TAKING OVER THE WORLD, AGAIN? EXAMINING PROCEDURAL REMAKES OF ADVENTURE GAMES

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Remakes of interactive narratives, including adventure games and electronic literature, have risen over the past decade, propelled in part by nostalgia. However, unlike obvious parallels in other media (such as the remake of cult classic *Ghostbusters* with a new cast and mentality), game remakes are rarely re-imaginings. In many cases, the original games have been rendered unplayable or at least very difficult to access by time, as digital history is constantly in a process of being lost thanks to the rotating door of technologies. Given these challenges, remakes play an important role in establishing and preserving canonical play. How do we evaluate and value fidelity in the remake of procedural content, and what role do changing interfaces and platforms play in our understanding of an interactive narrative as experience? I examine these questions through the lens of several remakes of classic adventure games from the last decade. Fan reactions to each of these games and the design choices behind them reveal the difficult balance between

preserving the nostalgic experience of an original and adapting to new modalities and expectations.

REMAKING ADVENTURES

The last several years have seen an incredible rise in remakes of classic adventure games, including *Day of the Tentacle* (LucasArts 1993, remake Double Fine Productions 2016), *Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games 1990, remake LucasArts 2009), *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father* (Sierra On-Line 1993, remake Phoenix Online Studios 2014), *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra On-Line 1987, remake Replay Games 2013), *Grim Fandango Remastered* (LucasArts 1998, remake Double Fine Productions 2015), and *Full Throttle Remastered* (LucasArts 1995, remake Double Fine Productions 2017). Many of these remakes are from the same team at Double Fine Productions, which has successfully acquired a number of classic LucasArts titles and turned the "remastered" game into a lucrative franchise. Their combination of authorial recognition through the involvement of original designers, and in-house tools for developing remakes of this kind, makes them one of the dominant forces in remastered adventure games. The remaking of these games could be interpreted as powered by nostalgia, and the fact that the remake is thoroughly established as a fan practice (Salter, 2014) adds to the apparent validity of that perception. However, the remake of a procedural work is more than an act of nostalgia or even of fandom: it is a powerful act for canonization as one of the most prominent commercial methods available for keeping works accessible. While it may be tempting to compare these remakes to practices from other media, there is a fundamental difference in priorities: for instance, film remakes tend to reflect new advances and often draw on rhetorical, social, political, and cultural changes to reposition or even radically change the essential content of a film (Forrest and Koos, 2012). Game remakes by contrast are judged by their fidelity, as they often serve as vehicles for transferring an experience that time and

changing platforms have rendered unplayable. The adventure game remake in particular presents a powerful case study for the tradition because adventure games are defined by their narratives and characters, which as with film are "recast" with new graphics, voice actors, and even code.

While the shot-by-shot remake of a film is easy to dismiss as an unnecessary act, and deviance from the script is the norm, games and digital objects are always headed for an expiration date that makes the screenshot-by-screenshot remake an object of potential historical and aesthetic significance. Such remakes of games have the additional challenge of translating coded and procedural interactions into a new language or engine. The procedural remake has strong implications for the games and electronic literature community. The desire to remake (and to play the remake) reflects the ephemerality of the original game as canonical experience. An increasing number of platforms that form the foundation of electronic literature and gaming are becoming rapidly inaccessible: Flash is vanishing from the browser, iOS is constantly updating and rendering obsolete applications, and even changes to computer hardware can render older software mostly unplayable except for those with significant technical expertise or hardware access. The remake is one solution to the disappearance of work, but is it successful? How does the process of remaking fundamentally transform an interactive narrative? I will examine these remakes through close play of sequences from both the remake and the original and place them in the context of electronic literature, and particularly consider their implications for our definition of an interactive text through its relationship to a particular platform and the hardware and software configurations of an era.

