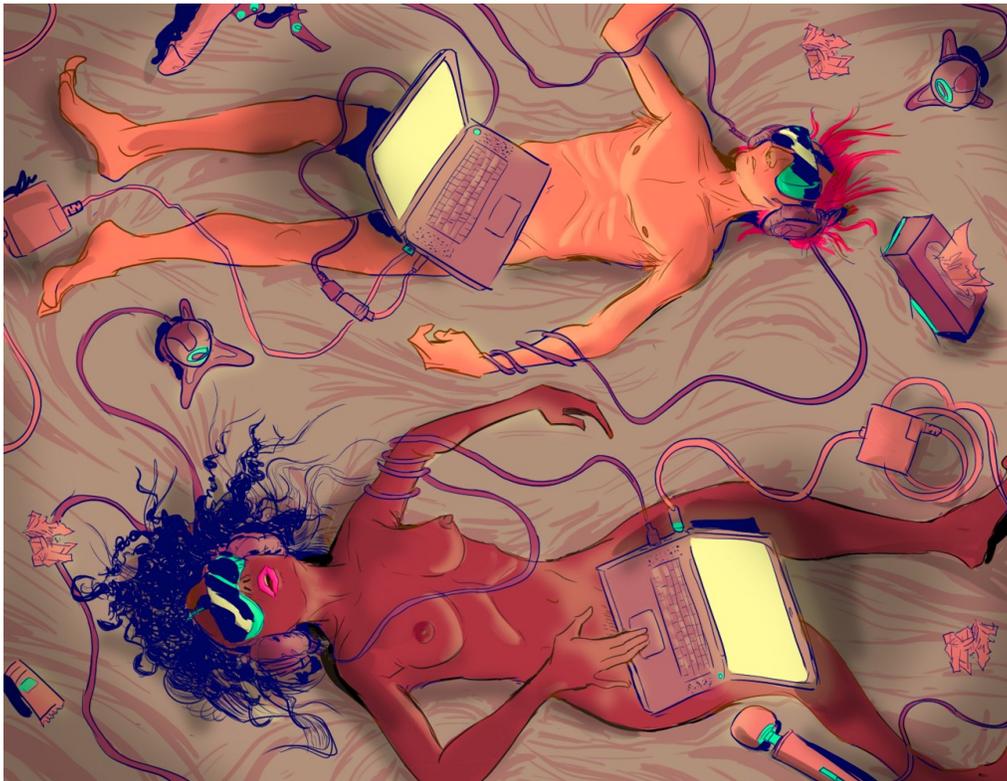


# "You Here for the Oculus Gang Bang, Too?"

The reality of virtual-reality porn is overhyped and unsexy. So you're stuck having sex with humans for a little while longer.



**By Ryan Bradley**

*Illustrations by Miguel Jiron*



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**It's a strap-on**, that headset. No two ways around it. A blindfold, too. With headphones, if you really want to do this right. Now, throw in some kind of artificial orifice, like a Fleshlight, or some other newfangled creation in the burgeoning field of teledildonics,

and ask yourself: How does it feel? Amazing? The porn industry imagines that it does, just as it imagines you, deaf and blind and draped in technology, are excited, even turned on.

That's the hope, anyway, when Brian Shuster, the CEO of Uthervers, delivers his "visionary keynote" to XBiz 360, a conference that bills itself as "the online adult industry's top trade event." We are in the Andaz West Hollywood, on the Sunset Strip, when Shuster says he believes virtual reality is the inevitable future of pornography. This is not a surprise. Porn is an industry not unlike any other in media, in that free content has eroded the business model from within. Uthervers creates online 3-D virtual worlds where a user's avatar can meet and have sex with other users, or pliant bots, in a variety of sexy, rendered venues. An X-rated *Second Life*, basically. The most popular of Shuster's domains is redlightcenter.com. He has been pouring money into making his virtual kingdoms ready for the second coming, which is VR. Tomorrow he and his team will be hosting a small virtual demo of one such world on the Oculus Rift.

So, VR it is, or will be, or might be. Who knows!? It's the future, anyway. I was eager to see what Shuster's futuresex visions looked like, just as I was surprised he was actually going to show the demo. I had spent the past four months listening to people tell me how exciting it would be, to exist in this fantasy world of virtual sex with anyone or anything imaginable. And yet trying to glimpse some form of this VR porn had led me to a distant edge of Los Angeles County with a distinct sense that I was unwanted and had, perhaps, fallen for an elaborate form of X-rated hucksterism.



