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Kevin Marcus: So, there's a lot of similarities there.

Rickerby: Welcome to the Creator State, where we share stories of social innovation and entrepreneurship for movers, shakers, creators, and change makers. Each episode will celebrate success and failure, ingenuity in the endless pursuit of knowledge. Tech entrepreneur Kevin Marcus is naturally curious, with a knack for problem solving and tendency to take risks, he's created some amazing opportunities for success.

Rickerby: He has started and sold companies, is the author of several patents, and a self proclaimed tech evangelist who created some of the world's first mobile phone games. Today Kevin is the co-founder and chief technology officer at Versium, a predictive analytics company helping businesses make sense of all their data. Tune in to hear how boredom can fuel innovation and why it's a great idea to step outside your comfort zone every once in a while.

Rickerby: In this episode, we're speaking with Kevin inside a computer lab in the Marlin and Rosemary Bourns College of Engineering at the University of California, Riverside. I'm your host Rickerby Hinds. Welcome to the Creator State.

Rickerby: I want to begin by asking you if someone wants to ask you what it is that you do, how would you describe what you do? Where you would you go with that question?

Kevin Marcus: I just start off with janitor and the reason I say that though, is because when you have a business, there's a lot of moving parts and ultimately, it is the leadership's job to go and clean up all of the messes that exist. The stuff that's not getting done, you've got to identify that and say, hey, that's the problem that I'm gonna go solve today because that's effecting the business today.

Kevin Marcus: Now, putting the janitor aside, I generally do lots of data processing work, that includes things like integrating with CRM systems so that we can understand what type of data a business may have on its customers, and help them better understand who those customers are, so it can inform their marketing and their sales efforts.

Rickerby: Yes, yes. So the term analytics comes to mind because I'm somewhat of a sports person, tell me if and how analytics plays a role within what it is that you do? What role it plays and how you use that particular form of information gathering and usage in your business?

Kevin Marcus: Sure, so analytics is a huge part of it and so essentially what we'll try to do with a lot of these business is we'll say, hey we'll help you understand, not just who your customer is but maybe there are people who aren't currently your customers that should be, and so what we'll do in those cases, is we'll go and say, let's take a look at what the properties or the attributes of the current customers you have are, oh they like to go fishing, they drive whatever this kind of car, and they're this age group, here are some other people that also are in that age group but in order to identify what those primary attributes are that you need to look for in the first place, you've got to do some analytics.

Kevin Marcus: Just because a 70% of my customers are maybe a particular gender, that doesn't mean that, that's who I should always sell to, maybe the marketing I have just appeals to people of that gender. So you've got to be very careful when you go in to understand what is the root cause of what is creating these signals inside your marketing efforts.

Rickerby: So Kevin, there's a write up on you somewhere, where you're described or you described yourself as a tech evangelist, now I've been to church and I know what evangelists do. Tell me within what you do, why do you see yourself or do you see yourself that way.

Kevin Marcus: Sure, so I would take the religious connotation out of there but the way I like to think of it is, there's a lot of really cool technology that's out there and I think being able to talk about it and communicate and show people the exciting new stuff that's coming out, for me that's really fun, I like to participate in that. So when I say tech evangelist, really what I'm talking about is I like to take that neat new shiny toy and say, here's why it's cool, here's why you should pay attention, here's why it's gonna change your life.

Rickerby: That's nice, nice, nice. So let's go back a little bit and let's talk about video games on telephones.

Kevin Marcus: Oh yes.

Rickerby: So I actually want you to walk me through your creation of these very early games for our cellphones.

Kevin Marcus: No, no this is great stuff. This is great stuff I love this. So gosh, this was probably the late 90s or so. So a lot of phones still had cords, right so you know it was connected to a wall or so but they did have cellphones, and they were just coming out with these smartphones at the time, and so at the time I was at a company called InfoSpace up in the Seattle area, and one of the things that InfoSpace did, was it tried to put content onto phones, and a lot of times if you think about it, sort of like an SMS kind of thing or you know very simple type of content.