Remakes draw our attention to the question of what is essential in a work. Most of the fundamental mechanisms are changed in the process of remaking — the art is replaced, the engine transformed, and the code rewritten. What, then, is the essence

of the work? Three recent remakes offer a perfect contrasting case study of approaches to fidelity in remaking adventure games: *The Secret of Monkey Island, Day of the Tentacle Reloaded,* and *Grim Fandango Remastered*. Each of these games has been heralded as a classic in the genre. In the case of Guybrush Threepwood, the availability of relatively recent games in the same series (*Tales of Monkey Island,* Telltale Games 2009) provides initial motivation for newcomers to seek out the now-unplayable DOS original. In part thanks to this continued viability as a license, *The Secret of Monkey Island* is an in-house remake produced by the original company. *Day of the Tentacle Reloaded,* by contrast, is the second game in a series where the original is less lauded and far more difficult, representing an earlier era of design. I will place these two 2D adventure games in contrast to *Grim Fandango Remastered,* a rare example of a 3D adventure game remake recently released.

REVISITING THE ADVENTURES OF GUYBRUSH THREEPWOOD

Secret of Monkey Island is one of several remakes that demonstrates its fidelity through providing the user with the ability to switch from the "new" graphics to the original interface at any time. The inclusion of this functionality makes the experienced player wonder at the need for the graphical overhaul, while the new player is more likely to swipe once to reveal the visuals and then back away. Reviewers reassured fans of the game's careful attention to the original: "If you have played the game but it's been a while, note that the new art and voice over are the only new things to find here. Beyond the cosmetic changes, this is exactly the same game you played in 1990" (Hatfield, 2010). However, some editions are more than cosmetic, including an in-game hint system designed to make the logic more accessible to players unfamiliar with the genre and a completely redesigned interface that takes into account not only

changed expectations but also new platforms such as touchscreen tablets and consoles where the game was ported.

Some of the game's fidelity to the original includes references inaccessible to the modern player: "No egregious "Greedo shoots first" revisionisms, nor lame attempts to "contemporize" jokes here; quips about buying Loom and adventure game death penalties from rival developer Sierra On-Line are still present" (Nguyen, 2009). This is characteristic of the genre, as Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone (2015) notes that adventure games as a genre are particularly notable for self-parody and self-referential humor that extends beyond a single game and often encompasses a much larger context, linking even outside the works of one publisher. The inclusion of such moments gestures to the desire to preserve not just the central experience of the game, but also its placement in a genre with its own culture and norms, even at the expense of accessibility to new players unlikely to find an "Ask me about LOOM" button to be more than a confusing aside.
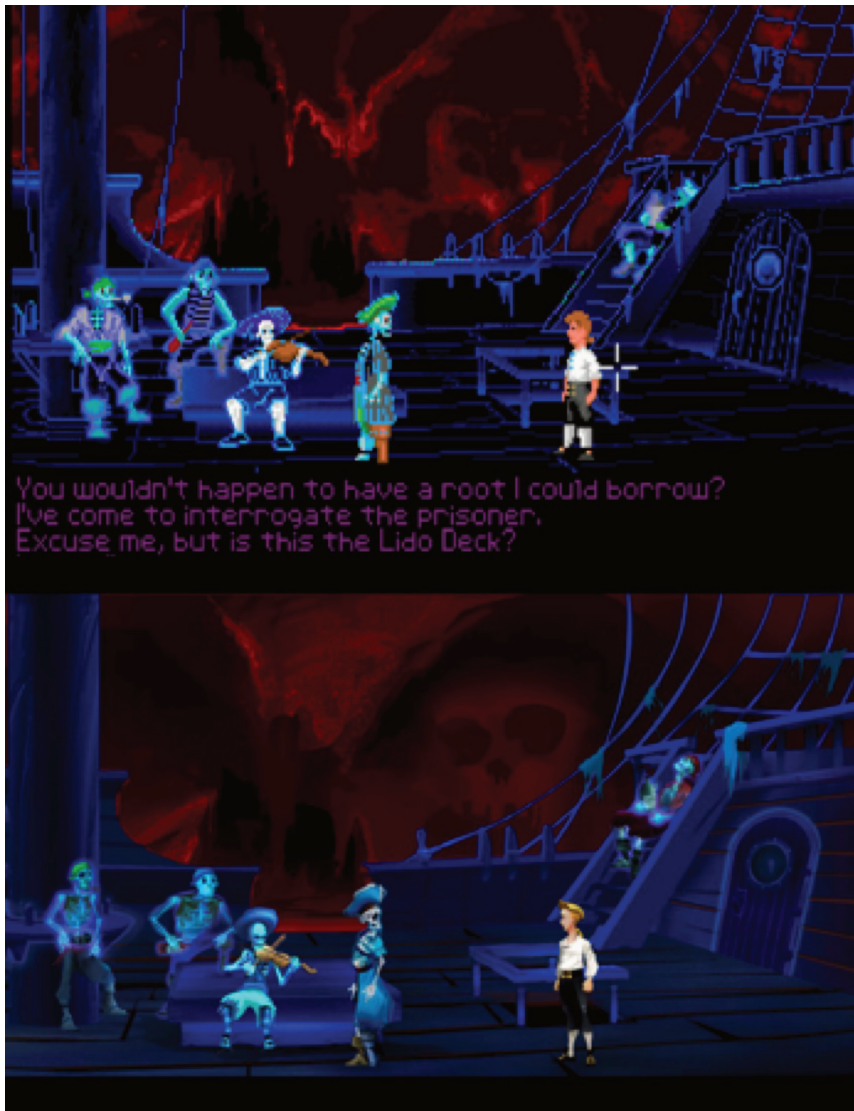
Figure 1. LeChuck's pirate ship in the original game (top) and special edition (bottom)
(Zyle, 2010)