# M

**My search for** the future started quite hopefully, with a company called SugarDVD, which is like Netflix, but for porn. The company announced it was working on a “choose your own adventure”-like first-person virtual experience for the Oculus

Rift. A spokesperson for SugarDVD named Rebecca Bolen wrote on the company’s website that they had a demo and were looking for volunteers. When I called her, Bolen told me the company’s engineers were not simply working on an erotic experience unlike any the world had seen, but were talking about what to build off it that would change the very way people thought about sex. “We’ve been doing social media longer than anyone,” Bolen said. “When you think about it, what’s more social than sex?” I said I wasn’t sure. Before she hung up, she told me how she’d be talking to the team, the CEO and developers, and would set up a time for me to come in and chat, see what they were up to, maybe sit in on one of those meetings where they discussed and planned out the future.

Weeks passed, then a month, then Bolen’s emails began bouncing back, then she appeared again, but only to set up a meeting, then push it back, then cancel it. Eventually I determined that the best course of action was to just show up at the SugarDVD headquarters.

SugarDVD is one of a suite of companies owned by Oddesse, which has its offices in Chatsworth, in the northwestern-most corner of the San Fernando Valley, where the suburban development peters out at the foothills of the Santa Susanas, crude hills pockmarked with sandstone boulders and rattlers, probably. The office itself was a low-slung cinderblock structure, unmarked and unremarkable. I pressed the buzzer and waited. A man in a Mickey Mouse T-shirt opened the door. I said I was here to see Rebecca Bolen. “Do you have a meeting?” he asked. “Kind of,” I said. Then added, “Just tell her Ryan Bradley is here to see her.” But when he went to close the door, I made a move, wanting to wait inside. It was hot out, and relentlessly bright. “No,” he said, “You need to wait here.”

A minute passed and then suddenly I saw a woman rush down the stairs and, in what seemed like one fluid motion, move from the last step to opening the door. “Ryan?” she said. “Rebecca?” I said. “Oh, I don’t think

any of our engineers are available to talk to you right now!” she said. She was extremely pale and had very red hair and a matching red leather jacket. She let me in.

