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Reigning Territorial Plains – Blast Theory's 'Desert Rain'

Rachel Clarke

A consistency with any modern war is that events are mediatized, revisited and re-evaluated as significant national and international pointers of loss and victory. Ten years on, however, the Gulf War seems to represent an oil slick that cannot be cleansed, and remains an unresolved political sore point and embarrassment to Western Europe and America. Rather than be considered representative of heroic loss and victory, as is the association with the Second World War, the motivations and the achievements of the Gulf War are more readily associated with ambiguity and uncertainty through its mass reliance on media and warfare technologies. This is why there have been so many books and articles dedicated to the Gulf War in particular, it having been branded the first true media war or 'video logo war', and thereby representative of an era of 'postmodern' and 'cyber' warfare.

Baudrillard's articulation of this 'simulated' war has marked a whole series of debates on its mystification and actuality, and the distanciation prompted by technological warfare and media relay (Baudrillard 1995). Using this theoretical trajectory 'Desert Rain', a performance and computer game designed by Blast Theory and the School of Computer Science at Nottingham University, has brought these issues into the 21st century, asserting further affirmation of the vague events and motivations concerning the Gulf War. My intention with this article is not simply to map out Blast Theory's success in reconfiguring the events of the Gulf War to an appropriate, accessible and contemporary medium, but is to discuss the ways in which the metaphor of 'mapping' can be used to discuss

the experience of 'Desert Rain' at varying levels of subjective engagement within the performance.

For the purposes of this discussion, the mapping of 'Desert Rain' is considered in three separate spatial domains: visual, physical and virtual mappings to reveal something of the western perception of the Gulf War as prompted through the experience of 'Desert Rain'. It is an attempt to plot points of significance that reiterate the issues at stake during the Gulf War that potentially remain today, and to question how those points are represented within the performance and virtual technologies of 'Desert Rain'.

Blast Theory are a performance and new media company based in London. Coming together as a group in 1991, they have since collaborated on a number of works which challenge the boundaries of the real and the virtual. Their earlier work 'Kidnap' received much media attention in its acute questioning of the equivocal and ethical status of material and viewing practices explored through the Internet. Desert Rain has extended this critical and provocative response to the way in which we engage with media technologies by working with increasingly advanced technologies to create a more controlled, embodied and interactive atmosphere and experience.

GENESIS OF 'DESERT RAIN'

Desert Rain began as an Art Lab residency in Nottingham 1997, where the group were experimenting with water and projection as a means of creating multiple illusory dimensions within space. The School of Computer Science at Nottingham

University became interested in developing work which explored the boundaries between virtual and physical space, and so teamed up with Blast Theory in order to approach these interests through a creative process. Development of material from the Gulf War was initiated through a reading of Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, which accentuates the confusion and collapse of distinctions concerning the 'real' and the 'virtual'. It was Baudrillard's verbalization of the war, Blast Theory have suggested, that gave them the academic language with which to engage their initial concepts, leading them into further research on the Gulf War as an archival study. Consequently, the project of Desert Rain largely focused its content on the Gulf War. But the initial questions which Blast Theory approached sustain wider concerns over the fragility and interconnectedness of the physical and the virtual, the fictional and the factual.¹

Desert Rain premiered in Stockholm in 1999 and has since toured art venues throughout Britain. It has been experienced by art-going audiences, but has also appealed to a much broader range of people because of its shared similarities to computer game interaction and motivation. Furthermore, it offers the potential to be explored and engaged with simply as a computer game, or as a more complex work that deploys varying intertextual layers referencing academic theory and the Gulf War.

GAME STRUCTURE

The crux of the work depends upon competitive drives activated through a computer game scenario, by giving each participant a target to retrieve and a goal to accomplish. Working largely with computer game logic of find, retrieve, kill or rescue, the target to find and retrieve is a virtual person recognizable by both name and face within the virtual environment. The goal is to find this target and escape with the other five participants to a hotel room in the virtual environment within an allotted time of 20 minutes. All participants are visible within the environment and can be contacted via a headset, if they are close by, in order to prompt collaboration and speedy exit. Unlike most computer games,

however, Desert Rain allows a significant amount of contact with human presence at varying stages of the performance/game, which often disrupts the remote telepresence experienced by the participants. Furthermore, movement between virtual and 'real' or 'stage set' spaces serves to disorientate the body through the perplexity of the shifts between the tangible and the ephemeral.

