



Research case study: Niťárna (Thread factory) Česká Třebová

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Abstract: The company Niťárna Česká Třebová s. r. o. is a manufacturing company operating in the textile industry. Its products include embroidery, crochet, patchwork and knitting yarns. The company was founded in 2000 as part of the original company Primona, while textile production had existed in Česká Třebová since the middle of the 19th century. The key source of information for developing the case study was an interview with the company's executive. The analysis showed that it is very difficult for the company to strengthen competitiveness in a highly saturated market. At the same time, the company has to face a decline in interest in its products, especially among the younger generation. To strengthen competitiveness, the company strives to provide maximum service and cultivate exclusive relationships with customers. A combination of causal and effectuation logic with a predominance of effectuation logic is used in company decision-making.

Keywords: textile industry, yarn, opportunities, innovation, covid-19

Company presentation

The Niťárna Česká Třebová (Thread Factory) was officially established on June 1, 2000. However, the history of the textile industry in Česká Třebová dates back to 1848, when a mill for washing sheep's wool was set up in a mill on the banks of the Třebovka River, in 1849 the first vertical steam engine was built and a cotton spinning mill was added (Niťárna Česká Třebová, n.d.). In 1858, the "old factory" was established, on the basis of which the buildings of today's Niťárna were built. At that time, the company employed up to 300 people. In 1882, the Viennese firm Hermann Pollack and Sons bought the factory. In the 1930s, the production of embroidery cotton was established on the 4th floor of the spinning mill. After 1948, thread production took place in the "old factory" building and was expanded to include sewing thread, crochet and patchwork yarn. In 1949, a new company, Perla Česká Třebová, was established, which included other factories in Polička and Zábřeh in Moravia. During the political and economic liberalization in 1968, the Třebov textile company became independent and Primona was founded on January 1, 1969. However, during normalization, the textile mill once again became part of the Perla plant. After 1989, specifically on July 1, 1990, Primona was re-established as an independent enterprise (Velšová, 2021). While most of the Primona area was demolished, the "old factory" with Niťárna was preserved almost in its original form. The Niťárna company also acquired coloured yarn and a gas-fired steam boiler with a water plant. After the necessary repairs and modifications, it resumed the production of pearls, cordonets, knitting yarns and other traditional assortments (Šebela, 2010, p. 167).

Since its establishment in 2000, the company has employed an average of 57 employees, of which 9 are THP. In 2019, the company had 31 employees, including 1 member of management, 6 administrative employees, 2 statutory representatives and 1 member of the supervisory board (Niťárna Česká Třebová, 2020). The company makes a profit of around 2,000,000 CZK per year (average for the years 2015–2019).

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The thread mill can be divided into three main operations (see p. 11), in which individual workshops are located (Charvát, 2006):

- a) plying – here the initial operations of the cut yarn take place,
- b) dyeing room – this is where cotton yarn is treated in connection with dyeing,
- c) the thread factory itself – finishing works take place here.

The company produces (examples are shown on p. 12):

- a) Embroidery yarns (under traditional names such as Perlovka, Perlovka ombré, Norma, Mouline, Mouline ombré) in a wide range of colours (more than 140 colours in uni design).
- b) Crochet yarns that are suitable for crocheting blankets, tablecloths, curtains, but also clothes (e.g. tops, blouses, vests). Weaker crochet yarns can be used for drumsticks.
- c) Hand darning yarn for repairing children's tights, sweatpants and socks.
- d) Knitting yarn made from a mixture of cotton and viscose silk, possibly polyester staple and viscose staple or cotton and polyacrylic.
- e) Embroidery sets (template and embroidery yarn with various motifs, e.g. nature, castles, etc.). Sets consist of pattern and embroidery yarn.

Access to opportunities

Ways of planning and analysing new opportunities

The company's approach to opportunities is based on a long-standing tradition and the current market situation. During its history after 1989 (still as part of the Primona company), it had to adapt, like other companies operating in the textile and clothing industry, to new market conditions. The company faces increasing competition from countries with lower personnel costs and safety, hygiene and environmental requirements (ATOK, 2015, p. 43).