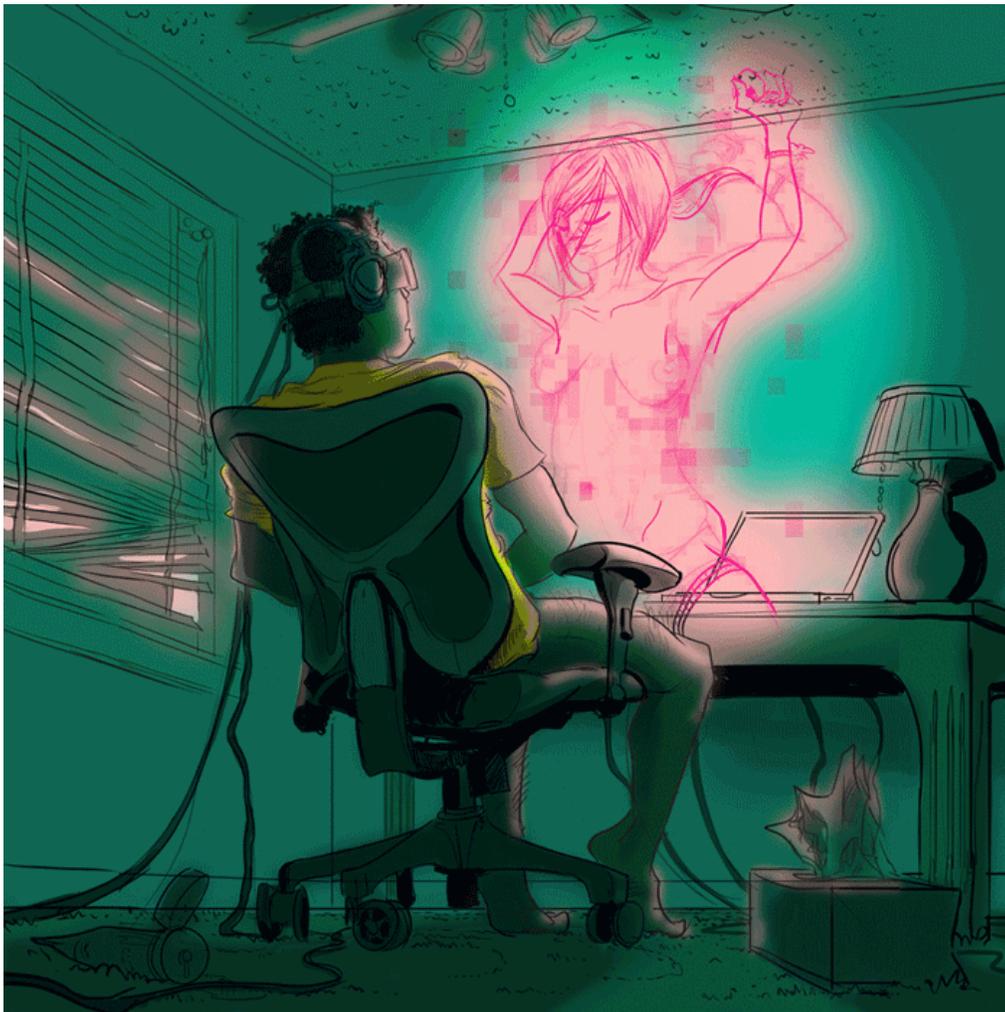
We talked for an hour in a large break room. There was very little about the décor to suggest this was the headquarters of a vast adult entertainment empire. Behind me, on the bookshelf, I noted Jack Welch’s *Jack*, a Murdoch biography, and *Stori Telling* by Tori Spelling. Bolen apologized for the disappearing act. They had been very busy updating their streaming service app, she told me, so that it could tailor content even more specifically to users’ desires. “So that, if you hate big butts and you cannot lie, you will literally never see a big butt in any of the videos. Sometimes it will even be pixelated out.” She repeated a line she had told me before, when we were talking on the phone, about how SugarDVD was more of a tech company than a porn company. This seemed very important to her. At one point a little robot on wheels careened into the room, pivoted, and shined a green light at us. “Oh, that’s our droid,” she said. The droid backed out of the room and, in the hallway, proceeded to do a series of spectacularly high hops as Bolen continued talking.

Eventually we started talking about the company’s progress in VR, which was...not far? It was slow going. They had just scanned one of “the girls,” a star named Alex Chance, and were going to scan a few more. The scanning process was as simple as getting the star to stand in the middle of a room while cameras moved around her, then stitching the images together, on a computer, and replicating her body virtually. As for the demo itself, they were “exploring options” like changing a star’s hair color, but what sort of “action” would be available was still a mystery.

At the end of our meeting Bolen took me in to see SugarDVD’s CEO, Jax. Jax Smith. A pretty good porn name. Stocky fellow with something between a close-cropped beard and extravagant stubble, loose fitting black deep-cut V-neck T-shirt, big biceps. We said very little to each other but shook hands long enough for him to squeeze just a little too hard and stare just a little too long, imparting to me that he knew what I was doing, and that I wasn’t invited. I squeezed his hand back and tried without words to say something like “Yes, I am not supposed to be here, we are not supposed to be having this uncomfortable moment together, you and I. Nonetheless I am learning all kinds of interesting things about your *technology* company.” Then I smiled wide and told him this all seemed really exciting and I couldn’t wait

to set up a time for us to have a longer chat. “Sure, sure,” he said. Then Bolen led me out, and I was never invited back.

(Months and months later, Bolen told Matter that SugarDVD’s virtual sex demo was canned, that the company is “pursuing the options” but that “the technology was moving very quickly and we had to put the project on hold until we could gather more resources to pursue VR options.”)