VISUAL MAPPING

Desert Rain uses three types of simulated references to the visual delivered during the performance. These different types of images serve to highlight the significance of the intangible image in the relaying of an event, not just with reference to the Gulf War but also as an experience of a simulated event.

The Credit Card Target

Each participant, prior to engagement with the virtual environment, is given a credit card with a player number, a pixelated close-up of a face, and a name which is the target to be found within the environment. Whilst each participant is referred to by number, the target characters have an eerie and figurative presence, through notification of their names and faces; a presence mirrored in the virtual environment where the faces of the targets are the only figurative attributes within the abstracted linear computer-game graphics of the virtual environment. This raises the question, what are my targets for? Am I saving them? Are they annihilated when I find them? The motivation for finding the target is further muddled by their presence as white men and women. The word 'target' obviously triggers associations of firearms, yet if they are white, what are they being targeted for? If the faces suggested Arab origins how would this change the perception behind the motivation for their retrieval? The players are, however, represented figuratively by faces of Iraqi civilians, soldiers and politicians. This was sometimes difficult to discern, but serves to suggest that the Iraqi 'other' within this game is present, but ambiguous. These presences of the 'other' of this war further

complicate the motivation and the consequence for the retrieval of targets.

Computer Game Graphics

Further connotations of the visual content of computer game graphics within *Desert Rain* and the actual mapping of the Gulf desert by American satellite are revealed when considering the project of mapping within the West. As Kevin Robins suggests

From the 'deep black' of outer space the penetrating look of American spy satellites maintained a constant surveillance over the Iraqi nation, continually identifying strategic targets. Stealth fighters 'lurked' in the Gulf skies, invisibly and undetectably lethal. And then death came suddenly, out of the blue, through the 'surgical strike' of a cruise missile. These 'smart' or 'brilliant' weapons allowed the allied forces to 'remove' chosen targets with precision and at will.

(Robins 1996: 63)

Iraq was mapped visually for its points of significance in order to focus targets on places which would cause the most damage to Hussein's army and intentions. This distanced plotting of the land, creating a 'panoptic map', also distanced responsibility for the civilian lives that were being taken from the ground, despite the intention simply to target specific areas with fewer civilian casualties and greater impediment to Hussein's mission of dominating Kuwait. But there is another kind of mapping which haunts this war, the mapping of oil which dominated, and still does dominate, the significance of the Gulf. The oil-fields of Kuwait have been mapped due to the expenditure on oil in Western Europe, the Persian Gulf housing one of the biggest land-based deposits of crude oil. Plotting large expanses of space has been a western project for hundreds of years.² However, the East and the desert, that large expanse of nothing, can only be mapped if it serves the purpose of some economic or imperialist project. As Anne McClintock suggests:

the map both preceded and legitimised the conquest of territory. The map is a technology of knowledge that

professes to capture the truth about a place in pure, scientific form, operating under the guise of scientific exactitude and promising to retrieve and reproduce nature exactly as it is. As such, it is also a technology of possession promising that those with the capacity to make such perfect representations must also have the right to territorial control.

(McClintock 1995: 27)

Although McClintock is specifically concentrating on the project of colonialism embarked on by the great British empire of the 18th and 19th centuries, the mapping of land achieved during travel conquests has led the way to a western understanding of modern foreign territories. The extent to which the West was trying to dominate the Gulf to claim it as territory may be questionable, but perhaps now the land has become worthless. It is oil, a product of the land, that now suggests wealth and power. It is no longer a question of how much land you own but the type of land – associated with whatever generator of economic prosperity is at stake.

Baudrillard's use of the fable of Borges illustrates this point quite distinctly. He cites how the map comes to stand for all that is 'real', whilst the territory from which the map is developed becomes obsolete (Baudrillard 1983: 2–3). In these instances of mapping then Iraq and Kuwait become signifiers of warfare and oil, whilst the intricacies and actuality of the land are left unrepresented and ignored. This is mirrored in the computer game images used within *Desert Rain*, which rely on bland linear representations, blocks of colour, and simple navigational signifiers. The participant is often floating in a void that has only compass and degree points to show the way. There is no motivation to explore; the images are devised not as spectacles but utilitarian points of reference.