Kevin Marcus: That was a very small aspect of it. We were looking for the next generation of phone, the smartphones. So we had a relationship with a very large carrier called AT&T and they came and gave us some of these demo phones, basically phones for us to go start developing on so we could create new things for these phones that they would then go try to sell. So that by itself was interesting. We put the weather on there and some boring applications like that, news headlines things like this, and then I took it with on a trip down to a company in the Bay area called Oracle, and I was getting some database training and spent the day there whatever, and I had this phone.

Kevin Marcus: It was like a brick, it was that big, you know I mean it was huge right, and I had it in my pocket and I was waiting to get picked up after this database stuff that I had done at Oracle, and I'm sitting with the phone and I'm thinking to myself, man I've got this awesome piece of technology, it's cutting edge, it's like the forefront of where phones are going and I'm bored.

Kevin Marcus: That's not fun and so immediately I thought the very first thing you've got to do to kill boredom is have something to do, like play a game. So I went back up and literally the next day I wrote Pick a Number. Pick a number between and 100 and try and to guess it. So that was the first thing, then Hangman came after that, and some other very simple games that are easy to understand, easy for people to figure out how to do and very easy to put on the phones of that day.

Rickerby: Wow, I mean this was kind of an immediate reaction to information that you had gathered, essentially having this phone, sitting and going, what would make this phone useful at this moment and coming up with, hey something to do. What is, if it differs from this, your creative process? Is this indicative of your creative process or was this an anomaly or what is a combination?

Kevin Marcus: So it's a fantastic question. So when I look at it a lot of times, I generally don't consider myself to be that creative of a person but I am good at coming up with solutions to problems. So as soon as I can identify what that problem is, I can think about, okay how would I solve it, what would get me to the point where I'd say, that's not a problem anymore. That's how it is, I don't go sit down and say, hey let me come up with some cool new idea. It's really if there's a problem that's been proposed or put in front of me and then I think about how I'd solve the problem.

Rickerby: So with that let's go to the moon. Tell me about the Lunar X, I believe is the name of it, the Lunar X project, your involvement with it, the why ... just based on the answer to the last question, you know there's a dilemma, what's the solution? So can you talk a little bit about your involvement with this project?

Kevin Marcus: Sure, so actually the name of the company there is called, Moon Express and there's another organization, totally unrelated to them called the Xprize, which offers very large cash prizes to people trying to solve problems that industry has otherwise overlooked, and so they have all sorts of very interesting projects that

are kind of always going on but one of the ones that they came out with is they said, hey we're decommissioning these space shuttles, we're not doing anything in space anymore, it's kind of going away, it's being overlooked.

Kevin Marcus: So they worked with a corporate partner, which at the time was Google who had offered \$30 million prize to the first company that could go get something on the moon and need to meet some criteria, move around, do some stuff like that.

Kevin Marcus: Right around that same time there was also a kind of big uptake in some, I'll just say, space related things, there's movies coming out with stuff, so it seemed like a kind of fun, cool area and there's a lot of talk going on around it. So one of my friends approached me and said, hey I know this guy, his name is Bob Richards, he used to work with Carl Sagan, you'll see him on the Discovery Channel with the Mars Pathfinder Mission, you should take a look at this company and maybe you want to get involved there.

Kevin Marcus: And so I'm thinking to myself, I love astronomy, I love space this sounds like a super fun thing. So initially it was pretty straightforward, it was just I'll make an investment in the company but after maybe the first year or so they actually gave me a call, which is kind of strange from the companies that usually you invest in they don't start asking you questions. In this particular case they called me back and said, hey we know you do some astro photography, which I do just periodically and they have a project with an organization called, The International Lunar Observatory, which is based out of Hawaii, and the ILO's objective is to put a telescope of sorts on the moon and let people control that telescope from here over the internet.

Kevin Marcus: So kind of cool right? You say hey I want to see a picture of Orion, it'll move the telescope, take a picture of it, here's what it looks like from the moon. All sorts of clever issues start coming up there but one of the things is, how do we calibrate the camera once it lands, how do we adjust the focal point if we need to, very basic things related to photography, and so having gone through some of this with my own astro photography, I essentially would consult with them to provide them feedback on how you could consider doing that on the moon.

Rickerby: So how far along did you get in the process? I know that there have been some changes to the competition, where is the competition, where are you in relationship to it and are you still pursuing it?

Kevin Marcus: So yes is the short answer.

Rickerby: Okay great.