**The Andaz West Hollywood**—host to Xbiz 360—was once, not so long ago, the Continental Hyatt House, also known as the Riot House, a place made famous by the rock stars who stayed there and trashed it (Zeppelin, the Stones, Bowie—though Bowie didn’t, apparently, toss his rooms quite so aggressively). “Today,” a placard inside the Andaz reads, “the hotel appears on almost every reality show on TV.” The Andaz’s Panorama

T

Penthouse is filled with men, mostly middle-aged, mostly in advanced stages of hair loss, who appear to have never considered nor touched the top three buttons of their shirts. All are wearing a white lanyard with the words “exoClick” printed on

either side, repeatedly. Attached to the lanyard is a badge with the attendee’s name and the company he works for. Every other square inch is filled with advertising—for [adultfriendfinder.com](#), [cams.com](#), [alt.com](#), [penthouse.com](#), and *Out Personals*. The walls of the Andaz are covered with ads, too. As are the elevator doors (both sides), floors (carpeted and otherwise), and hallways (which are lined with banners that both rise from the floor and come draped from the ceiling). The penthouse conference room has advertisements behind the stage and to either side. “They really sold the shit out of this place, didn’t they?” one speaker announced, with wonder. More than once, I overhear attendees remark that the space has been transformed into something like the physical manifestation of a porn site.

Many floors below the Panorama Penthouse, where the men who control online porn discuss the buying and selling of traffic, porn stars are considering how best to promote their personal brands in this modern age. The panel is moderated by the most famous male porn star since Ron Jeremy: James Deen. Perhaps you’ve heard of him? Or seen him costarring in the film *The Canyons*, with Lindsay Lohan?

Deen is seated in the audience, facing the four panelists, peppering them with questions. As a moderator he is relentless and sometimes brutal. After asking a young and fairly new star, Chanel Preston, what she would like to see in the future and getting the reply, “Some good sex. I don’t know. What was the question?” he stands up, walks over, and unplugs her clip-on microphone. Near the end, after Preston has plugged her mic back in but things have broken down into more of a discussion among the panelists, Deen begins wandering back and forth, in front of the low stage. Occasionally he takes a sip of water, or barks a laugh, or interjects a clarifying question. He does this when the four panelists are trying to make sense of their work, specifically, all the weird off-camera, fan-outreach stuff they have to do, which isn’t glamorous and too often, they say, goes

unnoticed. “What about the fact that there aren’t superstars anymore?” Deen asks, then adds: “Lisa?”

Lisa Ann, the grand dame among the panelists, star of the mega-hit *Hustler* joint *Who’s Nailin Paylin?* answers, “There are no more stars because everyone has become obtainable.” What she means is that there is no mystery anymore. And something more base, still. She continues: “No one is up on a pedestal. Now everyone has side work”—a nice way of saying that they can be bought and slept with. “They don’t dress well. It’s disgusting. You can’t hire me at home. I’ve never had intimate engagements with a fan. I don’t want to be watered down.”

A prolonged and uncomfortable silence follows because, well, Lisa Ann maybe wasn’t supposed to tell it quite so much like it is. The truth—that more porn stars are prostituting themselves, that the wall between the fans and stars has crumbled to a dangerously imperceptible level, that with the rise of live-cam sites the work is often a disagreeable blend of fantasy and reality, and that with virtual reality that blending is only going to get trickier, with porn stars more obtainable, more *watered down* than ever—is ugly and bleak. Deen steers the panel into safer waters: “What is your favorite thing about performing in this day and age?” he asks the quartet. Lisa Ann doesn’t blink. “Big paychecks,” she says.

Wrapping things up, Deen turns to the audience and says, “Do not accost any of the performers on their way out.” He puts his microphone down, moves to the side of the room, and tries—and fails—to escape. “I have this sandwich I need to eat,” I hear him say, softly, once he is cornered by a conference organizer.

A man in the back, reflecting on all that we have just witnessed, says, “That was hot,” to no one in particular.

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**Before virtual reality** there was Buttman. Buttman was the 1989 creation of an adult-film director named John Stagliano, who wandered through his Chatsworth home, video camera in hand, filming his various friends in various states of intercourse and undress. He also changed the face of porn, and virtual reality porn, forever. Stagliano called his plotless ramble *The Adventures of Buttman*, and it birthed a movement called gonzo

# B

pornography. Virtual porn today isn't all that much different from Buttman's first-person point-of-view exploits. The cameras are smaller, the images sharper and, more and more often, in 3-D. But Buttman's first-person element remains. Along with, of course,

all the random sex.