The Gulf War itself, however, was devised, some would say, as a spectacle. Returning to McClintock's idea that those with the power to represent accuracy and truth have the right to control, the way the media relayed the technological brilliance exhibited by the western armies asserted the West's

authority over and above the power of the East. This impression was reinforced by the excessive nature of the attacks; a 'repetition of action – not in order to damage but to make an already underlined point' (Baudrillard 1995: 53). Does this suggest that the fighting for territory and oil was equivocal, and that the spectacle served only to reaffirm the dominance and power of the West?

At an early stage of the game I found myself completely alone in a desert setting. The other team members must have moved off into another section, as I spun away into my own world. This was incredibly unnerving – there were no other bodies or reference points to recognize. I expected someone to jump out and attack me, yet nothing happened.

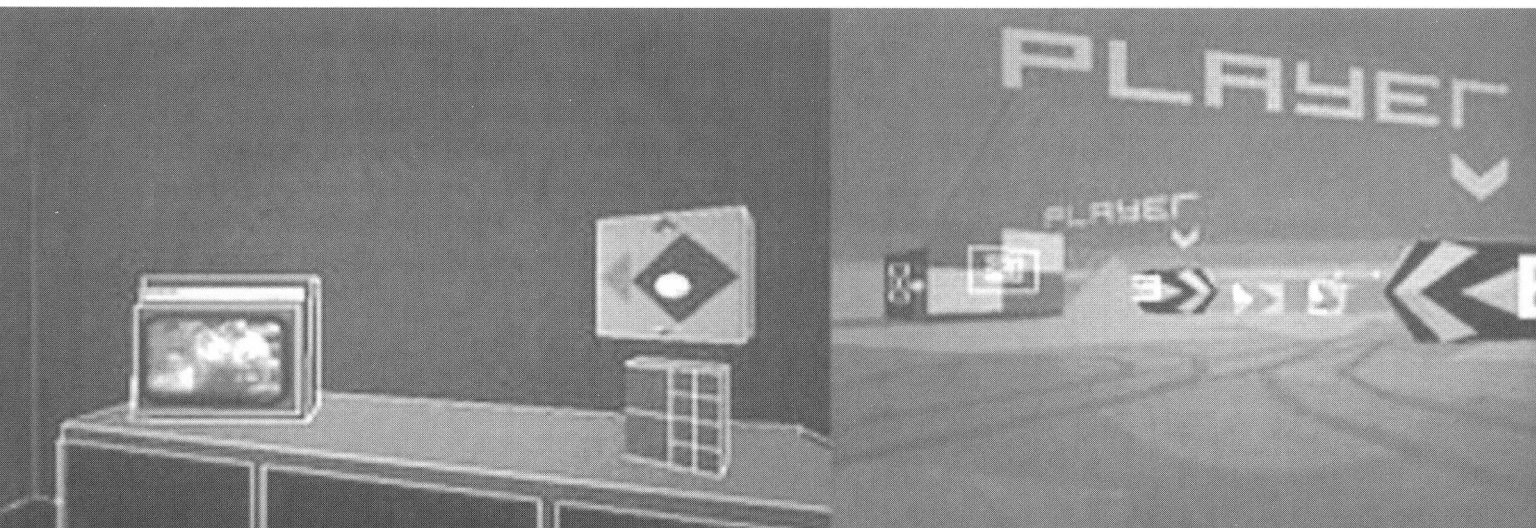
In an aesthetic and motivational similarity to computer games, the threat of failure is present; but only as a looming possibility that you do not escape into the hotel room as a team at the end, not as the threat of annihilation. There are no monsters, no baddies with guns to tackle, and you are not armed with anything to prompt a battle. As Margaret Morse implies, with virtual reality there is no place for dialogue or confrontation (Morse 1998: 29), the only present fear is of running out of time. Even that kind of annihilation does not display the same kind of computer-game guts and gore usually associated with combat. Here lies a further reiteration of the Gulf War in its being termed a 'clean' war. The technological combat and the 'smart bombs' often portrayed the war as one with little consequence. Cameras attached to bomb-ends would search out particular target areas and be destroyed at the point of contact – the image of devastation and maimed bodies eliminated from its representation. All that was displayed was mastery