Kevin Marcus: Moon Express is still a viable company, they've got two launch pads out in Cape Canaveral, they've contracted with a company for getting their lander into orbit or in this case to the moon but their focus has been really on the landers, which

is very, very interesting because if you go and turn around and look at many of the companies that we hear about today, you know the Space X of the world or even Blue Origin, lots of them have to do with propulsion and getting things to go up, nobody's really focusing on, okay-

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Kevin Marcus: ... think things to go up. Nobody's really focusing on the, okay once you land somewhere then what?

Rickerby: Once you get there.

Kevin Marcus: And so, recently NASA has been essentially giving out contracts to private companies because they're no longer doing that primary research. So, right now we then go and bid on these types of contracts in order to keep the business growing and going.

Rickerby: Wow. So have you always been interested in the moon or how did you come about getting involved with this?

Kevin Marcus: I'm just a naturally curious person, so I'm interested in lots and lots of things, space is one of them. I think there are so many unanswered questions. You can think of all of them, some of them are, gee are there other creatures out there? Will we ever be able to see them? What will it look like? What kinds of fascinating new things are out there? So, when I think about it and just the overall size of the universe it is mind boggling, you can't really imagine it well. It's just the distances between things are so far. The moon is right there, you can get there in three days at typical spaceship speeds. So, when you look at that you're like, "Hey here's a heavenly body that is definitely not Earth, but we can get there in just three days so that sounds like a fantastic place to start doing stuff."

Rickerby: Wow.

Kevin Marcus: Now I know there's a lot of talk about other planets, especially Mars. There's a lot of issues with going to Mars, it's a little bit further away, it's going to take you six months to get there.

Kevin Marcus: So, when I turn around and look at my childhood I had a very interesting moment with one of these little wobbly telescopes, I think it was from Costco now but it was Price Club back then.

Rickerby: Yeah, Price Club.

Kevin Marcus: And I didn't know how to use this thing, I was whatever eight years old. And I set it up in the backyard one day, and just started looking at anything that looked like a star, let me go look at that. And they all looked the same it was totally

boring, I didn't like it, until just out of sheer chance I happened to come across Saturn. It looks like a bright star but through a telescope oh that takes you away, it's amazing. You can see the rings, all sorts of stuff. And so, at that point I was like, "Oh my, this is awesome. I really like this. What a fascinating thing." Then of course I started thinking about, hey going to go to college somewhere. I started realizing there wasn't really a whole lot of money in the space field.

Rickerby: [crosstalk 00:13:07] Yeah.

Kevin Marcus: So, the next best thing turned out to be computer science, which at least exposes you to that if you want and that was kind of how that went.

Rickerby: Nice. Wow.

Kevin Marcus: And now I live vicariously through human express.

Rickerby: That is so cool to think of beginning with like you said, something that you're doing independently that's not directly related to an educational institution or an educational endeavor. So once you said, "Hey you know I'm going to check out this education thing," what role has education on your own behalf or institutionally played in your trajectory?

Kevin Marcus: Fantastic question. Education is like the primary tool that you have at your disposal to do whatever that thing is that you want. I sometimes will refer to it as the tools in the toolbox. Somebody may come in for an interview and really I don't want to know what they don't know, I just want to know what are the tools that they have in their toolbox? What problem will our business have and will this guy be able to fix it? Yes or no. If the toolbox is big and wide then probably they'll be able to figure something out. If it's super narrow and too focused in on something or if it isn't very deep then maybe you look for somebody else. But education ultimately is a tool. It's a thing that enables people to do whatever it is that they want to do.

Rickerby: Nice. So tell me about your theater background. Just talk a little bit about your brief fore into the land of theater.

Kevin Marcus: Sure. So, like most engineers, a little bit introverted, didn't work well with other people, it was tough to keep eye contact, all these kinds of things, the typical engineering things that you would expect not this vibrant outgoing personality. So at some point in my stay here at UCR one of my dorm mates said, "Hey you should go and take this theater class with me, it's going to be great."

Kevin Marcus: And so, I'm like, "Okay sure I've gotta fill out these electives, why not?" And the first day I realized, "Uh oh this is not what I was thinking I was going to be doing. I thought we were going to study films or something." But it was actually a really, really important learning experience for me, and a very important growing experience. And the reason is because all of those insecurities that I

had about myself, and all of the animosity I had when talking to people, a lot of that started to go away.

