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Race Representation and the Concept of Religiosity in Genshin Impact

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ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini berfokus pada representasi ras dan religiusitas dalam *game* Genshin Impact, yang erat kaitannya dengan penggambaran stereotip serta berdampak pada pemahaman pemain terhadap suatu bangsa. Permasalahan tersebut kemudian menjadi masalah utama dan dianalisis dengan teknik analisis semiotika Roland Barthes. Hasil dari penelitian ini mencakup representasi ras dan religiusitas di Eropa, Asia Timur, dan Timur Tengah, yang menggambarkan kebangsaan dalam wilayah-wilayah tersebut. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa video game dapat mempertahankan stereotip berdasarkan representasi yang mereka miliki. Namun, video game tetap dapat menawarkan representasi yang berbeda akibat implikasi selektivitas di dalamnya. Selain itu, kurangnya aspek ludik dalam Genshin Impact tidak memungkinkan pemain untuk mendekonstruksi makna secara efektif.

Keywords: representasi, ras, religiusitas, *video games*

Introduction

The presence of a nation is influenced by its people. This can be seen from the national identity inherent in society, one of which is race and religiosity. However, no objective concept can explain national boundaries since the idea of nationality itself is a subjective phenomenon created due to shared beliefs formed in society over a long history (Miller, 1998). Therefore, describing representations related to race and people's religiosity as a national identity can provide an understanding of the existence of a nation. As a mass communication medium, video games have a big influence in presenting cultural and historical perceptions and awareness through the representations displayed. The representation displayed then can change or influence the audience's perception (in this case the video game players) of existing history or culture. However, as a medium of representation, the representation shown in video games is often not diverse and is stereotypical.

This stereotypical representation is formed due to the selective influence of game developers in presenting the culture and national identity of a society to present an understanding of related image to a nation, one of which is through the representation of race and religiosity that is owned or adhered to by the people of a particular nation. Furthermore, the game players can identify a particular nation based

on the understanding gained through representations related to race and religiosity of a particular nation based on the video games they played and make the game players able to provide 'judgments' regarding a nation from the perceptions formed by the representation displayed.

Genshin Impact is a fantasy role-playing game that, two years after its release, has continued to increase global popularity. One of the reasons for this popularity is the open-world concept that offers interesting stories and world exploration. Genshin Impact offers a gaming experience through a story that can be played by using existing avatars. Players can also experience exploration in the existing virtual world. To optimize the player's gaming experience, Hoyoverse (the developers of Genshin Impact) designed a virtual world in the Genshin Impact to present a perspective regarding the existing world and the culture of a nation by the representation of various races and nation's identity to eliminate the distance between the avatar (player) and the virtual space.

The virtual world designed in Genshin Impact, shows seven regions that represent cultural conditions and national identities with national characteristics that are different from each other. The developer can define this characteristic through the physical and racial characteristics of the people who inhabit the area and by the concept of religiosity they adhere to. Genshin Impact itself is a game made by a company from China named Hoyoverse, Still, it not only displays representations of the culture of mainland China but also other cultural diversity throughout the globe, with the range from medieval Europe to the sands of the Middle East. Even though the Genshin Impact developer tries to display the diversity of national identities from each region through existing racial and religious characteristics, the representation shown in the Genshin Impact game is mainly still stereotypical and displays certain biases regarding the people of a particular nation. This research was then carried out with the aim of finding out the racial stereotypes and religiosity of a nation represented in the game Genshin Impact influences players' understanding of the nation represented.

This research topic was deliberately chosen because of the various discussions that occurred within Genshin Impact player community which mainly talks about the accuracy of cultural representation in the Genshin Impact. Of course, in this informal discourse, some groups are pro for the diversity of representation displayed in the game Genshin Impact. However, there are quite a few players are against it because they think that the representation shown in the Genshin Impact game is too general and provides stereotypical assessments. It's because video games itself as a media of representation do not fully depict events that occur in society, the content presented by the media selectively displays what needs to be shown and represented in a certain way (Hodkinson, 2017).

Hall (2020) argues that representation is an activity to produce meaningful messages to other people through language, images, or representative signs. Representation activities then connect meaning and language in culture. A certain message is represented in a video game through visual media in the form of character designs (playable and non-playable), architecture buildings or landmarks, narrative, and so on. The message represented has been reconstructed so that in interpreting the

message the meaning obtained by the player depends on how the message is displayed. The study of representation then becomes very important in the study of game studies because it reveals how the message is represented and determines the interpretation of meaning made by the players.

Theoretical Framework: Race, Religiosity, and Representation

As mentioned previously, race and religiosity are identified as the key to shaping social construction inherent within a culture, shaping individual identities and even national identity (Lorenz, 2008). A nation can be identified by its society and the society also represents its existing nation and culture. Yet, sometimes it still creates stereotypical images about their nation and culture because how the way it is represented in mass media.

Hall (2020) defined representation as a process of creating meaning and a process of exchanging it through language and icons. The process of creating meaning in representation depends on human's understanding and relations between people, objects, existing events, and how individuals perceive their world. Furthermore, the process of exchanging meaning through language and icons happens because there is an understanding between individuals who share the same culture and beliefs. Therefore, the representation process can't be separated from the cultural process that created society and its nations.

