

The second-person addressee as the reader's avatar

DOI: 10.14746/fp.2026.43.4

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In this article, I pose a single guiding question: can applying the concept of the avatar to the analysis of the addressee in second-person narrative illuminate the growing popularity of this transmedia storytelling form and its impact on readerly engagement? Second-person narrative—the “you” narrative—is hugely popular in print,¹ digital,² and playable literature,³ in hybrid and borderline narrative forms,⁴ as well as in television series⁵ and video

¹ Joanna Jeziorska-Haładaj, Magdalena Rembowska-Płuciennik, “Second-Person in Different Genres and Cultural Practices”, *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich [The Problems of Literary Genres]* 4 (2022): 7–16.

² Elżbieta Winiecka, *Poszerzanie pola literatury. Studia o literackości w Internecie [Expanding the Field of Literature: Literary Studies on the Internet]* (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

³ Monika Górńska-Olesińska, Agnieszka Przybyszewska, “O «wypożyczeniu» ciał odbiorców na potrzeby (nie tylko literackich) immersyjnych wędrówek po przestrzeniach pamięci” [On “Borrowing” the Bodies of Recipients for the Purposes Of (Not Only Literary) Immersive Journeys Through the Spaces of Memory], *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy [Cultural Studies Review]* 2 (2020): VII–XXVI.

⁴ Paulina Siedlecka, “«Rzuć K8 na inicjatywę», czyli o narracji drugosobowej w grach fabularnych” [“Roll a K8 for Initiative,” or Second-Person Narration in Role-Playing Games], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 4 (2022): 125–137.

⁵ Sandrin Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in “House of Cards”* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

games.⁶ Its proliferation correlates with broader shifts in the language of mass interactive communication on the internet.⁷ I do not engage here with the long-standing narratological debates surrounding the definitions and typologies of second-person narrative.⁸ For clarity, I restrict my discussion to the prototypical narrative situation in which the addressee of the story (the narratee) is a character distinct from the narrator who recounts that character's actions, motivations, and experiences.⁹ We can see that, for example, in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*:

You see yourself taking a walk on that beach, you see yourself meeting new people (only they are new in a very limited way, for they are people just like you). You see yourself eating some delicious, locally grown food. You see yourself, you see yourself . . . You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it. You must not wonder where your bathwater went when you pulled out the stopper. You must not wonder what happened when you brushed your teeth. Oh, it might end up in the water you are thinking of taking a swim in; the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system.¹⁰

Based on this fragment, we can identify key formal determinants of second-person narration. “You” designates the central, acting character of the story, and the narrative is directed to this very figure as he participates in the events. “You” remains present on the syntactic level—its disappearance would shift the narrative into a first-person or third-person mode. The narratee thus carries greater semantic weight than the speaker: the address to “you” is not an apostrophe to a silent witness (as in a spoken monologue) but a vehicle for representing the character's individual actions (which drive the plot). This function extends beyond the pragmatics of imperatives (as in self-help books or tourist guides: “Turn left to admire the view of the river bend”). The action typically unfolds in the present tense, so events are narrated simultaneously to the protagonist who is experiencing them. Experiments on how readers process this narrative form¹¹ reveal a striking effect: second-person narration encourages readers to inhabit the embodied perspective of the protagonist addressed as “you”, which in turn supports the construction of richer mental models of the fictional space and fosters

⁶ Second-Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media, ed. Pat Harrigan, Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010); Michał Kłosiński, “Przekraczając horyzont inności: Narracja drugoosobowa w fabularnych grach cyfrowych jako problem biopolityczny” [Crossing the Horizon of Otherness: Second-Person Narrative in Digital Role-Playing Games as a Biopolitical Problem], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 4 (2022): 83–95.

⁷ *Język w Internecie. Antologia* [Language on the Internet: An Anthology], ed. Małgorzata Kita, Iwona Loewe (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016).

⁸ It is a constant point of reflection on second-person narration and is discussed in detail in specialist monographs. The most recent publications are: Magdalena Rembowska-Pluciennik, *Opowiem ci o tobie. Narracja drugoosobowa w literaturze współczesnej* [I'll Tell You About You: Second-Person Narrative in Contemporary Literature] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2025), Sandrin Sorlin, *The Stylistics of You: The Second-Person Pronoun and Its Pragmatics Effects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁹ Bruce Morrissette, “Narrative «You» in Contemporary Literature”, *Comparative Literature Studies* 2 (1965): 1–24.

¹⁰ Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Stauss and Giroux, 2000): 7–8.