Rickerby: Wow.

Kevin Marcus: And the reason is because now I was learning, "Hey, I'm trying to be funny sometimes, sometimes I'm not. And other people who are watching what I'm doing, I'll see their reaction." And so, it really helped me I think get a little bit more in tune with just how people are.

Rickerby: Wow.

Kevin Marcus: And as an engineer at heart that's a super important skill, the soft skills are the things that a lot of engineers don't really focus too much on, and it's a big limiter I think.

Rickerby: Okay so Kevin you had a brief stint in the theater, in a class, let's just call it an introduction to theater class. And there's some things that it sounds like you garnered from that, that you pulled from that. Your company is listed as one of the top companies to work for in Seattle last year. How if in any way did that brief theatrical experience help or were there other things along the way that you gathered as a leader to go, "Oh this is a type of company I'd like to have and here's the type of space that I'd like to create at this company," that then landed you on the list?

Kevin Marcus: I'm sure it's contributed something. If you ask me, is there one thing you did that you learned in theater, I don't know. I think if anything the one thing that I really learned in theater was to maybe care a little less about what other people thought about me, and to be a little bit more open with sharing whatever ideas I might have, and not worry how's somebody going to react to it.

Rickerby: Yeah.

Kevin Marcus: That permeates in many different ways, certainly in an organization, in a company, etc. But we do all sorts of other weird things.

Rickerby: Okay.

Kevin Marcus: We'll do the go-karting thing, we have bitcoin miners in the office, we've got a 3D printer there.

Rickerby: Oh wow.

Kevin Marcus: These things have nothing to do with what our main business is, but what'll happen is people get curious about it, they'll start playing around with it, they'll start printing something, doing something, it's a fun way to say, hey it's not always 100% all work. There's some fun to be had here, and that really helps I

think to build a team that respects each other, they can do stuff with each other. We work hard we play hard, and I think that really helps.

Rickerby: That's very cool. You mentioned go-karting but there's another car ...

Kevin Marcus: Oh no, we don't want to talk about that.

Rickerby: ... that I glance somewhere that you're somewhat interested in and found of. Can you talk a little bit about this vehicle or vehicles?

Kevin Marcus: There are long stories behind those.

Rickerby: Well give us one of those.

Kevin Marcus: So, it was probably around again the year 2000 or so where I went out and I bought ... this will sound expensive but it's not what you think.

Rickerby: Okay.

Kevin Marcus: I bought a used Ferrari.

Rickerby: Okay.

Kevin Marcus: And this car cost less than a new Lexus did, at the time.

Rickerby: Okay.

Kevin Marcus: So if you were going to go buy a Lexus you could buy this car easily, no problem. And that sort of started this very strange chain reaction for me where it's like, this car is very different and I kind of like it. And so, as I started learning more about it what became clear to me that was not clear at first, was that there's a huge community of people that are interested in that particular marque. I didn't realize that when I stuck my nose in that.

Rickerby: Okay.

Kevin Marcus: But it turns out there is, right? And the thing that was like the ... I don't want to save pinnacle but sort of different tiers if you will, and up at the top where the guys that went racing.

Rickerby: Yes.

Kevin Marcus: And so, I'm like, "Well that sounds fun, I should go try that." I used to race BMX bikes when I was a kid so I've always kind of had a little bit of a racing itch.

Rickerby: Got it.

Kevin Marcus: And so I went out and I bought a race car and started racing that around for a little while. And this is actually a really interesting thing because in racing you are making calculated risks all the time, that's kind of what it's all about. Can I pass them here? Can I pass them there? Do I have enough power to get by them? How good are my brakes? You're making all these decisions and they have to be instinctive. There's a lot of it, which is actually very similar to a business, and even a lot of that which is similar to management. You need to know how far can I push before I'm going to go off the edge?

Rickerby: Wow.

Kevin Marcus: So there's a lot of similarities there.

Rickerby: Cause you mentioned risk taking, and something like race car driving as one form of risk taking, I read your bio and it said you were a serial entrepreneur. If you look at this idea of starting new businesses, starting things from scratch, that idea of risk taking plays a pivotal vital role in that. Which came first?