But watching a porn star do his thing (and it is, still, nearly always, the guy holding or wearing the camera) isn't especially new, even the versions that are available on the Rift—i.e., video shot with 360-degree cameras so you can kind of look around (as if you were a person fixed to a point atop a porn dude's head). No, to get a real peep at the future one must seek out fully built worlds. You need agency. You need to feel like *you* are the one having the experience, and not getting to exist as a camera atop another dude.

One avenue that has always granted users agency is video games, and sure enough, one of the most anticipated is called *Wicked Paradise* by a company called Immersive. *Wicked Paradise* was to be "like a mature TV series with a rich storyline and characters like *Game of Thrones* and with a lot of passion and excitement like *Californication*, but without censorship," the game's creator, Jeroen Van Der Bosch, told reporters last year. But when I tried to reach Van Der Bosch, and got instead Immersive's then-CEO, Barr Potter, he assured me the company was "not going to focus on sex as the purpose of our content." Also: Immersive was no longer working on *Wicked Paradise*. He said they wanted to be in the "mainstream entertainment business."

You could also give viewers agency by surrounding them with renderings based on body scans, like the kind SugarDVD was working on. These existed and were of extremely high quality. Two British companies, Veivie and Infinite Realities, made them. One afternoon I met up with a friend of a friend who had a Rift and was willing to download these demos (which the companies make available online for free). The demos were deeply strange to the point of being disturbing. The renderings were static. And, while more realistic than anything I'd yet encountered, they felt more like a museum exhibit than like anything remotely sexually stirring.

Corey Strassburger, a co-founder at Kite & Lightning, the hottest and mind-blowingest of all the new VR firms in L.A. told me he understood my disappointment but that I needed to also understand just how difficult this three dimensional in motion image capture business really was. He, too, had seen some of the “frozen moment” demos. “It was cool, but too lifeless,” he said. “Good 3-D capture is only kind of possible now in even the best of circumstances—in blockbuster movies with huge budgets and viewers that don’t move and ruin the effect—and even then, it’s just so expensive and time consuming, it’s like we can barely do it. The ‘uncanny valley’ is just a really tough nut to crack.” Even then, if you had the ability to walk around, and you wanted to see something from the side, an awful lot of this human rendering business would fall apart. It’d look like the cheap trick of the eyes it really was.



**T**

**The day after** Deen's panel at the XBIZ conference, Brian Shuster of Utherverse and redlightcenter.com has his Oculus Rift demo. Utherverse isn't creating the most technically complex virtual

realms (that'd be Kite & Lightning) but the worlds of redlightcenter.com are most representative of what everyone seems to hope VR porn will one day be. It's a world you can move through. A world with a lot of gyrating, naked women.

The demo room is quite small, not even big enough for a real-life banner ad. It is terribly drab and monotone save for one man, Cash Garman, a reedy fellow whose hair has been sculpted into four fuchsia spikes approximately two feet tall apiece, whose pants are plaid and green, and whose sleeveless black shirt reads "Hack Planet." Garmen is a client programmer for Uthervers. He's here to set up whatever it is we are about to experience. I sit down and wait. The room begins to fill—it can't seat more than 15. Someone walks in and asks, "you here for the Oculus gang bang, too?" and gets a few chuckles. Mostly, though, everyone is expectantly silent.

We are eventually asked to wait outside. Staring out at the sidewalk on Sunset, I think about a story I'd heard or read somewhere from the old Riot House, about Led Zeppelin's band members tossing televisions off their balconies, and wonder how the smashed glass of the busted sets must've looked under the neon light, and did anyone get hurt? Later, I look up and find but cannot confirm a rumor that one television landed in the backseat of a car a kid had borrowed from his dad, a canary yellow Eldorado.

A woman with a clipboard calls me in. Garmen, finished with his setup, is leaning back in his chair at the front of the room and has got this great punker smirk-slash-sneer going. Beside him is a table with a laptop, headphones, and Rift. In front of that is a seat, for the participant. Behind the table, facing the seat, is a full-length mirror. Kind of nice touch, I think, to see yourself as you slip on the headset and enter virtual sexytime, or whatever.

The woman with the clipboard tells us we will be experiencing two scenes, about a minute each, one a strip club, one a sex party. The graphics, Garmen says, are a combination of motion capture and pure CGI, all rendered in the Unity gaming engine. They've already begun rolling out content that's Oculus-optimized on redlightcenter.com, and should have about six months' worth up soon. For this demo, they've "eliminated the joystick element" because it brings on nausea. So, no, you won't be able to move. Can you have sex? No. But you can watch, which I do.

