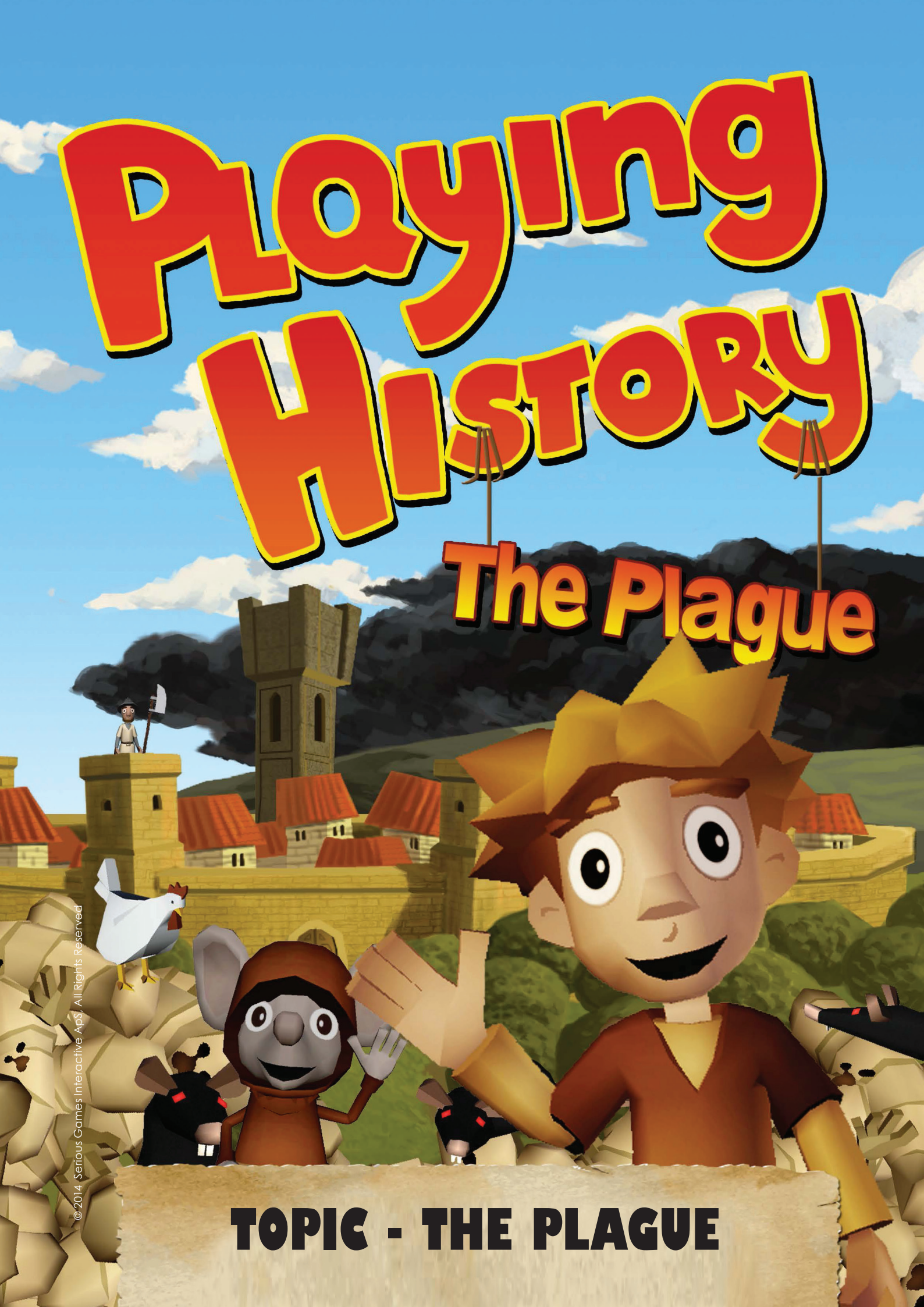
Playing History

The Plague



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TOPIC - THE PLAGUE

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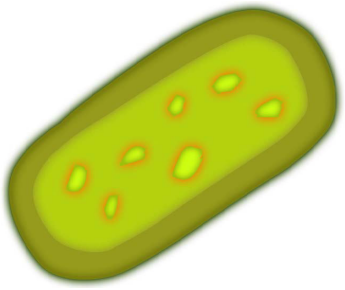


TOPIC FOR THE PLAGUE

It has been more than 600 years since the pandemic that was later named the Black Death swept Europe. So why is it still interesting to study this phenomenon? Because the plague transformed Europe and the Europeans' view of life was changed due to a sudden questioning of established scientific and religious practices. Furthermore, a critical shortage of man-power changed the relationship between employers and employees.