¹¹ Tad T. Brunyé et al., “When You and I Share Perspectives: Pronouns Modulate Perspective Taking During Narrative Comprehension”, *Psychological Science* 1 (2009): 27–32; Tad T. Brunyé et al., “Better You than I: Perspectives and Emotion Simulation During Narrative Comprehension”, *Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 5 (2011): 659–666.

shared embodied responses, such as emotions and perceptual acts. This distinctive reception pattern has been widely examined across linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, and the rhetoric of second-person storytelling. The inclusive semantics of “you” destabilizes the ontological boundaries between textual levels and the subjectivities involved in literary communication. The narratee may be a fictional character, the narrator addressing a version of himself (for example, from the past), a fictional reader embedded in the text, or a real reader situated outside the fictional world. Blurring the boundary between the intratextual and extratextual audience serves to radically—and often explicitly—draw the reader into both the world of the story and the narrative act itself. This narrative gesture does not occur in any other form of narration. Thus, second-person narration is the only mode of storytelling that offers the reader a textual representation of themselves at both the level of events and the level of discourse. Many terms have been proposed to describe this effect,¹² but despite the variety of labels, they all point to a single purpose: the reader/player/user is quite literally “inserted” into the poetics of storytelling.¹³

In digital and interactive media, this role is now performed by the avatar—a visual representation of the user that has become ubiquitous in video games, social media platforms, online shopping interfaces, and educational applications.¹⁴ The history of the avatar, which originates in the religious and cultural traditions of the Indian subcontinent, illustrates how ideas circulate across cultures in ways that can be understood both as intercultural exchange and, from a postcolonial perspective, as cultural appropriation. Video games and digital culture scholars themselves point to this dual interpretive frame.¹⁵ The noun “avatar” comes from Sanskrit, where it referred to the manifestation of a deity in bodily form, a cyclical, perfect, and endlessly recurring incarnation in the material world. When American developers in the emerging computer and video game industry began using the term avatar in the 1980s, they intended it to retain a trace of its divine origin. This was not only because the rapidly growing Californian tech community was, at the time, deeply fascinated by cultures of the Far East—Hinduism, Buddhism, and various forms of East Asian art and philosophy—but also because the original idea of a divine being “descending” into corporeal form was meant to become an innovative and compelling metaphor for the user’s own “descent” into the virtual world—an

¹²David Herman called it “double deixis” (David Herman, “Textual «You» and Double Deixis in Edna O’Brien’s «A Pagan Place», *Style* 3 [1994]: 378–410). Helmut Bonheim calls this slippage the “referential slither” (Helmut Bonheim, “Narration in the Second Person”, *Recherches Anglaises et Américaines* 16 [1983]: 69–80). Dennis Schoffield described the “Protean ‘you’ and the narrative function” in his monograph *The Second Person: A Point of View? The Function of the Second Person Pronoun in Narrative Prose Fiction* (Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1998). Sorlin wrote about the “interpellation” in *The Stylistics of You*, 66–69; Jill Walker Rettberg distinguished between “forced and voluntary participation” (Jill Walker Rettberg, “Do You Think You’re Part of It? Digital Texts and the Second Person Address”, in: *Cybertext Yearbook 2000*, ed. Markku Eskelinen, Raine Koskimaa [Saarijärvi: University of Jyväskylä, 2001] 8–25). Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin call this effect “creative collaboration” (Astrid Ensslin, Alice Bell, “It’s All about «You»”, in: Astrid Ensslin, Alice Bell, *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2021): 157–171. Referential ambiguity and its functions are medium-specific.

¹³This refers to the intended effect—whether temporary or lasting—of dissolving the boundary between the reader and the protagonist; it is often associated with second-person narration, particularly in formats such as choose-your-own-adventure novels.

¹⁴Ralph Schroeder, “Social Interaction in Virtual Environments: Key Issues, Common Themes, and a Framework for Research”, in: *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, ed. Ralph Schroeder (London: Springer, 2002): 1–18.

¹⁵Lars de Wildt et al., “(Re-)Orienting the Videogame Avatar”, *Games and Culture* 8 (2019): 962–981.

incarnation as a digital representation capable of acting within it. This way of conceptualizing the digital persona introduced an entirely new dimension to the player's sense of embodiment and agency, one that existing terms such as "character" or "icon" could not convey. The player was encouraged to see themselves as a person visually represented and materially instantiated within a fictional environment, operating autonomously in that space and altering the course of events through their actions.¹⁶