The company tries to analyse the situation on the market, but with the knowledge of negative developments and the possible termination of activity. In general, it can be said that analysis is usually associated with a predictable market (existing market and existing product), because according to the experience of entrepreneurs, if the market is more predictable, someone smarter with more resources can come quickly (Sarasvathy, 2008). On the contrary, in an unpredictable small market, a budding entrepreneur has a real chance to come up with something innovative with added value. In the case of Nifárna, the market analyses conducted in the long term show an unfavourable development, which, according to the executive director, cannot be prevented by plans or analysis, but by efforts for "bare living".

But of course, we do [note: analyses]. We draw on that knowledge in the sales department, Mrs.

Suková, every two years she always submitted a report to the board of directors, or rather to the executive board and the supervisory board, I might still be able to find it, about how the situation is developing on the market. The news always sounded negative, because it was clear that the internal market is simply declining, that competition is growing and that we are simply fighting for a bare living here.

...

Today, we are able, at least as I say, to create a ten percent profit rate from that sale. Although, of course, every owner would prefer twenty to thirty percent. But as I said, Mr. Kurka himself knew and even declared that, he had this vision and he seemed to be reconciled with it, that the Nifárna would continue to operate here for some six or seven years, he said, until he was ninety-five, now he is 90 this year. So, he said to the ninety-five and expect that if you don't find something, we'll just have to close it.

A key opportunity for the company in recent years is the cooperation with the toy manufacturer Ravensburger Karton from Polička. The company belongs to the German group Ravensburger Spieleverlag, known mainly for the production of puzzles. In addition to puzzles, Ravensburger Karton in Polička produces various games to develop children's motor skills and imagination. For the production of some products, they use yarn from Nifárny Česká Třebová. Currently, Ravensburger accounts for a third of Nifárna's sales. The opportunity was not preceded by deep analysis or planning, but by personal acquaintances that supported the development of mutual cooperation. This procedure has also been identified on several other smaller occasions and appears to be prevalent.

It basically came about because my friend, who bought Keralit in Litomyšl after the revolution, started making some kind of ceramic toys, ceramic swings and ceramic dogs and they gave them collars. And she bought cotton from us. And her son worked there with them. When he graduated, had university and gained some experience, he joined Ravensburger in Polička, as a director, so he looked around in this program and contacted the development centre in Germany and simply tried to develop this possibility as well. They didn't only cooperate with us, they cooperate with German companies, they do those things for those children. [...] It's like these personal contacts, which actually helped a little, because of course we're not the only ones who did or tried to do for them.

Working with resources and risk

According to the executive director, the approach to risk and to working with resources is relatively prudent. There is a noticeable effort to proceed with caution and focus primarily on possible risks, not potential profits. According to the statement of the executive director, the approach to risk also reflects the fact that he, the business director and the economic director are of retirement or pre-retirement age. At the same time, the influence of the owner, Mr. Kurka Sr., is evident.

But we were also guided by Mr. Kurka Sr. to be cautious, because the main indicator was the return on the investment, so that means if we shot the goods to someone in such a way that we also got the money from them, because in the nineties there was such a Klondike here. However, I was guided to be careful, to be consistent, to value the money that is earned here, so we did not waste it in any way.

They tried to modernize the operation with limited costs. They applied the "don't buy new when you can buy used" logic. They acquired machines from factories that were closing down. Here, too, they tried to use contacts.

A new machine would cost ten times what I bought it for. And I was lucky that in Germany, Slovakia, Italy and elsewhere they closed the textile shops. [...] I went there, I went to Italy to look first, once, I was there for a different reason, however, I visited there and saw and found out that the machines were there to be had, so I entered into the negotiations with the owner through an acquaintance who worked in Italy for years. That's how we got to it, the coloring machines. But I actually wanted to say that the depreciation has actually already been done for the ten years that it has been working here, the machines have been paid for. Depreciation is therefore zero and it mainly brings profit, and it brought in the worst period, we basically did not fire anyone.

The company is actively looking for new ways of selling its own products. In some cases, these experiments lead to losses, but they do not have a fatal impact.