Consider these screenshots comparing our exploration of
LeChuck's pirate ship in *The Secret of Monkey Island Remastered*
with the original graphics: placements are consistent, and the
characters occupy the same world of colors as in the original,

though with added depth. The familiar avatar of Guybrush Threepwood that the player once embodied is wearing his customary garb, though he seems to have gained both height and blondeness. The expressions on the ghost pirates are more readable, but details such as the center pirate's peg leg have been altered. With the loss of pixelation we also have a change in mood: the skeletal head in the background can be clearly noted, and yet the cliffs have lost some of their jagged foreboding. The more concrete pirates are less humorous, with some of the exaggeration no longer carrying forward. This emotional disconnect even when the image is apparently faithful is significant. From a historical perspective, Richard Rouse (1999) took on both film and game remakes as perhaps the more insidious for their apparent fidelity:

> Here we have a game masquerading as the original, which to the untrained observer will look exactly like the original Centipede, and to those who have never played the original may actually conclude that this is the original. However, it is not as finely tuned as the original was, and as a result new players of the game who mistakenly think this is the real classic Centipede will be left with a false impression of it.

(Rouse, 1999)

Rouse endorses emulators as an alternative, which is a particularly important statement given the fidelity to the encoded original that emulators allow: however, it suggests that the underlying logic is more important to fidelity than aesthetics and interface, a troubling assertion particularly when taken across genres.

Emulation is particularly significant in the case of a game like this one, which was made in a dedicated tool built specifically for the genre. The SCUMM (Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion) engine behind the original *Secret of Monkey Island* offered a distinctive system for temporal narrative, which

Michael Black (2012) notes as a key distinguishing structure behind this era of interactive narrative. One of the leads on SCUMM, Mike Bevan, noted that future-proofing was a concern but not an overriding one:

> I don't think that any of us thought that SCUMM games would be around this long. I worked on the system for about 12 years and I tried really hard to 'future proof' my code by testing across as many computers as I could. When developing under Windows, I would test it under Windows NT, even if that wasn't one of the target machines, but NT required stricter coding standards. So if it ran under NT, chances were improved that it would run under other future Windows operating systems.

(Bevan, 2013)

The system has proven somewhat resilient for adaptation, although there is no longer any commercial support for it and the task has fallen to fans seeking to preserve their ability to play classic games: "With projects such as ScummVM, a fan-written SCUMM interpreter, additional target machines are now possible. That *Monkey Island* was selected as one of five games to be running at an exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art shows how good storytelling is often more important than flash-in-the-pan games based only on technology" (Bevan, 2013). However, the Smithsonian's model of large-screen displays and limited play time also makes it difficult for any exhibition visitors to appreciate or experience that narrative. The removal from the classic interface context (with a focus on projection and distance from the characters that would previously have occupied an intimate 14-inch monitor) creates further barriers from the "original."