What links the functionality of an avatar with the narrative role of "you" in second-person print narrative is their shared capacity to stimulate participation in events, interaction with other characters or audiences, and engagement in the unfolding action. From its emergence in the early 20th century, second-person point of view in literature was regarded as a complex, experimental technique that challenged established reading habits. Today, however, it aligns smoothly with the core features of media culture. Second-person narrative in print literature also generates an effect akin to the co-presence effect, which Erving Goffman¹⁷ described in the 1960s as the feeling of being together with another person in a virtual environment. Goffman's insights are now applied to the study of human interaction with non-anthropomorphic entities as well, including avatars representing real people and technological agents associated with the rapid development of artificial intelligence, such as chatbots and virtual assistants.¹⁸ This concept opens up previously unseen ways of examining community and communication, interaction and intimacy, and the dynamics of closeness and distance.¹⁹ Technology and digital media have created a new prototypical situation in which we engage with a fictional character through direct second-person address: the experience of interacting with fictional figures during gameplay or through chat, for example on the Character.ai platform with characters generated by large language models.²⁰ Because second-person narrative also relies on the consistent use of "you,"²¹ the spread of immediate, informal communication has made it culturally transparent: it no longer evokes avant-garde novelistic experimentation but instead aligns

¹⁶In this form and function, the avatar first appeared in the game *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (1985) by Richard Garriott de Gayeux (de Wildt et al., 1970).

¹⁷Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

¹⁸Kristine Nowak, Frank Biocca, "The Effect of the Agency and Anthropomorphism on Users' Sense of Telepresence, Copresence, and Social Presence in Virtual Environments", *Presence Teleoperators & Virtual Environments* 5 (2003): 481–494.

¹⁹Kris Rutten, "Participation, Arts and Digital Culture", *Critical Arts* 3 (2018): 1–8.

²⁰The platform was created by former Google engineers Noam Shazeer and Daniel de Freitas, building on their work with the artificial intelligence model LaMDA. Its public beta launched on September 16, 2022, and quickly became one of the most widely used platforms for interactive entertainment, creative storytelling, and community formation. Users create digital characters ranging from legendary or historical figures to humorous, fictional conversational partners. The service is powered by a large language model (LLM) that uses deep learning to process and generate text in response to fluid user interaction, predicting subsequent words and clusters of sentences in ways that approximate human speech. Character.ai employs these models not only to produce general responses but also to construct and sustain a coherent fictional personality for role-playing and interactive storytelling. See <https://policies.character.ai/about>, date of access 27 Aug. 2025.

²¹Morrisette had already introduced the distinction between the apostrophic and the narrative uses of "you" in the study of second-person narrative. Only the latter—the recounting of an individual's story from the perspective of "you" to oneself—functions as a generator of second-person narrative. The apostrophic use of "you" appears instead in forms such as spoken monologue and literary genres modeled on oral traditions. Irene Kacandes, *Talk Fiction: Literature and the Talk Explosion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

with the default functionalities of interactive entertainment. In digital environments, the primary tool for co-presence with other users is the avatar, a visual representation of a real person—an icon or personalized graphic marker that may resemble the actual individual (to varying degrees). Participants in digital culture continually modify or multiply their identities,²² freely creating their own media representations—often to share virtual space in real time with a global online community and to interact with its members. Immersion in an imagined world through a borrowed persona that represents the user within a community capable of active interaction has become a widely accessible form of entertainment and media engagement. This media environment, in turn, reshapes the status of second-person narrative within the contemporary landscape of storytelling forms. A narrative that draws the reader in by positioning them as a “you” acting within a fictional world now resembles, for today’s audience, the experience of using an avatar in an interactive medium.

Through role playing it is possible to test out new fronts and new roles. As a player of games, I have the leisure and luxury to explore what it is like to be something totally other. “What are you?”, you ask, and I don’t answer with my real gender, nationality, or age. I am an orc, a shaman, in Kalimdor, and I struggle to find a safe spot in the dry, searing desert heat where orcs can finally live in peace from demons, tyrants, and others who want to enslave or eradicate them. I still know very well who I am, but I am also something else, something other—and online, playing a role-playing game, I set some of that other free.²³

The textual “you” in print literary narratives finds its closest functional analogue in the avatar—a participant in virtual events and interactions, a representative and embodiment of the user of new technologies, often endowed with abilities the user does not possess in the real world. Using an avatar:

responds to a desire to enter the gameworld not as yourself, in your actual physical body, but as incarnated in another body, a body made to fit all kinds of strange and alien worlds, and into which you can seamlessly transplant, via minimal movements of eyes, hands, fingers.²⁴

In narrative genres, the avatar—through its surrogate body—allows the player to merge the roles of director and actor; in narratological terms, it enables the user to co-perform the functions of both narrator and protagonist. As Ewa Szczesna observes in her analysis of