Of course, there are contacts that disappear. Then they renew themselves, or find another. We had an excellent contact in Italy, that person died, someone was found there again, so contacts were renewed again. We now sell to well-known e-shops, for example Muziker in Slovakia. It deals with a huge wide range of products, something like Amazon. We tried Amazon but that didn't work. We were beaten a lot. There we had to pay commissions, even though we were actually at a loss. We tried to set up our own e-shop in Germany, but it didn't work either, we were beaten by the Turks there.

Relationships with partners

The company uses a wide range of partnerships with a wide range of entities. In many cases, these are contacts created in the past (before the company was founded in 2000, even before 1989). Although the company strives to create pre-selected contacts to fulfil certain goals, it also builds partnerships with so-called self-selected partners. Created partnerships enable the company to access markets, spread risk and find new ways to go, possibly. identify less interesting or dead ends. The thread shop is open to various projects and possibilities. Partnerships are established through personal relationships, through a mutual economic relationship and through social capital (through an intermediary - a third party).

In France, there was excellent cooperation through KOH-I-NOOR Prague. He had his own representation there and sold his products there before he started offering our products as well. We choose this format a lot, because we use the opportunity to get fancy like this, now it is the best cooperation in the form of joint sales with Preciosa.

...

We just try to be with everyone, big and small. Sometimes it's just that, when they're already talking arrogantly, we cover our ears and let him curse for a while, because some of them would like us to do it for them for free, preferably, or so that they don't have to pay for it at all, and the like.

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So you have to find other forms of cooperation, expand where possible.

...

So contacts were limited to personal acquaintances. This is simply how it works today, so we simply help each other, we sell to each other.

...

So the Slovaks were used to coming here to shop and those personal ties persisted here and persist and will continue to come here. We will sell it and take it to them, because the people in Slovakia are used to the Czech goods.

Competition and competitive strategy

The annual publication of the Textile-Clothing-Leather Industry Association (ATOK, 2015) lists three possible competitive strategies for the textile and clothing industry as a whole and for individual companies. These are the strategy of operational superiority, the strategy of proximity to customers and the strategy of product leadership. Based on the analysis of the interview, it is possible to say that the company focuses mainly on the strategy of proximity to customers and partly on the strategy of operational superiority. A product leadership strategy would require significant investment and reorientation of the company to a different production program.

The Czech market is represented by leading European manufacturers with higher prices (Coats, or MEZ Crafs, and DMC), while cheap goods from Turkey and Asian countries and comparable goods from Poland are imported. Competition from domestic manufacturers was not mentioned during the interview.

Of course, Coats MEZ makes goods of the highest quality, but again at the highest price ranges, so Nifárna tried to occupy a middle position in that pyramid, when we are actually lower with the price and we try to maintain at least the quality comparable to the German quality. [...] And as you asked, the second main competitor is the French manufacturer DMC, which is also expanding into the Czech Republic with the help of its dealers.

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As I told you, in the beginning, when we were trying to somehow succeed in that market, we had to base ourselves on the conditions that existed here. Basically, we had to undercut the competition on price. We waged a price war and we still wage it today. Mainly with the Poles. [...] It is cheaper in Poland. So, the Poles are also such a threat, so we had to constantly keep the price level at some level for the Czech consumer, because the Czech consumer has been our basic benchmark since the nineties, when wholesalers started to look beyond the borders, looking into the China, as I told you.

Introduction of new and innovative products

Due to the fact that the company does not apply a product leadership strategy, it focuses more on lower order innovations. The company strives for both product and process innovations. Examples of these innovations also show the use of effectuation rather than causal logic. These are not projecting with clear planning and a single goal.

We must have forgotten one important thing that I will show you. You will like her. These are the tapestry embroidery. We established cooperation. Again, he is a person who almost does not belong to the textile industry, but he has a travel agency on Lake Balaton, but you know how it is with tourism on Lake Balaton, the Germans have stopped going there. He was looking for everything possible for years until he rushed to the textile.

And because we had a friend in řamolín from Coats, this Hungarian sometimes went there to visit acquaintances and they met there. He says, hey, how about you do something cool with the tourism business, maybe deliver cotton. And he says, yeah and how do I get there. I have it in stock. You got it dear. Well, take something from Āeská Třebová. So, we started supplying him with cotton from Āeská Třebová, and he came up with the idea that we could make tapestries with the cotton.