In a blog post on how he would approach revisiting the Monkey Island franchise, original designer Ron Gilbert also emphasized the importance of the SCUMM engine:

> I would rebuild SCUMM. Not SCUMM as in the exact same

language, but what SCUMM brought to those games. It was a
language built around making adventure games and rapid iteration.
It did things Lua could never dream of. When Lua was in High
School, SCUMM beat it up for lunch money. True story. SCUMM
lived and breathed adventure games. I'd build an engine and a
language where funny ideas can be laughed about at lunch and be
in the game that afternoon. SCUMM did that. It's something that is
getting lost today.

(Gilbert, 2013)

Emulation preserves SCUMM and the logical patterns that
designers new to Lucasfilm Games would have learned and
mastered as part of their initial training before even beginning
to prototype graphical adventure games. However, the process of
emulation is far less accessible to the average user than a remake.
For instance, an examination of the wiki page on DosBox (2016)
for would-be emulators of *The Secret of Monkey Island* shows
directions are given for both DosBox and ScummVM, a
SCUMM-dedicated virtual machine. In both cases, difficulties
can be expected not only in installation but it convincing audio
files to play on modern machines. Such projects are also only as
good as their committed, unpaid teams, and thus can at any stage
fall to the wayside.

REMASTERED AND RELOADED

While *The Secret of Monkey Island* kicked off the trend of
adventure game remakes, it represents one of the few in-house
projects of its kind. Other initiatives following in this pattern
have frequently involved the original game designer, but rarely
the original company. However, this hasn't lessened the emphasis
on fidelity. Most of the games targeted for remakes have been
2D games from the days before 3D graphics rose to dominance,
and few of the franchises lived to see 3D graphics introduced
into their original context. However, another recent remastering
draws attention to one of the few 3D successes of the genre,

Grim Fandango, which strikingly employs remodeled characters but not backgrounds:

> Just as the excellent craft behind Grim's story means it's no less engrossing today than it was in 1998, its 3D graphics have also held up surprisingly well. Because Grim has such unique art direction, its low-polygon characters haven't aged as poorly as you'd expect. In fact, the original pre-rendered backgrounds help the graphics look borderline modern. Thus, switching back and forth between the original and remastered graphics on the fly only changes the characters, whose detail and lighting are cleaned up for 2015.

(McCaffrey 2015)

Reviewers particularly noted the reverence with which Grim Fandango treats the original: "Double Fine (lead by *Grim Fandango* creator Tim Schafer) has taken every scrap of the beloved classic and transported it to modern platforms with the feather-light touch of a National Archives curator touching up the U.S. Constitution" (McElroy, 2015).

Figure 2. Manny's office in the original (top) and remastered (bottom) version (McElroy, 2015)

Thanks to this archival approach, *Grim Fandango Remastered* presents perhaps the most compelling model of what a remake can be: driven by the original designer, and including detailed commentary tracks from Tim Schafer and team, the game not only recreates the original mechanics but also provides further insight into references, including details of clear cinematic nods

to *Brazil, The Maltese Falcon,* and *Casablanca.* Laura Preston notes that the game becomes its own lesson in design history as well as a reminder that creativity often springs from limitations:

> I listened to challenges the Grim Fandango team faced due to basic 3D graphics available at the time. It's hard to engage players when your characters are basic geometric shapes with rough textures…or is it? Tim explained that seeing a paper-mâché skeleton got him thinking creatively. The rounded torsos of the skeletons with painted on ribs would be perfect for their new 3D graphic style. The debonair skeletal protagonist, was an elegant solution to a practical design limitation.

(Preston, 2015)

Such commentary also creates its own reflexive irony, as the characters themselves are the most notably changed in this new iteration. Given the genre's reliance on an emotional connection with the player's avatar, these changes are disconcerting: it's a physical update to the embodied self.

The trend towards remaking in graphic adventure games is far from over, with *Day of the Tentacle Remastered* released in early 2016 (with an iOS version released in July 2016) and inviting players to revisit Purple Tentacle's quest to take over the world. However, players finding themselves on this journey "back…to the Mansion!" will be confronted with a familiar sight: a Commodore-style computer tucked up in one of the character's rooms running a playable version of *Maniac Mansion* (Lucasfilm Games 1987), the game's prequel and the impetus behind the initial creation of the SCUMM engine. Does it run? This question was on fan's minds prior to the release, and answered in a pre-launch interview:

> Double Fine VP of Development Matt Hansen made sure to point out that the full Maniac Mansion game is indeed fully intact within Day of the Tentacle Remastered. For those that played the original Day of the Tentacle, it's in the exact same spot as it was before. Is Maniac Mansion itself fully remastered? Unfortunately, no, it's

just as it was, but fans of the original game aren't about to quibble with that minor detail, given that it's widely regarded as one of the greatest adventure games of its era.