of the technological weaponry. But Morse also remarks on the 'blindness' of these technologies in their insensitivity to corporeality (Morse 1998: 26). Kevin Robins notes how the screen acts as a mechanism of disavowal or denial of 'human implication or moral realities'. A 'moral dissociation' is experienced through 'killing at a distance'. Furthermore, he suggests that the 'video-game' graphics of the Gulf War as broadcast on tv rid the viewer of sympathy through distancing (Robins 1996: 72). Desert Rain mimics this process of 'moral dissociation' and 'distanciation' through the simple linear aesthetic employed. However, whilst it suggests a mirroring of this enactment of dissociation, other elements within the work – such as the figures of the targets and their floating and fragmented faces and bodies – penetrate the graphics and complicate this clean association.

The aesthetic developed for Desert Rain suggests similarities to the types of images developed for military surveillance, distanced mapping and abstracted target points of significance. This being the case, as either observer, participant, or soldier, I am placed in no present danger. But even in the Gulf combat itself it is debatable whether soldiers were in any danger, since it was fought from the air at night, a display of 'abstracted military power' (Baudrillard 1995: 9). The number of American soldiers killed in the combat, 300 in comparison to 100,000–150,000 Iraqis,³ suggests much more damage to Iraq than to the USA. Furthermore, the combat was fought on Iraqi soil, placing the civilians of America or Europe in no danger.

This raises questions of the one-sided nature of the Gulf War and its potential to be considered an 'exercise of domination rather than a war'

• Screen grabs for Virtual World. Photo credit: Blast Theory



(Baudrillard 1995: 14). As a participant in *Desert Rain* my position has been mapped by previous experiences of and negotiations by both soldiers and viewers. What *Desert Rain* affirms is the muddled distinction between the soldier – the implementer of violent action, and the spectator – the viewer of violent action. I am caught between the pleasure of control and mobile activity and any moral implication of my activities, the latter sensibility having been flattened by the abstract simulated space that lies before me.

The Hotel Room

The performance ends with participants escaping into a square room wallpapered with images that simulate a hotel room. On emerging from a dark projected space, I find the room appears luminous and austere. Whilst it should be a relief to have escaped, the fact that the room is featureless unnerves, especially when the only tangible presence is a tv monitor.

On finding our targets each participant is given a card which is swiped and then prompts the relaying of experiences from the target character on the tv monitor. They sit in the same hotel room featured in the room the participants stand in, as each game player swipes and reveals the anecdotes associated with each target character's experiences during the Gulf War. Whilst these representations offer a more rounded view of the people involved in the Gulf, they are all representations from a white British perspective. There are only two representatives of the military, so whilst there are multiple and personal perspectives offered other than that military combat, it is a very western-centric depiction of events within the Gulf War. The foreign 'other' is missing, unrepresented, elided from the consideration of the participants. Furthermore, one of the characters is an actor and the layering of simulation spreads further into the possibility of all the characters is an actor in this simulated environment; layer upon layer of simulation reverberating from every surface. The inclusion of actors serves to reiterate the allure of drama that war seems to encapsulate.

PHYSICAL MAPPING

Whilst *Desert Rain* and the technologies it uses rely on a visual navigation of space and the events of the war, they are balanced by a physical mapping of the space within the performance. In order to encounter the image, the body is required to physically map the areas of space and physically navigate the technologies.

Although the layout of the space travelled through from start to finish is very simple, the route feels more like a labyrinth, and disorients the body in a very corporeal way. Whilst there is much reliance on the security felt within the interactive game, there is also a sense of embodiment in the overall construction of the space. Furthermore, some of the aspects of this space sustain a physical and tactile reality which serves to complicate notions of distanciation implied by the simulacrum.

