometime in their teens when they realise that pilfering something worth a fiver is really not worth the risk. (I mean regardless of the quantity of love they had received as babies/infants etc).

Curiously- he hadn't revealed his social maladaptation to abuse as a child until quite late in his life.

One wonders why Tesco didn't just have a quiet word with him. Did he rub someone at the local Tesco up the wrong way?

[Recommend?](#) (18)

Responses (1)

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[mschin](#)

11 January 2012 8:33PM

Personal anecdote unsubstantiated by any empirical evidence, I know, but ... the most prolific shoplifter I know is an extremely wealthy pensioner who has made a lifetime hobby out of robbing upmarket shops just because no-one suspects her of doing so: she has never been caught.

[Recommend?](#) (78)

Responses (1)

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| [Link](#)



[meejahoor](#)

11 January 2012 8:35PM

In which aisle is this 'love' you are speaking of?

Does it come with double points on my Tesco card?

[Recommend?](#) (31)

Responses (0)

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[Zerotolerance](#)

11 January 2012 8:36PM

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[Leopold1904](#)

11 January 2012 8:37PM

It was Napoleon who once called us a "nation of shopkeepers".

Well he may or may not have done, but if so he was simply quoting Adam Smith (The Wealth of Nations).

This came up as a suggestion on wadday and Bella said no, it was a bit sad. Pity no one told Ms Moore.

[Recommend?](#) (11)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[rdmantle](#)

11 January 2012 8:37PM

Shoplifting is not a victimless crime at all.

It's partly because of arseholes like Worrall-Thompson and their ilk that the cost of goods at the supermarket is so high. When people like him steal stuff, we all pay the cost of it.

lock him up.

[Recommend?](#) (103)

[Responses](#) (2)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[Rainborough](#)

11 January 2012 8:38PM

We care little about the traumatic childhoods of those people, or "the stressors" that caused the shoplifters of the world to unite.

Ah, that excessively loose "we" which columnists affect. Speak for yourself.

[Recommend?](#) (25)

[Responses](#) (0)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[Wherearemyglasses](#)

11 January 2012 8:38PM

Response to [kendrew](#), 11 January 2012 8:29PM

I once knew someone who'd shoplift from the local wholefood co-op and radical bookshop because "they were middle class and so deserved to be stolen from" but who wouldn't steal from Tesco because "it was where working class people shopped".

He had some daft ideas!

[Recommend?](#) (43)

[Responses](#) (1)

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| [Link](#)



[holzy](#)

11 January 2012 8:39PM

Even though every little helps, the quality of love in Tesco is very poor. Just generic, everyday sort of love. Pleb love that's only worth having if everywhere else is closed. I get my love in Waitrose, where a troll of most aisles generally guarantees something tasty.

[Recommend?](#) (33)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[scoosh](#)

11 January 2012 8:39PM

Response to [davidabsalom, 11 January 2012 8:21PM](#)

Let me do it for him - I demand a custodial sentence for Worrall Thompson. No, not for stealing 'things' but for using a self check out till - I always see that as stealing a job from an unemployed person. This is much worse in my mind than stealing 'things'.

[Recommend?](#) (131)

[Responses](#) (3)

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| [Link](#)



[Fainche](#)

11 January 2012 8:39PM

Still, **celebrity shoplifting is a source of hilarity**, not outrage.

Can't understand what possessed you to write that, is the situation hilarious because he's a minor celebrity or the crime? What ever underlying issues Worrall-Thompson may have I guess he's fair game for an arse kicking article?

I don't know what makes people steal for a cheap thrill or because they're going through a crisis, but if that's someone's state of mind then you can't apply sense or reason to it.

When Isobel Barnett got caught the shame and media attention resulted in her committing suicide, not exactly a hilarious outcome but who cares when it's a 'celebrity'.

[Recommend?](#) (41)

[Responses](#) (3)

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[MadMacz](#)

11 January 2012 8:40PM

Is it not possible he simply realised after the first theft that he had got away with it and thus returned again for the thrill of it?