Kevin Marcus: That's a great question. I think the risk taking has kind of always been, that's part of me. I don't do super great with authority. I don't like people telling me what to do or what I can and can't do. I think that's part of my personality. The risk taking was first. And I think then it's like, "Okay, well if this is how I am what are the things that I can do with it?" So, I think that's kind of how it evolved if you will.

Rickerby: And what is the most exciting part, thrilling part of the creation of a new business for you, or parts? But what is that thing that makes you go, "Ugh"? Like yes.

Kevin Marcus: So it's all fun. There are a couple of really big milestones where I'd say there's a certain satisfaction that I don't feel that same way often. The first is when you make like your first sale. You've started a new thing, you've got a new company, whatever it does it's probably selling something.

Rickerby: Yeah.

Kevin Marcus: The first person that comes to buy something, there's just an intense gratification there. Wow, the thing I did is something somebody actually wants I didn't just guess wrong.

Rickerby: Wow.

Kevin Marcus: That's a really, really good feeling at that time. The first time you hire a person. If it's just you that's one thing, you can do whatever you want, you can call yourself a consultant or something, but when somebody places in you trust, "Hey, this guy's going to figure it out. I want to work with him." That's extremely

powerful. Somebody else committing to you to try to work to the same vision that you're pushing forward, that is also a very gratifying experience.

Rickerby: Wow.

Kevin Marcus: Hairs are standing up talking about it.

Rickerby: Man. That's cool.

Kevin Marcus: One other that's super, super interesting on the journey is a lot of companies need to raise money in order for them to be able to grow at the pace that they want to.

Rickerby: Yeah.

Kevin Marcus: The first time somebody says, "Hey, I've looked at what you do, and I see what it is, and I get it, and I am interested in putting money into that."

Kevin Marcus: Then you again, there's a certain gratification about that of, "Wow, I've done something that's so cool, other people want to come do it. Other people want to give me money to keep building this vision out." That's just a super awesome amazing feeling.

Kevin Marcus: Of course the last one is when it gets sold.

Rickerby: Yes.

Kevin Marcus: So, somebody comes in and they say, "Wow, that's worth umptin bagillions of dollars. I'm going to write you a check because I want that thing you've created so much." These are all great parts of the journey.

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Kevin Marcus: ... so much. These are all great parts of the journey. They're really fun. Starting the company is probably the most difficult thing. There's an article that's written. It was on TechCrunch. Michael Arrington wrote it. It's called Are You a Pirate? It's some years old. It's maybe five, 10 years old. And it goes on, and it draws these interesting associations between being a pirate back in the, say, 1700s and being an entrepreneur today.

Kevin Marcus: Chances of a pirate striking it rich, getting all of the money, all the treasures, whatever that they're trying to get, very, very low, right? So very high risk, and actually, there's almost ... the reward, yes, maybe it's there, but chances are you're gonna fail, right?

Kevin Marcus: That's totally true of business as well. And when you look at that and say, "Do I look at the risk that's associated with it, and do I get scared?" Do I say, "Oh, I

don't wanna do that. I just want a stable income all the time. Give me my check every week or two weeks" or whatever it is. That's one approach, and some people like that.

Kevin Marcus: Entrepreneurs, I think, they have a little bit of a different tolerance for that in that there's ... and this article would argue the same thing, and I agree with it. It says, "There is utility in that risk-taking," that most people would look and say, "No, I don't wanna do that, it's too scary, too dangerous." Whereas an entrepreneur might look at it and say, "Oh, I really enjoy the feeling of that risk." And, "That's interesting, and there's probably nobody else has paved this path for me, because it's so risky to start with." You have to be crazy.

Rickerby: Wow, you talked a little bit about risk-taking before, and clearly the serial entrepreneurship has been a part of your existence. But can you talk a little bit about those things that didn't necessarily work out the way you envisioned them working out and what you learned or what you gained from that?

Kevin Marcus: Yeah, so it's a super interesting area. And again, psychology, they study this. It's called survivor bias or survivorship bias, where you go out, you look around, and you're like, "Oh, wow, look. There's all these successful companies, all these successful people. I'm gonna go do that."