²²It is important to recognize that this functionality introduces new ethical and legal challenges. An avatar may enable digital idealization—distorting the user’s real appearance—or provide anonymity, both of which can facilitate unethical manipulation or even criminal activity. The powerful psychological effects associated with identifying with an avatar can also be exploited; for instance, virtual assaults on avatars in digital environments have been shown to produce trauma that closely resembles real-world traumatic responses. For discussion of the psychological dynamics of avatar–user relationships, see Jennifer Wu, “Choosing My Avatar & the Psychology of Virtual Worlds: What Matters?”, *Kaleidoscope* 11 (2013), Article 89, <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/vol11/iss1/89>, date of access 27 Aug. 2025.

²³Torill E. Mortensen, “Me, the Other”, in: *Second-Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, 305.

²⁴Rune Klevjer, “Enter the Avatar”, in: *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, ed. John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim, Tarjei Mandt Larsen (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012): 29. See also: Rune Klevjer, *What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games: Revised and Commented Edition* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022).

computer-game narratives, these forms combine situations considered impossible in print literature: they bring together chance and deliberately designed plot development as well as the roles of recipient and sender, since the player actively shapes the course and structure of the game while engaging with it.²⁵ Creating and using an avatar also carries significant social value. It often emerges within group interactions, and the avatar's traits may be shaped by the expectations of other players in a given game or by their responses to the user's specific mode of self-presentation.²⁶ Avatar use has therefore become an important subject of study in Internet psychology and in the psychology of contemporary technologically mediated social interaction.

For gamers and social media users, a key advantage of an avatar is its ability to provide a tool for co-presence in the virtual world, enabling extensive social interaction and allowing individuals to shape their own identity. Avatar functionalities make it possible to combine a sense of embodiment in the virtual world with a sense of actively taking meaningful action within it;²⁷ co-participation and agency constitute highly valued cultural experiences, made readily accessible through the capacities of the new media. Janet Murray identifies agency as a key experiential feature that heightens the satisfaction or pleasure of digital media users. Agency strengthens the user's position by reinforcing the connection between immersion and action—an increasingly collaborative form of engagement in contemporary digital environments.²⁸ The fact that an avatar may differ significantly from its user is crucial; for example, it can possess abilities that people with disabilities do not have:

Suddenly, they could run, jump, and physically interact with the world in ways they had not before. For disabled players, some of whom made up the group's leadership, the experience was one of reembodiment, allowing them to do things their physical bodies could not, as well as putting them on a "level playing field with others." All players enjoyed a new kind of inhabitation and agency in the world, of which they were now physically and representationally a part.²⁹

How might the concept of the avatar influence narrative theory in print literature? The possibility of reinterpreting classic textual narrative categories in and through other media narratives is an established phenomenon, closely tied to the evolution of the media landscape. Revising traditional categories of analog culture in the context of interactive and digital forms becomes a necessary step in deepening reflection on the medium-dependent or transmedia characteristics of narrative:

²⁵Ewa Szczęsna, *Poetyka mediów: Polisemiotyczność, digitalizacja, reklama* [Media Poetics: Polysemioticism, Digitalization, Advertising] (Warsaw: Wydział Polonistyki UW, 2007): 152–154.

²⁶Celia Pearce, "Communities of Play: The Social Construction of Identity in Persistent Online Game Worlds", in: *Second-Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, 311–316.

²⁷T.L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds", in: *The Social Life of Avatars: 40–62*; see also: *Avatars at Work and Play: Collaboration and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments*, ed. Ralph Schroeder, Ann-Sofie Axelsson (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006); Ralph Schroeder, *Being there Together: Social Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁸Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York, Singapore: The Free Press, 1997): 126–153.

²⁹Pearce, 312.

[...] telling a story in a novel is not the same as enacting it in a video game. Stories are experienced differently between the tabletop, the computer, and the stage. New forms of media not only require new approaches to story but may even force us to reexamine our assumptions about how stories are told in more traditional forms.³⁰