He didn't come up with the idea entirely, we did it here under socialism. To the festival in Moscow. There, we supplied embroidery patterns with the symbol of the festival, so it was given as a present. The Czech expedition was there, Mrs. Suková was there as a business director, she was there at the youth festival in May in Moscow, it was sometime in 1988. However, we had experience with it, we had already done such things with the patterns for the embroidery. But this is really something else, it's in a big way.

We have huge catalogues of what we've done. I really forgot to tell you that we started it.

One direction of innovation is the introduction of yarn with a new composition. This is how products with a proportion of polyester and bamboo have been launched on the market in recent years. Although products with polyester are sold on the market, Niřárna has not yet been successful with them. In the case of yarn with a share of bamboo, the market situation is more favourable for the company.

One of the innovations that we introduced, because the processing of polyester is very popular in our country, so we started, we tried to introduce, a mixture of cotton and polyester. I myself have very good experience with those polystyrene T-shirts, for example from vacations in the jungle, I like to travel to those warm countries. That polyester is a grateful material that you just rinse in water, throw on and you're done. So, I did here, the innovation program is mostly handled by me, with the production manager and the store manager. So, I made such a yarn in that mixture and we introduced it. Did you see the knitted pattern? So far, we have been offering it for about the second year and it is gaining ground very slowly and with difficulty. Quite frankly, some customers are telling us, hold on to your hoof. Well, I say, but you bring that thing from Turkey, so why don't you take it from us. Well, nobody wants that polyester. We tried, I tried, also for Mr. Kurka, the processing of the granulate. I spoke with the owner from Jaroměř, who takes the polyester from the Germans, because the granulate is transported to Germany and in Germany it is processed into the yarn, the tubes and the fibres, and then it is transported to the spinning mill and made from that polyester yarn. So, I took quite a lot from them but couldn't sell it. I'm stuck there. I tend to thrive in the area of viscose blends. For example, bamboo, viscose yarn from bamboo, that is very modern. Bamboo has better useful properties, it is softer, smoother, more pleasant to the body, etc. The polyester is not very pleasant, it is sharper.

Innovative products are also based on relationships with customers and the search for opportunities for mutual cooperation and mutually beneficial solutions.

That's also about the five years. So, it really worked for us, I'll show you later. So, we are really processing these designs for the embroidery in a big way now. We cooperate with the publisher of such brochures. She teaches people, children, women, to crochet various little things. She was in America for a long time, she lived with the Indians and was engaged in that activity, the handicrafts of the Indians. She simply came up with this idea of hers, and she processes various vases, flowers,

and books for us from our materials.

And it publishes these quarterly magazines, which we, of course, advertise and therefore sponsor in the form of the yarn and a contribution to advertising. So, it had a really big impact. That's when the Niřárna really came to the attention of those people.

In the course of the interview, examples of the search for innovation in production processes and the search for ideas to reduce costs in production were identified. Similar to the previous cases, there was no precise vision, target state or necessary resources at the beginning. The key was the pursuit of creative solutions aimed at savings and suggestions from experts in the field. In this way, projects for the treatment of technological water for dyeing or the installation of an economizer were implemented.

We started this three or four years ago. It sells comparatively than the polyester.

From this, of course, we then reflect on further work in the shop and in production. Not only to make money, but Mr. Kurka Sr. mainly taught us to save a lot of money on costs, so we came up with a lot of innovations and a lot of ideas. One of the latter is actually the treatment of technological water for dyeing. We managed to save roughly a third of the cost of technological water consumption for the production of steam and water for washing, dyeing, cleaning and treatment with such an improver through a pressure wave, through a pressure water tank, modified. [...] I just started it, we all just worked on it and the experts, actually the roper, who deals with work related to heating, the boiler room and the like, so he actually came up with the idea for the expansion pressure tank. We created the necessary water pressure and saved hundreds of thousands of crowns per year.

...