Which would support my theory that:

...he sobs himself to sleep.

not because he shoplifted, but because he got caught.

[Recommend?](#) (69)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[PaddyMcGintysGoat](#)

11 January 2012 8:42PM

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[daiiad](#)

11 January 2012 8:42PM

To sum up, then;

When the lower classes steal it's a crime.

When the upper classes steal it's a treatable illness.

[Recommend?](#) (337)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[zapthecrap](#)

11 January 2012 8:42PM

Response to [crinklyoldgit](#), 11 January 2012 8:33PM

He is a Tory and like all good Tories he became arrogant and decided he could do what ever he wanted.

This has nothing to do with love they actually believe themselves to be above others.  
I reckon it stems from a childish selfish attention seeking, disorder.

[Recommend?](#) (68)

Responses (2)

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[philippphilip99](#)

11 January 2012 8:43PM

Sneering, unsympathetic, simplistic and nasty.

[Recommend?](#) (21)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)



[raindancer68](#)

11 January 2012 8:44PM

There's an independent hardware store in the north called Madeley and Thompson.  
They recently had a closing down sale, blaming the economic downturn and shoplifters.  
The cosmic jokester has a lot to answer for.

[Recommend?](#) (24)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

Clip

| [Link](#)

[dcmtr](#)

11 January 2012 8:44PM

Response to [Fainche, 11 January 2012 8:39PM](#)

It is funny to see a faded celebrity - a chef, no less - caught shoplifting poor quality produce from Tesco for cheap kicks. It's also a bit tragic, in the manner of Les Dennis as portrayed in Extras. But I would hope that he can see the funny side himself rather than feeling mortified. What he did is nothing to be too deeply ashamed of, and I am laughing with him not at him.

[Recommend?](#) (18)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

Clip

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[scoosh](#)

11 January 2012 8:45PM

Response to [holzy](#), 11 January 2012 8:39PM

I have come to hate Tesco. I hate the deceitfulness of its 'tricky' pricing, the yards and yards of choice which numbs my mind and steals my time. I have come to love Aldi. I love the simplicity of its pricing, I love the simplicity of its range and thus choice, I love the small intimacy of its shop, I love the surprises awaiting on display - buttons next to the apples, winter coats and summer boots. I love that I can go in shop and be out again almost in the blink of an eye. Tesco, you have my love no more, my love has gone to another never to return to your tortuous claws and ways.

[Recommend?](#) (120)

Responses (1)

[Report](#)

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| [Link](#)



[peerlesspundit](#)

11 January 2012 8:45PM

Response to [fingerbobs](#), 11 January 2012 8:23PM

fingerbobs, how can you tell Mr Worrall Thompson has "mental health issues"?

Are you a psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse?

If you are, have you undertaken a clinical examination or assessment of this gentleman?

Perhaps you can share your insights with us, starting with your definition of "mental health issues"

If I committed a crime, and was caught in the act, I am sure that I would feel anxious, depressed, and, if held up to public ridicule, unloved.

I am not sure that this would demonstrate that my actions were the result of "mental health issues"

[Recommend?](#) (63)

Responses (2)

[Report](#)

[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[wordtweaker](#)

11 January 2012 8:45PM

@geoffo

Did you mean 'trill' is part of the fun. Didn't realise Thompson was an avian supporter. Good stuff Suzanne...candid with a touch of sympathy.

[Recommend?](#) (4)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[roserat](#)

11 January 2012 8:46PM

Chef Antony Worrall Thompson nicks stuff from a supermarket a few times and gets told off with a caution. Joe Bloggs walks into a shop, tries to nick stuff or even doesn't nick stuff but is just 'there', gets nicked himself, theres a riot going on, everyone goes tut tut, general public don't seem to give a damn about what has gone on in Joe's life and why should they? So Antony, you've been lucky plus people feel sorry for you on top of that. Personally I've more empathy for some of the people punished in the riots, and yes, I love Manchester.