We will start out with a brief overview of the history of the plague before we dig deeper into the community-related themes.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PLAGUE

> *In the middle of the 14-century, the pandemic that would eventually be known as the Black Death came to Europe from Asia. The Black Death refers to the period from 1347- 1352 when the plague had its firmest hold on Europe. Besides Europe, Asia and Africa too were hard hit by the epidemic.*

The plague probably came to Europe on trade ships from the Middle East in 1347. The infection was carried by fleas on ship rats. The rats scurried ashore in European ports, and the fleas quickly moved on to new hosts. Fleas could hide easily in clothes, bedding or on people. The plague spread rapidly from the docks to urban areas, and its impact was severest along Europe's great trade routes. The rural areas were infected at a slower pace.

The most common form of the disease was the bubonic plague, which probably also gave the pandemic its nickname "the Black Death". Initial symptoms of bubonic plague included fever and vomiting followed shortly by the appearance of characteristic blue-black abscesses or boils. The disease usually killed people within three to five days. The mortality rate among those infected was extremely high, as no effective medicine was available or known.

Another form of the plague was the pneumonic plague, which attacked the lungs. In medieval times, this variant of plague was nearly always fatal, and its victims only survived for a few days after being infected.

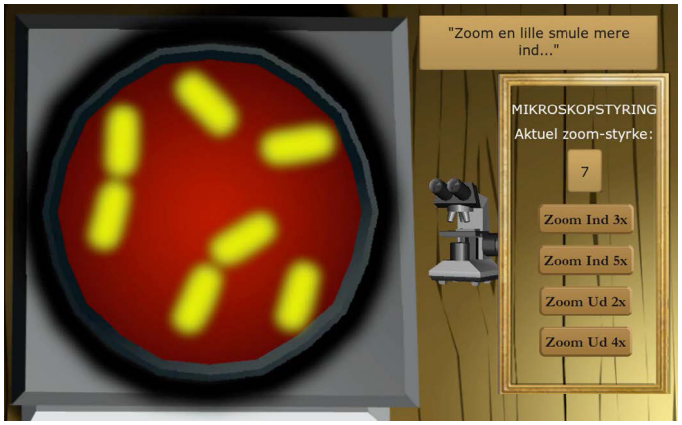
There are many educated guesses concerning how many people died during the Black Death. The death toll varies greatly depending on which region of Europe is taken into account. Southern Europe was struck the worst, whereas the plague outbreaks were not as devastating further north. One estimate is that approximately a third of the population of Europe perished during the years of the Black Death. Others are more conservative. It is a fact, however, that people died by the millions. The plague decreased in strength after its first peak in the mid-14th century, though in the centuries that followed the plague was a recurrent threat to the inhabitants of Europe.

Earlier outbreaks of plague are known as well. Rome was hit by several serious outbreaks of the plague, and the high risk of infection and extreme mortality rates were due primarily to the people's ignorance about the disease.

Nobody suspected rats or fleas, but almost everything else was presumed to be the cause of the disease, including the positioning of constellations, God, the Jews or witchcraft. The disease affected all social classes, but the poor and the middle classes suffered the hardest. They had no means to escape from the city and this gave the fleas ideal conditions to spread to more hosts. Some groups were especially prone to infection: priests, monks, doctors and barber-surgeons, all of whom were expected to take care of the sick, and mortality rates among these professions were very high.

The plague bacterium, Yersinia Pestis, was discovered in 1894 by Alexander Yersin during a plague epidemic in Hong Kong. Organisations like the WHO still report outbreaks of the plague worldwide, but the disease is much less dangerous today compared to medieval times, because timely treatment with antibiotics will almost always cure the infected. Relive the discovery of the plague bacterium in ''Playing History: The Plague''.

> **In the game:** *you can identify the bacterium in the "Microscope Mini-Game", which is activated by putting on the Chrono Goggles and examining the microscope in Marchione's father's workroom*



Religion and science

In the Middle Ages in Europe, the power of the Catholic Church was immense. Religion influenced politics as well as science and was an important aspect of daily life. The Pope lived in the French city of Avignon at the time of the Black Death.