Kevin Marcus: And then almost like I said earlier, you don't necessarily see all the details and all the little minutia that maybe had to come together for that person to have that success, right? All you see is that there was a success. And so that makes it so that you think it's super easy and everybody can do it. And it's not. It's hard. And there is a lot of little things, a lot of minutia that's buried in there.

Kevin Marcus: So really getting some appreciation for, again, all those fine details so that you don't turn around and say, "Hey, just because I failed once doesn't mean I should never try again." You gotta keep trying at it, because who knows when it's gonna come together for you? Just 'cause you see all these successes and it makes look easy doesn't mean it actually is. It is real work, so keep that in mind.

Rickerby: Very cool, very cool.

Rickerby: Now let's get into the creator state of mind. In each episode we asked our guest to share what's been on their minds, something they can't stop thinking about, a new challenge they're facing, or what's inspired them into action recently. We call it The Creator State of Mind.

Rickerby: What are you excited about right now? What has you hyped? What are you going ...?

Kevin Marcus: So there are lots of things. Obviously, I'm still very excited about my business, Versium. I see tremendous opportunity there. There are some really interesting market forces that are shifting around where the traditional sort of advertising

agencies are getting a little bit pinched by consulting companies trying to fix their data problems and things like this. So I think that actually opens tremendous opportunities for our business right now. And so far, at least with many of the companies we talked to, they're very receptive to it. So I think we're on to something, something really good there.

Rickerby: It is always a valuable learning opportunity to take time to reflect. At the end of each interview, we like to ask our guest this. In hindsight, what is something you wish you would have known when you were starting out?

Kevin Marcus: Well before I answer that, there is a famous quote. I don't know who said it. You should look it up and tell me. But it goes like this. It goes, "Wisdom is an unusual teacher. It gives the test first and the lesson afterwards."

Rickerby: Ooh.

Kevin Marcus: Right? In other words, you've gotta experience it before you learn. So from that aspect, I don't ... I mean, I'm not saying I'm proud of everything I've done or I couldn't have done things better or different. But I just take those as part of the learning experience and just adjust things as I move forward.

Kevin Marcus: Are there any regrets? Sure. I'm sure I could think of something. Dang, I wish I didn't buy that, whatever. I wish I didn't do that thing over there. But at the end of the day, I learned something from that process, where at least now when I look back at it, I can say, "That was not a good idea. I shouldn't do that."

Kevin Marcus: So in the future, I'll say, "Hey, I won't do that there." So I wouldn't change it. It's part of the wisdom experience. There's a lot of little things that have to come together to really make something happen. And I think it's really easy a lot of times, at least for me, to say, "Oh, hey, I wanna go over there. Great, I'll walk over there." And then I'll be there, and problem solved, right?

Rickerby: Yeah, yeah.

Kevin Marcus: A lot of times it might be, well, okay, how are you gonna get there? It's quicksand. Okay, I'm not gonna walk there. I'm gonna jump there. Okay, but you can't jump either, now how are you gonna get there, right?

Kevin Marcus: So suddenly these things that, on the surface, seem like really, really simple problems to be able to solve, the complexities are hidden below. And you may not see them until you start the journey. So I wish I was maybe more respectful of that concept and think a little bit more before I jump two feet into the next thing.

Rickerby: That's a great way to phrase that, being respectful of that process and of the moment and the space that you're in at the time.

Rickerby: Well listen, man, it has been a pleasure meeting you and talking to you for this brief time. I've gained a lot of pirate knowledge and also, though, really looking at this idea of risk-taking as you talked about and how it's taken you from one space to the next to the next, both business-wise as well as fun-wise, when you're talking about Ferraris and looking at the moon exploration. So I appreciate it so much, man. And hopefully this won't be the last time we do this.

Kevin Marcus: Yeah, maybe you can come up to Seattle next time.

Rickerby: Just send a invite [inaudible 00:28:31], we'll be there.

Kevin Marcus: All right.

Rickerby: Thank you so much.

Kevin Marcus: Thanks a lot, I appreciate it.

Rickerby: Much appreciate it, man, thanks.

Rickerby: Join us for our next episode when we sit down with Shelby Worthington-Loomis to discuss the important role of gathering places and communities and how she's inviting other entrepreneurs to join her in revitalizing her community's downtown district. Thanks for listening.

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