The second thing I thought about when we were doing the overhaul of the boiler, because they keep forcing us to reduce emissions, so we also made an economizer on that boiler and it reduced the gas consumption. By a quarter. Even to such an extent that we were able to agree with Energoaqua, our gas supplier, to reduce the guaranteed limit. The reduction of the limits by a quarter means that we save about 10,000 crowns every month on the payment for the guaranteed subscription. Because you have to order a certain amount from the gas plants, that is, from the gas distribution, and they ordered you two thousand cubic meters per day for 40 thousand per month. And if you don't take them, then you have to react to order only 15 and they will reduce it by a quarter to 30.

...

We had an expert here. Basically, during the general overhaul of the boiler, he recommended it, and thus we saved not only on the gas, but also on the guaranteed purchase of the gas.

Operating on international markets

The company Niřárna applies a combination of effectuation and causal approach. Operation on foreign markets is based on a historically built network of contacts and partners. Due to the market situation, it is difficult for the company to manage international activities according to a predetermined goal or plan, strategically and systematically. The company mainly operates in the markets where it has implemented activities in the past. Contacts from the past are used for further networking.

The share of sales from the sale of own products abroad was 20% in 2019 (5,367,000 CZK abroad, 21,828,000 CZK domestically). This share has ranged from 16% (2018) to 23% (2016) in recent years.

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The company exports roughly 25% of production. Exports go mainly to Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. Part of the production is exported to Germany, France, the Baltic countries. Previously, export was supported by Centrotext.

There is no longer any trade organization that deals only with this export. They all do everything, they do everything, but it's not that anyone would try to export our goods explicitly. But they do it to Poland or Hungary at most. Or the Hungarian gives it to Romania, Croatia. And after all, we still have cooperation with one German company, which is based in the south of Hungary. She employs Croatia as a sales representative, so we also do business with her sometimes. We take tablecloths from him and try to sell him embroidery cotton. So, it's kind of a mosaic. Of course, we use all the contacts of our traders when they really go somewhere to find something. But it was very difficult, as I tell you, the competition is huge.

Niřárna uses forms of cooperation that allow it to operate in foreign markets with a low level of commitment.

The entry of new companies, increased competition and the creation of a new distribution network led to the loss or weakening of the position on some foreign markets. Efforts to create new strategic partnerships were not successful in some cases.

We had huge orders in that Germany, we relied on that, we made many knitting yarns there, many kinds, even from different raw materials, a mixture that actually the Germans themselves wanted, so we started making for them, cotton, viscose. We had one big customer in Hamburg. So, it was still exported there. But the moment they simply built the Turkey-Germany distribution network, they simply established stronger business ties. So, we hardly whistled there. We still tried it there, we had a meeting with a German company in Germany. We wanted to establish cooperation with them, so we would produce the yarns for them, there was more. [...] It was the Turks, they were just trying to extract information from us, how much we produce, how much we deliver, so we actually gave them all that, all that information, we gave them our entire production program, the entire assortment of what would we were able to produce and sell and for how much. And they bounced back from it, and within half a year we had it painted. We still kept and sold something there, but de facto this is how we came to the German market.

The company is looking for foreign customers via the Internet. They are trying to strengthen their activity on social networks to promote their own products. They are in a number of Facebook groups. Although these are mainly Czech groups, the customer community in these groups has an international dimension and people from abroad are also involved in them.

We strive constantly. But we actually search mostly via the Internet. So just as soon as we have something new or some success or just a nice product, we put it on the Internet, we put it on Facebook. We have our own group on Facebook and we are registered in several groups for crocheting, for knitting, for making children's toys, children's blankets. We are in maybe twenty groups on Facebook.

Impact of covid-19

As a result of the pandemic, enormous economic changes have occurred and are causing difficulties, and in some cases also bringing positives, to companies in the Czech Republic, Europe and the world. In the case of Niřárna, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on business was influenced by a combination of various positive and negative factors.

A negative factor was the ban on retail sales in the Czech Republic and neighbouring countries (Germany, Poland and Slovakia). The closure of the toy store and the reduction in demand for Ravensburger were reflected. At the same time, sales in haberdashery were closed or restricted.

Yes, we have almost reached the mark of thirty million twenty-nine and a half million sales. So even though the lockdown affected Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Ravensburger, because those toys were not allowed to be sold in toy stores, the toy stores were closed and the departments in that Kaufland, in Lidl, where those toys were sold, were taped. So even though there was a drop in that Ravensburger, we managed it.