(Mejia, 2015)

However, the very phrasing of the announcement raises its own questions: right now, the original *Maniac Mansion* is unplayable without significant fiddling and a virtual machine. How long will *Maniac Mansion* stand open for visitors, if indeed this computer-within-a-computer launches at all? And indeed, how long will Purple Tentacle's quest for world domination be open for thwarting in the context of industry where preservation is an afterthought, and the remake a futile stop-gap against a tide of shifting bits?

Drew Messinger-Michaels draws attention to the minimalism with which the designers approached the process of remastering *Day of the Tentacle:*

> *Day of the Tentacle*…has been Remastered with what I would be tempted to call an even lighter touch if not for the almost obscene amount of work that its approach requires: Rather than reimagining the visuals, DoubleFine has painstakingly smoothed out the jaggy pixels of old (which new drawings rather than some glib aliasing filter) in order to make the game look like what it was apparently intend to look like the first time around: an exuberant hand-drawn cartoon.

(Messigner-Michaels, 2016)

Given the team's clear visual influence from cartoons of the era, the art of the "remake" could in fact be seen as a truer realization of the intended outcomes. Every game is constrained by its platform: classic adventure games faced limitations in size, resolution, graphics processing, and audio. In some cases, those constraints led to compelling outcomes. This visual

transformation attracts mixed feelings from devotees of the original:

> I'm in two minds about this. On the one hand I feel like most attempts to improve visuals in remastered games are driven by a misguided assumption that older art automatically equals worse art thanks to the technical restrictions of computers at the time. This isn't always true, and for the Lucasarts adventures it's particularly untrue; those games had pixel art that hinted at what wasn't there in a masterful way, and neither of the *Monkey Island remasters* managed to better the pixelated renderings of Steve Purcell's original hand-drawn backgrounds despite having a twenty year advantage.

(Hentzau, 29)

The primary changes are driven by interface: in the original, the SCUMM interface took up the majority of the screen. In the remake, an alternative is presented: "Remastered borrows a page from later LucasArts games like *Sam and Max Hit the Road*, handling actions with a pop-up wheel full of options. This more modern interface *gives Day of the Tentacle Remastered* more room to breathe, and it makes for swifter navigation and interaction" (Alexandra, 2016). However, a player of the remastered version relying on this swifter navigation is likely to miss a number of the humorous moments that a player using the SCUMM interface (with its visible verb and noun play) would encounter. Likewise, the removal of the characteristic system and interface obscures the game's connection to its genre. The oft-disparaged reliance on point-and-click powered exploration of the interface is also at the heart of much of the genre's humor: "the adventure game is a genre immediately so self-referential, it seems to weave a network of texts that refer back to themselves in a way that "establishes" its credentials as genre — on the other, it actively sets up a two-way participatory dynamic, making the player aware of the interplay between the medium's limitations and the possibilities they enable" (Giappone, 2015).

The iOS version of *Day of the Tentacle* serves as a visual warning

of the challenges of interface emulation facing digital preservation. Games made natively for iOS face not only the death of their platform but the death of their operating system version as imminent threats to their survival: games and digital art works regularly disappear from the app store with the advent of a major update. As a platform for revisiting point and click works, the touch screen also struggles with the difference between observing and interacting with environments—the distinction of moving versus clicking the mouse is lost, and it is more difficult to physically "explore" in fine-tuned detail.