[Recommend?](#) (93)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)[Clip](#)[| Link](#)[Benulek](#)

11 January 2012 8:46PM

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[zapthecrap](#)

11 January 2012 8:46PM

Response to [Fainche, 11 January 2012 8:39PM](#)

How many poor people get the same discretion if they shoplift for the same reasons as the rich?

I doubt a poor person would be allowed to even suggest they were disturbed at the time they did it.

[Recommend?](#) (69)

[Responses](#) (2)

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[TVwriter](#)

11 January 2012 8:47PM

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[Abertawe](#)

11 January 2012 8:47PM

Response to [scoosh, 11 January 2012 8:39PM](#)

I demand a custodial sentence for Worrall Thompson. No, not for stealing 'things' but for using a self check out till - I always see that as stealing a job from an unemployed person. This is much worse in my mind than stealing 'things'.

Presumably you never use a self-service petrol pump, or withdraw money from an ATM, or use online check-in when you travel? And you have a maid instead of a washing machine and dishwasher?

[Recommend?](#) (80)

[Responses](#) (1)

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[fingerbobs](#)

11 January 2012 8:48PM

Response to [zapthecrap, 11 January 2012 8:29PM](#)

I appreciate that the coalition government aren't exactly flavour of the month round these parts however, what on earth has this mans political leanings got to do with

anything ffs?

[Recommend?](#) (39)

Responses (0)

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[exsanddancer](#)

11 January 2012 8:48PM

Response to [geoffo](#), 11 January 2012 8:29PM

tesco does not prosecute anyone. That is the role of the CPS and a few other statutory bodies such as the BBC (licence fines only - not sadly for broadcasting shite telly.

[Recommend?](#) (16)

Responses (1)

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[SirOrfeo](#)

11 January 2012 8:49PM

Self-service checkouts must be heaven for shoplifters, but we can only assume they save the supermarkets (in wages) far more than they lose (in stock). They probably prove that the vast majority are pretty honest when it comes to paying for things.

Personally I like the self-service tills because I'm a miserable git and it means I don't have to interact with anyone. But then I've worked in a shop before so I find them easy to use.

Not sure how WH Smith will cope with the advent of self-service checkouts though. How do you get a computer to persuade someone to part with less money for their bottled water in exchange for a copy of the Telegraph? Or tempt them into buying cut-price Chocolate Oranges or chewing gum multipacks?

[Recommend?](#) (36)

Responses (0)

[Report](#)

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[ivanna](#)

11 January 2012 8:49PM

I have a deep-seated need for love but I don't often wander around Tesco looking for it. Indeed no. You announce it in an international newspaper.

[Recommend?](#) (53)

[Responses](#) (1)

[Report](#)



| [Link](#)



[Censorshipsucks](#)

11 January 2012 8:49PM

Is AWT the new Jeremy Clarkson? I may have missed that memo.

It would be really lovely if the Grauniad's new year resolution was to be more positive about stuff. It is really depressing to visit this site these days. It's become a festering slough of despond of negativity and holier-than-thou right-on sneering.

For God's sake, take your thumbs out of your arses and try to see something good in people.

[Recommend?](#) (28)

[Responses](#) (1)

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| [Link](#)



[suzannemoore](#)

11 January 2012 8:50PM

@PaddyMcGintysGoat. Context ?? I said I dont often do it. The headline makes me look needy. Which is not a good look. I must say stuffed mongoose is worth leaving the house for. No am afraid no Lidl near me but Tescos and Morrisons. Sainsburys if needs must and someone gives me a lift as I don't have a car.

[Recommend?](#) (9)

[Responses](#) (1)

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[| Link](#)[limu](#)

11 January 2012 8:50PM

When I used to live in Japan I would frequently see old women stealing from the 100Yen store (A bit like Poundland).

Apparently it was something of a problem and OAPs were far more likely to shoplift than the younger generations. For them I guess it was just a spark of excitement in an otherwise boring retirement.

I was always tempted to alert the store security to their dastardly theivery, just to see their reaction. But I was too worried that they'd have a heart attack and keel over.

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