The physical navigation developed for the computer game relies only on the ability to navigate a flat surface through a flat board which the participant tilts back/forth, left/right, in order to watch the environment in front of them change. This demands a repetition of movement whilst the images suggest you are moving in virtual space. Deleuze and Guattari have considered the idea of the nomad in relation to the war machine and territory and the significance of flat space. Unlike the state apparatus, which establishes sedentary territorial space, the nomad serves to negotiate himself around the flat areas in the 'vague expanse around cities like the desert'. The nomad negotiates undefined space in a continual process of 'reterritorialization' at points of 'deterritorialization' whilst routes and paths are in constant flux, not demarcated by visual pointers but by tactile and sonorous space. The nomad also exists outside of the state whilst propelling the war machine through disruption and surprise (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 380–2). In some ways the participant in *Desert Rain* can be considered as situated between the nomad and soldier, existing both outside of and integrally to the state in his negotiation of tactile and visual space. The nomad navigates the flat space of the board, and the soldier recognizes the visual signifiers that make up the virtual space. In



• Oil refinery. Photo credit: Blast Theory

this way there is an ambiguity in the position of the participant in what Morse describes as an 'uncertain mode of presence' (Morse 1998: 24) that is suggested not only through telepresence but through the implicated identities of the participants within the work. The participant experiences multiple and unstable 'schizophrenic' shifts of identity.

On leaving the game participants are asked to walk towards the projected image. In doing this the participant walks *through* a sheet of running water onto which the image has been projected. This, in sharp contrast to the simulated images projected onto the fluidity of water, generates a sense of ambiguity of the image, a mirage, with its certainty now in question, whilst the textural certainty of the water is asserted. This corporeality is reaffirmed when, on the other side of the image, another person waits to direct you to the next part of the performance. There is something therefore beyond or behind the image, something that serves to disorient and confuse the body's sense of direction and motivation and to counteract the emptiness of the image.

On leaving the virtual environment via the translucent image participants are confronted with

a hill of sand which they have to climb in order to escape. Although resembling part of a film set, with ambient lighting and white block walls, this hill of sand retains a quality of the simulacrum whilst sustaining its own physical and corporeal reality. As a haptic juxtaposition to the water that was previously walked through, the hill of sand also makes certain physical demands on the bodies of the participants in contrast to the terrain covered in the computer game. At these moments it would seem that the participant becomes the nomad in a reconfiguration of the tactile space that overwhelms the body by contrast with the configuration of virtual and symbolic space previously engaged.

The metonym of sand and physicality was reiterated when, a day later, in the coat returned to me after the performance, I found a small plastic box containing sand, with the words '*estimated at 100,000 grains*' and '*"It's really not a number I am interested in."* General Colin Powell – *New York Times* March 23 1991 p44'. The number is an obvious reference to the number of Iraqis killed, as symbolised by the impossibility of calculating the actual number of sand grains in the box. Whether

this was supposed to happen or not, the box leaked some of the sand out into my pockets and was difficult to disperse. This prompted a consideration of the persistent omnipresence of this war over the last 10 years, and the inability of Europe and America to eradicate the Iraqi notification of the number of dead bodies, in favour of some verifiably accurate amount. In the western states of control, where numbers and measurements are the grounding of all knowledge, the ambiguous Iraqi death toll marks a glitch in this unresolved map and returns to haunt not only in the Desert Rain performance but in the media too.

VIRTUAL MAPPING

Much emphasis is placed on the virtual content of Desert Rain, which relies on the negotiation of images suggesting movement in space and time. However, I want to consider another type of virtual mapping which relies on spectator or participant relations to events received not just through screens but through symbolic markers. Anne Friedberg, looking at the dandy, poet, artist-*flâneur* of the 19th century, sees his gaze as a significant pointer in ways of thinking about cinematic and televisual viewing practices of the 20th century (Friedberg 1993). The *flâneur*, as cited by Walter Benjamin, suggests a fully embodied mobile gaze in the metropolitan crowds of Paris. Embodied by his environment the *flâneur* is free to amble and consume the spectacle and the delights of the city. This consumption is a way of negotiating his position within the city and a way of exploring the city as an undiscovered and mysterious site (Benjamin 1983). Friedberg traces the development of ways of seeing in relation to the *flâneur* and suggests the cinema offers a similar type of spectatorship, only the body is immobilized whilst the eye retains its mobility. She terms this a 'virtual mobile gaze' which aptly fits with other types of viewing practices that cinema precedes. However, Rob Shields suggests the viewing practices of the *flâneur* were loaded with the empirical gaze of colonialism and engaged in a 'popular sense of the empire'. In this way the *flâneur's* gaze could also be considered as virtual in the appropriation of artefacts taken from

the global empire and placed in the new context of the metropolis and its people. The *flâneur* virtually considers the elevated global status of nationality deployed through visual relics in his city (Shields 1994: 71–5). Like the television viewer, the *flâneur* acknowledges the supremacy of the state through visual global signifiers, travelling miles in the comfort of his own home, 'sensation without engaging us in the complexity of its reality' (Robins 1996: 80).