These remastered editions also change in audio, which can be well-received when the source files lend themselves to the remake, as in *Full Throttle:* as one reviewer commented, "You can switch back and forth between the original mono monotony, and the superbly remixed version, and there's no contest – crisp, clear voices over unfuzzy music – it's a joy" (Walker, 2017). The remastered audio includes the original voices, unlike recasting that was necessitated in other remakes (including the *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father* anniversary edition, which replaced Tim Curry and other iconic voice actors with new actors.) The original *Full Throttle* was released in 1995 and was lauded for its soundtrack, which featured the music of a rock band called The Gone Jackals, so changes to the auditory aspect of the game would have drawn particular scrutiny. Disconnects in remakes soundtracks can transform how each version is received, particularly by existing fans looking to relive a familiar experience. Describing his goals in the remake, Tim Schafer again emphasized fidelity: "It's a collaboration of a bunch of artists coming together. The acting, the writing, the sound design, the music. All these people worked together to make this thing, and we don't want to mess with it. We just want to present it in the best way possible, and make it more true to the original intentions. We're getting rid of artefacts, compression, and old tech to make it look like it looked in our minds" (Kelly,

2017). However, those so-called "artefacts" are part of the text, and the value of their removal is questionable: the same reviewer (Walker, 2017) who praised the remastering of sound noted that the aesthetics were not improved by the visual equivalent process.

The ongoing value of the remasterings here to the companies that own them is obvious: a remake can be sold commercially more easily than the original games, which require emulators and effort to successfully run and are often already easily found through abandonware. A successful remake can potentially be a launching-off point for further profit from an existing intellectual property, such as the Odd Gentlemen reboot of *King's Quest* (2015). Obviously, such works are not intended to be an answer to the pressing questions of software preservation facing scholars and archivists of playable media—however, thanks in part to their emphasis on the elusive qualities of fidelity, they can function as an important step in that process.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE CHALLENGES IN PROCEDURAL REMAKES

Every remake examined here includes fundamental breaks with the original, however close the designers tried to stay to the original. This isn't necessarily bad, but it does draw their suitability as artifacts of canonical preservation into question. Work on preservation in media archaeology typically focused on the full artifact: collections such as the Computer History Museum and the Strong Archive of Play, as well as projects such as the NEH-funded collaboration on Preserving Virtual Worlds (McDonough et al, 2010), involve archivists and scholars in preservation work that goes well beyond industry practices. Similarly, fan practices (including the pirating of abandoned games for play through emulators, see Coleman and Dyer-Witheford, 2007) have a broader reach than the commercially-viable titles cherrypicked by corporate producers for the

investment of a remake. Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort's work in establishing the field of platform studies provides us a context for suggesting why both experiences of the remake are ultimately unsatisfying: even in the most apparently faithful remake, layers of code, software, interface, and hardware have been stripped away and the work is fundamentally re-contextualized from its original platform (2007). You can't step into the same river twice, even if it is made of pixels. The desire to remake is a preservation instinct (even when corporate, it tends to be initiated by creators or fans rather than by a model of profit), but it is also perhaps the ultimate act of futility in a rapidly changing technological world. Emulation will step in to save only chosen works, while others are unlikely to see a lifespan much beyond the lives of their creators or intellectual property owners and, correspondingly, their creators' intentional care and continual remaking.

Many of the remakes examined here have versions that are even more tied to a closed platform than the original works: iOS remakes will, if not updated regularly, disappear from the App Store with little hope of remaining playable. While the cross-platform nature of most of these remakes will keep them playable for a longer period of time on more backwards-compatible environments such as the Windows operating system, there is a dark inevitability of an emulated future that is also a reminder that remakes are still a solution for a particular moment. This seems to contradict the mantra of fidelity espoused by designers, who treat the process as one of preservation perhaps in large part so the games can more easily function as sites of nostalgia for players recalling former experiences. This desire for fidelity is perhaps at war with the other commercial purpose of introducing new players to a canonical gaming narrative, but it does assist in the value of these games for teaching canonical games to students and newcomers to genres such as the adventure game. However, underlying these remakes is a larger assumption that newer graphics are inherently better. The

resistance on the part of some fans to the value (and need) for the remake reinforces the value of the original: while many of the graphic styles of these games were a response to the constraints of their platform, those constraints motivated creativity and originality. Jesper Juul has noted that many indie games rely on a "counterfactual nostalgia" of false pixelization, embracing constraints that modern platforms no longer possess as a way of inviting nostalgic consumption (2015). It is thus ironic that these consumer remakes, inherently rooted in nostalgia, mostly promise fidelity while delivering new versions of games themselves reflecting the graphical norms of a new, and fleeting, moment.

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