The Church supplied the sanctioned and generally accepted interpretation of the disease. The Church's official explanation was that the plague was a divine punishment of human sin. God was the only entity able to inflict this level of death and destruction. Some people believed that the Black Death meant the end of the world and that judgment day was near.

Priests suggested prayer and penance as protection against the disease to appease the wrath of God. This approach proved to be futile. On the contrary, many priests died from the disease themselves and the church was left with no means of protection against the Black Death.

> **The Black Death led to two things:**
> *A declining faith in the Church due in part to the high mortality rate among priests, and the appearance of more radical religious groups.*

Priests attended funerals and administered the last rites to the dying. They were in close contact with the infected, probably several times a day. This meant that the number of infected and dead priests rose and that the European clergy was paralysed when the destruction of the plague became less severe. When the epidemic was over, many laymen joined the priesthood in order to fill the vacancies. These people were often unable to even read the Bible.

> **In the game:** *a French monk has taken over the congregation, since its original priest has succumbed to the plague. The pastor himself is about to lose faith. Players can get historical facts from him, and he comes in handy when Marchione needs the French document translated.*

The second consequence was the resurgence of the flagellant movement. As early as the eleventh century, there were monks who tortured themselves with whips in order to subject themselves to the sufferings of Christ. Large congregations of flagellants were formed in Italy in the 1260's. The movement quickly disappeared when the Church condemned it, but flagellantism returned again at the arrival of the Black Death.

The flagellant movement

The flagellant movement didn't consisted of trained priests, but of laymen who wandered from town to town. Along the way they tortured themselves with whips until the blood ran as penance for the sins of humankind.

The flagellants claimed that those who followed them would gain salvation. Some groups claimed that they could also perform miracles. This meant that the Church regarded them as infidels, but their popularity made it difficult to get rid of the movement at the time of the Black Death.

From a medieval point of view, there was some reason behind the acts of the flagellants: if one accepted that the plague was caused by the extreme anger and disappointment of God just like the Deluge, which was said to have killed all of mankind except for Noah and his family, it was logical to believe that the path to salvation was one of extreme penance.

The flagellants wandered from town to town, punishing themselves at their attempt for penance. Their leader was a layman who claimed to have pastoral abilities such as providing absolution of sin and demanding public penance. A congregation of flagellants was usually a temporary fraternity existing for 33 ½ days: one day for each year that Jesus lived. When they arrived in cities, they congregated in city squares and whipped themselves until they bled. The people of the city gathered around and watched, singing songs, praying and trying to touch the flagellants. Some people hoped that their blood would have healing properties.

> **In the game:** *the player meets the flagellant Herman Schwarzer. It is possible to challenge Herman about medieval religious knowledge and beat him because he is a layman. The player needs an important document translated, but he must obtain a cloth soaked in the blood of a flagellant to pay the translator. This is done outside the church where other flagellants wander back and forth while whipping themselves.*

The flagellant way of cleansing the world from sin often went beyond self-inflicted pain. There were situations where flagellants attacked people or groups whose moral decay they believed to be the cause of the plague. Churches and clergymen were popular targets, and the flagellants often accused the clergymen of not maintaining a high moral standard, as they ought to. Consequently, God was particularly disappointed with them, they believed. Because of these attacks, a papal ban was eventually issued against the flagellant movement.

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Non-Christians were also a target for aggressive flagellants. The largest group of non-Christians in Europe were the Jews, who often became targets of the flagellants. It was believed that the presence of infidels in Europe could be the reason for God's anger. The burning of the Strasbourg Jews in 1349 is one of the most infamous occurrences of Jewish persecution during the Black Death.

> **In the game:** *the mistrust and fear of the Jews is represented by the guard at the gate. Near the end of the game, the player is accused of being a Jew and consequently the cause of the epidemic in Florence. Marchione has to run for his life.*

Despite the fact that neither the Church nor the rulers approved of the flagellants, the movement remained a significant religious factor in the 14th century.

Scientific explanations and actions in medieval society

The most common medieval perception of medicine and the human body was based on the works of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers. The prevalent idea was that the body contains four cardinal fluids. This theory was loosely based on the four elements that medieval people believed to be fundamental to the universe.

Illness was the result of a person's fluids being out of balance, and it was the doctor's job to diagnose which fluid was too dominant or insufficient and to make sure that the fluid in question was either drained or increased.