First, I watch the folks who are before me on the sign-up sheet. Each one sits down, while the woman with the clipboard helps him (or her; there are a few women in the small room, too) attach the black box to his face and slip big earphones on his ears. He sits still for a moment, then turns, far to the left, then to the right, then down a bit, up a bit, back to the left, straight ahead. By this time, maybe a minute in, many of the participants' mouths are slightly agape. A few grin a little.

When it's my turn, and I slip on the strap-on headset and wait a moment for my eyes to adjust, for the image to clarify, while the headphones are placed over my ears and a persistent bass begins to thump. I am in a strip club or, rather, someone's idea of a strip club. More likely still: many people's collective creation that is supposed to be a strip club. It is quite empty, and the lighting is weirdly harsh and delineated. A topless woman gyrates in front of me, but here is where writing about virtual worlds aid the lie. The words "topless woman" will immediately conjure in your mind a real image of a topless woman, just as the words strip club recalls a real space. Neither is true. Nothing looks remotely real. The sounds are real-ish—too loud but not loud enough to drown out muffled voices behind me, reminding me of the room I am sitting in with a black box strapped to my face while I look at digitally manufactured breasts bob atypically. I grin, and while grinning wonder if the others who I saw grinning before me were grinning about the same thought I'm having right now, which is: We are so damn silly, we humans, men in particular.

The strip club fades out and the other scene, the sex party, begins. I am on some large and vaguely Japanese-looking outdoor deck, or in a hallway. I'm not quite sure about the space because roughly human renderings of supine creatures to either side of me are fucking loudly. The depictions of the men's penises are geometric and strange, almost tribal, and I catch myself staring at one of them. It reminds me of phalluses I've seen in the Oceania wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, particularly those carved into wood and used as gongs, or spears, or prows of long canoes by the hill tribes in Papua New Guinea.

Then a gentle tug, and the headset is off, and the time is up. I glance in the mirror and look at myself for just a moment, trying to read my expression, walk a few paces to the back of the tiny conference room, and sit back down and wait awhile longer, watching more people strap on, smile, and look to the left and the right at the sex renderings.

A sex surrogate named Eric B. once told me about a kind of sex that is maybe the opposite of everything in that tiny conference room—despite the fact that some people have suggested that VR could maybe help people in the exact way sexual surrogacy does, drawing them out, helping the wheelchair-bound feel more comfortable and connected. When describing his work, Eric B. stressed how long it often took to get to the sex itself, and how much of what he did was simply getting people to quiet their minds, which began with focusing on something as simple as touching, and being touched. “We take turns. I would hold your hand, and stroke it for a minute. Just one minute. And then the client, you would stroke my hand for a minute. The idea is to bring ourselves into that moment, to focus on the sensations of what’s going on in that hand, how does it feel to give, and receive, and stay present in the sensations,” he told me. “We go back and forth. We talk about ‘Wow, how was that?’” The key, he said, beyond staying present, not falling back into your mind, is to “only do things that feel good to me. We don’t think, Are we doing it the right way? Am I holding my hand the right way?”

The man at the front of the room with the black box strapped onto his face is sitting stock-still. He has been for a minute now. I wonder what he’s thinking, if he’s thinking about whether or not he’s doing this right, or if he’s given up, or if he’s considering just how difficult it is to escape from ourselves, the persistent present tense of our existence, that it’s impossible, really, and that simply dealing with ourselves and maybe someone else is plenty. “I’d say teaching people to open up and trust another person is the literal opposite of porn, virtual and otherwise,” Eric B. had told me. Sometimes his clients would be coming to him for years. Sometimes it took that long to learn to be touched.

The man at the front stands up now, his session over, and heads to the back of the room, where a colleague or friend has been waiting. “So? Next big thing?” his colleague/friend asks. The man hunches his shoulders up and let’s out a long, large sigh that turns into an “eeeehhhhhhhhhhhh.” As they leave the room together the door swings open and, from somewhere out in the hall, out past the window and the city and the atmosphere, a single patch of sunlight falls into the room, only briefly, then the door closes and it’s gone.



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