What distinguishes literature in print from the digital media is that the reader is asked to identify who “you” is. A literary text may intentionally complicate this process, and identifying the intended narratee becomes central to interpreting the work as a whole. The reader’s identification with the narrative “you” is never automatic; it can be separated from the position the reader occupies when adopting the embodied perspective of that “you” within the storyworld—its bodily stance, perceptual range, and proprioceptive relations to other characters and objects. Orienting oneself in fictional space-time through the acting body of “you” engages the reader through mechanisms of embodied simulation. “You” becomes the reader’s vehicle for navigating the fictional environment—even when the reader does not empathize with that “you” for moral, gendered, or ideological reasons and may even experience a degree of resistance toward the character. The capacity to project oneself into the character’s spatiotemporal position produces only a corporeal connection³¹ grounded in shared location and simulated action; it does not, in itself, generate empathy or identification. When “you” is, for instance, a blind girl (Rumer Godden’s *You Needed to Go Upstairs*) or a middle-aged man unable to choose between his wife and his lover (Michel Butor’s *Changing Track*), full identification becomes difficult for most readers. Various epistemic and axiological obstacles can prevent the reader from fully aligning with the textual “you.” Recalling the earlier passage from Kincaid’s story, the reader’s assumption of the spatiotemporal location of the textual “you” becomes a point of orientation—much like the avatar’s position in a virtual environment such as a video game. This contrast underscores the difference between the reader’s imagined placement in fictional space and their potential empathetic identification with “you.” Empirical work by Alice Bell and Astrid Ensslin³² shows that readers tend to feel they are the referent of “you” when the text resonates with their own biographical experience. Yet even when such identification is limited or impossible, the textual “you” still anchors the reader’s bodily orientation within the fictional world, and this embodied positioning remains a fundamental component of narrative comprehension.

The sense of identification with a digital avatar is likewise a matter of degree.³³ An avatar can represent a gender, ethnic background, or body type different from our own, and it can be used for actions and behaviors we would never dare to repeat in real life. In this way, both the avatar and the textual character function as tools for exploring identity.

³⁰Pat Harrigan, Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “Introduction”, in: *Second-Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, XIV.

³¹Anezka Kuzmičová, “Presence in the Reading of Literary Narrative: A Case for Motor Enactment”, *Semiotica* 1-4 (2012): 23–48.

³²Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, “A Reader Response Method Not Just for You”, *Language and Literature* 3 (2019): 241–262.

³³Edward Downs, Nicholas David Bowman, Jaime Banks, “A Polythetic Model of Player-Avatar Identification: Synthesizing Multiple Mechanisms”, *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 3 (2017): 269–279; Piotr Klimczyk, “Psychologia gier wideo – zarys problematyki i jej akademicka legitymizacja” [Video Game Psychology: An Outline of the Issue and its Academic Legitimization], *Polskie Forum Psychologiczne [Polish Psychological Forum]* 3 (2022): 351–368.

In second-person narrative, verbs of action, perception, and movement play a central role in aligning the textual “you” with the reader’s perspective, because they prompt the reader to simulate the unfolding actions within the imagined environment. These linguistic cues support an enactive mode of understanding, grounded in the embodied enactment of another’s movements and sensations.³⁴ Research in psycholinguistics³⁵ informed by embodied cognition shows that the comprehension of movement verbs is tightly connected to the motor system: such words activate brain regions adjacent to, or overlapping with, those involved in performing or perceiving the corresponding actions.³⁶ In second-person narrative, this means that “you” places the reader directly within the fictional world, specifying the perceptual, emotional, and affective dimensions of that position. This creates a mode of engagement with the narrative that other forms do not offer with comparable clarity, because it thematizes the reader’s participation within the discourse itself.

Let us consider second-person in print literature as an invitation for the reader to assume the role of the protagonist, to witness the same scenes and perform the same actions, to act as a character in a fictional story ... long before such participation became possible in interactive digital environments. It is also worth recalling that the avatar, in this sense, first appeared in precisely this function within print literature itself, in Norman Spinrad’s *Songs from the Stars* (1980), and was later popularized by Neal Stephenson in *Snow Crash* (1992).

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁴Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative: An Enactivist Approach* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Yanna Popova, *Stories, Meaning, and Experience: Narrativity and Enaction* (London, New York: Routledge, 2015).

³⁵Arthur Glenberg, Michael Kaschak, “Grounding Language in Action”, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 3 (2002): 558–565.

³⁶Rolf Zwaan, “The Immersed Experiencer: Toward an Embodied Theory of Language Comprehension”, *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation* 44 (2004): 35–62; Rolf Zwaan, Lawrence Taylor, “Seeing, Acting, Understanding: Motor Resonance in Language Comprehension”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 1 (2006): 1–11.

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KEYWORDS

avatar

SECOND-PERSON NARRATIVE

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the functional parallels between the textual addressee constructed in second-person narrative and the avatar figure operating within digital environments. It investigates how both print-based second-person narration and interactive media such as video games generate an effect of co-presence—a felt sense of participating in shared events. In both cases, the narratee and the digital avatar provide the reader or user with a spatiotemporal position inside a virtual world, enabling them to act within it and to interact with other entities.

digital culture

co-presence

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