The media presentation of the Gulf War suggests a similar travelling gaze. Whilst the elevated global status of nationality is acknowledged, although complicated somewhat through the combination of countries involved, it was western technological virtuosity that was being consumed and enjoyed. Desert Rain also sustains a similar position in the virtual relishing of technological supremacy through participation and interaction with the game. But the assured status of nationhood or authority found in media representation is equivocal when considered in relation to Desert Rain. For Blast Theory, as the authors and therefore authority of the work, representing nationhood does not immediately materialize as an issue, but it sets up an ambiguous position for the message of the work. Is this message for or against the support of the nation in the Gulf War? Has nationality got anything to do with Desert Rain at all? Because of this ambiguity on the positioning of the work in relation to nationhood, supremacy is initially dissolved into technology. Yet when we are confronted by the target characters, all of whom are British, the question of nation is rekindled. Virtual empathy for the characters is prompted through the accents and their likeness to us to be British to evoke a 'sense of exaltation in wholeness and integrity' (Robins 1996: 70) but also the ability to exclude the foreign other from the trauma of the event. Suddenly the focus on British involvement in the war dissolves all the concerns of the war into British concerns. Furthermore, the notion of virtuality is extended by narration of events as opposed to actual events being screened and viewed. There is the virtuality of the British 'tourist' in a foreign land consuming and digesting the exotic. The second

layer of virtuality is in the relaying of the narration of personal experiences for the reception of spectators. The inclusion of such material adds to the proposition that the 'proliferation of archival information including taped and virtual records allows the event to become utterly dispersed into a morass of conflicting interpretations and hypotheses about what really happened' (Baudrillard 1995: 4). Participant presence within *Desert Rain* then fluctuates between the soldier, the travelling nomad and the dandy *flâneur*.

In attempting to map *Desert Rain* in its intertextual configuration of theoretical and visual material concerning the Gulf War, two modes have arisen within the piece – those of representation and presentation. Representation figures as a map of past events, one that is tangled and layered into a vortex with other modes of representation. Our first-hand experience is relayed through monitors and the reminder of newspaper snippets current at the time which are redisplayed and reimagined through the viewer/participant. Presentation re-maps these perceptions of the past into a new immediate experience, an experience that is just as much about a personal journey through the virtual environment as it is about the experience of others during the Gulf War.

After experiencing *Desert Rain* you would expect to leave with a more acute awareness of the events of the Gulf War, yet what it seems to do is take the participant into further tunnels of perpetuating questions and short-circuited answers. In this way *Desert Storm*, to which *Desert Rain* most obviously alludes, reaches a mythical status. However, *Desert Rain* sustains corporeality for all those involved. But what was it that we were actually involved with? What Blast Theory are questioning are the levels of 'fiction' the participant is engaged in. I am in no present danger, as I rationalize my participation, I am only navigating myself around symbols of danger. Yet in negotiating these symbols I am energized, perplexed, uncertain, frightened. I inhabit a whole reality of emotion and experience. This is a very personal experience which is complicated by its connection to the distanced reality of

the Gulf War. Am I experiencing something similar to those involved in the war? But what about the 100,000 bodies – are they not just grains of sand?

NOTES

- 1 The information outlined here was kindly given during an informal interview with members of Blast Theory.
- 2 The Frontline and BBC epic documentary on the Gulf War suggests that during Saddam Hussein's dominance over Kuwait, combined with Iraqi oil, he owned over 1/5th of the world's oil supplies. America believed this to be problematic in that it placed Hussein in an extremely powerful position over the West.
- 3 These actual figures are contestable. 100,000 is quoted as the figure in *Desert Rain* by Blast Theory. Robins suggests it is closer to 150,000. This implies the uncertain nature of the damage caused to Iraq, but it does significantly show the difference in casualties for America. This has been one of the sore points of the war in that nobody actually ever knew what damage was sustained in Iraq, especially in the retreat of western armed forces and the subsequent slaughter of Iraqi rebels and civilians.

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