Production in Niřárna was significantly suspended for 2020 and 2021, in both cases for a period of one month. The e-shop remained in operation and, in part, production to secure orders on the e-shop. To reduce the negative economic impact, the company used support and compensation from public budgets.

So we worked, the e-shop, he went here. We had to leave the production of that e-shop at least partially open, because most of those people were sick anyway, they were covid positive. So, we took turns here. [...] We did almost half the invoicing of the previous two months, that is, like in January or February and March, half of what we did at full operation.

However, even when retail stores were open, demand was falling. According to the executive director, the fears of the elderly about staying outside were also manifested in the adverse weather or appeals by various authorities to prevent the elderly from going outside. At the same time, the older population makes up the majority of customers (or rather female customers).

But I have to say that even January and February were affected by covid, because even older people, who mainly buy our goods, were so afraid to go among the others.

Although the coronavirus crisis brought a number of problems to the company, Niřárna recorded an increase in annual sales volumes. It cannot be said that there has been a reorientation of business to other, less affected sectors. Nevertheless, the fact that it was able to respond flexibly with its production program to the demand caused by the failure of deliveries from Turkish suppliers helped the thread company.

Turks have problems when they have a lot of orders or when they have a corona crisis like the one now. So now we can basically partially replace some products and that's why, for example, last year after the lockdown, we had a month of downtime, we had state support, but in May and June we sold so many goods that we even replaced the shortfall from that month lockdown. And in the end, actually that whole year we managed, I say, to make the biggest sales in the last five or six years.

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Well, as I told you, it improved a little by the fact that the competition had to be closed to Turkey for

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a certain period. She couldn't get the goods within the time limits, so we had the service, so we increased by about five or six percent last year.

A company representative did not indicate that there would be significant disruptions in the supply chain. In order to secure orders, they use and have used sufficient stock and production during the coronavirus crisis.

But if you don't make orders, you only do service, so you actually react to the order that he gives you one day and wants it the next day. This means that you try to keep the order covered as much as possible so that you don't lose sales or profit. So, we try to keep the service in the warehouse of finished products as large as possible, the range of colours is huge. But you saw. 500 colours for the embroidery cottons, 40 50 for the crochet ones, another rainbow of colours for that and so on and so forth. So, we try to hide those orders as much as possible. That is the secret of success. So, we manage to have 80, sometimes even 90% exposed.

The coronavirus pandemic created a number of problems for the company, but it can also be said to have become a catalyst for positive changes.

Additional information and documents

1. Production process at Niřárna Āesk Třebov

The thread mill can be divided into three main operations, in which individual workshops are located.

a) plying – here the initial operations of the warp yarn take place:

- pooling – multiple single threads are pooled into a single thread
- scanning – the twisted thread gets a twist and thus strength
- winding from bobbins – the yarn is spun from the bobbin onto the spool
- tanning – loose fibres on the thread are tanned
- steaming – cotton yarn is stabilized against twisting by steaming
- winding – the yarn is wound from the spools into skeins so that it can be dyed with quality

b) dyeing room – this is where cotton yarn is treated in connection with dyeing:

- mercerization – with the help of lye, the cotton is stretched on and off, it acquires shine and greater strength
- pressure boiling – by boiling in hot water, the yarn gets rid of the rest of fat and impurities
- pre-whitening – the yarn loses its colour and becomes partially pre-whitened
- finishing – the yarn is bleached
- dyeing – the yarn is dyed to the desired shade
- drying – wet skeins are knocked out and dried with hot air

c) the thread factory itself – finishing works take place here:

- spinning from the skeins – dyed and dry skeins of yarn are spun back onto the bobbins
- balling, skeining – final operations, during which a skein or ball of the desired length, weight, appearance is created

Source: Charvát (2006, pp. 17–18)

Figure 1: Products of Niřárna Āesk Třebov (from the company's e-shop)

Embroidery yarn



Crochet yarn



Knitting yarn



Patching yarn



Embroidery kits



Figure 2: Operation



Figure 1: Production



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