The four cardinal fluids are blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The dominant fluid was blood, and since this fluid was produced by most of the body, bloodletting was often the first remedy attempted in order to remove the excess and therefore restoring the balance. Other treatments included emetics or laxatives.

All sorts of ideas prevailed about how diseases spread and how they were cured, and often religion is also involved, as it was often believed that God was the one who decided who lived and died.

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> **In the game:** *the player has to obtain basic knowledge of the cardinal fluids to prove to the servant that he knows enough about medicine to perform a bloodletting on the noblewoman, Mrs. Dona.*

Explanations of the plague

The most widely accepted explanation of the plague was probably that the air was contaminated. With this theory followed a multitude of advice on how people could protect themselves against infection.

Doctors from Europe's finest universities, located in Paris and Montpellier, advised people to flee as soon signs of plague began to emerge. Another piece of advice was to lock the ill people up inside their homes to prevent them from spreading the disease.

The family could then return two weeks later to see if there were any survivors. This is an example of a very radical piece of advice, but unlike most other advice from doctors and other authorities, it was fairly effective. Since not everyone could flee head over heels or lock their family up, it was necessary to come up with other measures.

It was recommended to cleanse the disease-causing air. This could be done by the burning of aromatic herbs or by inhaling the scent of fresh-smelling flowers. Such advice may seem a little naive, but if one takes into account the era and the level of knowledge, it makes some sense. If the cause was contaminated air (and the air was quite foul in cities at the time), it made sense to try to clean it or avoid inhaling it.

The next category of advice includes methods similar to modern dietary guidelines: Eat lots of fish; avoid eating fish; bathe a lot; do not bathe, etc. There were also general medieval practices that were said to help according to the knowledge of the time. These included bloodletting and laxatives – practices that were based on the Greco-Roman physician Galen's theory of cardinal fluids.

CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PLAGUE

The plague greatly affected life for the people of Middle Age Europe. In practical terms, Europe was facing a huge problem: a critical amount of Europe's workers had succumbed to the plague, particularly in the big cities where the plague had struck with extreme severity.

> **In the game:** *you will briefly encounter Lorenzo the Ciompo. He hopes to work again when the plague is over.*

The problem was very serious.

Peasants and citizens quickly realized that there was a problem, as did the nobility and royal houses. Around Europe, various initiatives were launched in order to solve e problem, but the result was the same almost everywhere: the power of nobles was weakened and the influence of the peasants and middle classes increased.

Due to the shortage of labor, the workers raised their services. The nobility tried to ban and destroy this development of the market by trying to enforce ascription and feudalism on the peasants. But the peasants remained strong and independant, and all over Europe rebellions broke that confirmed the newfound rights of the peasants. The most famous is perhaps the English peasant revolt of 1381.

Cities such as Florence also had rebellions like the one led by Ciompi or wool carvers. Because forming guilds was banned, they started a rebellion in the city supported by the city's less influential guilds, and for a short time, wool carvers controlled the city.

In the western part of Europe, the peasants enjoyed more freedom, although they too succeeded in revolting to a certain degree. In the east, the situation was different. The peasants there were not governed by the same system of ascription as those in Western Europe and the nobles succeeded in introducing a feudal system in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Some historians believe that the foundations of the division between East and West, between liberalism and socialism, were established in the wake of the of the plague.

Lords and nobility realized that the result of the new times meant fewer people to work for them and fewer people had need for crops. Similarly, with agricultural innovation, flocks of sheep could be cared for by fewer shepherds; people had invented machines that could ease the work and alleviate the shortage of labor.

The seeds were sown for a new era of increased focus on technology, science and efficiency - The Renaissance.

Major outbreaks of plague in Europe

- Plague of Justinian (541-542)
- Plague of Constantinople (747-748)
- The Black Death of 1347-1351
- Great Plague of Iceland (1402-1404)
- Plague of 1575, Italy, Sicily and segments of Northern Erope (1571-1576)
- London Plague (1592-1594)
- Great Plague of Milan (1629-1631)
- Great Plague of Seville (1649)
- Great Plague of London (1665-1666)
- Great Plague of Vienna (1679-1680)
- Great Plague of Marseille (1720-1722)
- Russian Plague of (1770-1772)
- The Third Pandemic, originated in China (1855-1950s

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