Methods

This research uses exploratory qualitative research with semiotic methods. Bogdan and Bilken (in Rukajat, 2018) state that qualitative research aims to provide meaning so that we can understand the phenomenon being studied more thoroughly. Meanwhile, for the exploratory research type, this research seeks to explore a topic or phenomenon that occurs (Mudjiyanto, 2018). Exploratory research also seeks to find out the ideas behind certain phenomena. It is hoped that this research can reveal the myths behind a sign that represents the cultural diversity of a nation through the national identity displayed. Meanwhile, for the data analysis technique, Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method was used with primary data in the form of electronic documents in Genshin Impact by the form of screenshots to display the form of symbols or signs which were deliberately chosen because they show the implications of representing the concepts of race and religiosity in Genshin Impact. Secondary data is a literature source for literature review which helps to build arguments.

Results and Discussion

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Representation of Race and Religiosity in European Societies

The Caucasian is a race where the majority of the population follows European culture. This race is described by its characteristics with varying skin, hair, and eye colors but tends to be bright. This race has no connection with any particular ethnicity and this term tends to be used to describe heterogeneous populations on the European continent. This term Caucasian is then often misunderstood and misused to refer to Europeans and becomes a pronoun for the 'skin race' because of their physical appearance. In mass communication media such as video games, often depict European people with characteristics resembling the Caucasian race.

The depiction of the Caucasian race in video games is often used to describe groups of people in the virtual world who have high intellectual abilities, are well-off, and come from noble families (Yuwono & Wahyuwono, 2016). The stereotypes shown through video games towards Europeans are not only shown through physical appearance, they tend to take on the physical characteristics of the Caucasian race which then creates social characteristics that society believes in. However, it is also displayed through the presence of the concept of Christian religiosity which is largely adhered to by European society and has become one of the national identities of European nations. This is because Christianity is more suitable to be identified as the national identity of European nations which is strengthened by existing policies in Europe which then provide easy access and vital values for Christian communities such as access to education and health (Kunovich, 2006).

Just like any other mass communication media in general, the game Genshin Impact also depicts the stereotypical lifestyle of European society. This can be seen from how the Genshin Impact game displays a representation of European society, represented by characters with physical characteristics like the Caucasian race and several religious attributes of the Christian religion which is adhered to by the majority of European society. It is displayed by the existing playable character named Jean Gunnhildr and the gothic-stylized cathedral as a landmark as a signifier.

It signified that Jean Gunnhildr is the character that displayed a very stereotypical depiction of Europeans with the physical appearance of the Caucasian race; by having a tall body model, pale skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair. The stereotypical images represented by Jean Gunnhildr are also

strengthened by the clothes that she wears, which took reference from the uniform worn by Napoleon Bonaparte, a noble emperor in 17th century in Europe. Furthermore, those icons represented by the character Jean Gunnhildr reinforce Yuwono & Wahyudi (2016) statement about European society and create a myth that European people always described as a society with high intellectuals' abilities, coming from aristocratic families, and well-off backgrounds. It caused lasting stereotypical judgments in players' minds about European society.



Picture 1 Jean Gunnhildr's character's clothing design takes reference from the clothing worn by members of the European aristocracy in the 17th century

The Genshin Impact game also adds the representation of the concept of Christianity, which is the national identity of European society, and is displayed within the landmarks of the architectural style of church buildings in Genshin Impact. This building, which represents the cathedral church in Genshin Impact, later became an iconic landmark for one of the regions in the virtual world which is set in medieval European civilization. It can be seen from the church building that it adopts a Gothic architectural style which is displayed with the characteristics of a magnificent design with a pointed roof (Richard & Roosandriantini, 2022). This gothic architectural style later became a signified which is often applied to church buildings, especially Catholic churches, to display the greatness and beauty of God's creation.

MacKinney (1927) explained that the development of Catholic churches with Gothic architectural style influences the progress of religious activities in positive ways. He mentioned it has a positive relevance between the evolution of cooperative social activities and the availability of workforce labors in medieval European society, one of which can be shown by the development in the architectural field. Later on, these two signifiers affirm the stereotypes about European society and the myth related to European society which is always has been presented as an aristocratic society with high intellectual abilities and the great influence of Christianity on the socio-cultural life of European nations.

Representation of Race and Religiosity in East Asian Communities

East Asia is one of the subareas on the Asian continent, with several prominent countries such as China, South Korea, and Japan. For the ethnicity groups, most of the East Asian people themselves are often associated with the Mongoloid race because they share distinctive biological characteristics in the form of straight black hair and slanted eyes. Even though the Mongoloid race is a general term used to refer to the ethnic groups originating from the East Asian plains, they do feel uncomfortable with the term used. It is because the term Mongoloid often creates bad stereotypes regarding East Asian peoples in the eyes of Europeans. The term is also used to refer to the condition of Down syndrome which is called 'Mongolian idiocy' (Takezawa, 2012). As a result of negative and stereotypical depictions of East Asian ethnic groups, the Chinese and Japanese governments have taken firm steps to deal with this stereotype. Even the Japanese government is very concerned about how other countries and/or nations see the Japanese people and to maintain the representation of Japan in the media (Makharova, 2022), several media, especially Japanese media, try to present themselves with a 'nationalist' image. Through today's popular culture media, Japan has successfully represented itself by showing an image of a nation that is progressive and even committed fully to futuristic ideas to provide a better understanding of the national identity of the Japanese nation.

As for China, they use mass communication media to present an ideal representation of their nation and use it as a data source to explore the ideas and values of the Chinese nation which is characterized by success, peace, development, and a better future (Hou, 2016). As one of the video games developed in mainland China, Genshin Impact has become a media representation to 'rebut' negative claims regarding East Asian nations presented by conventional media by displaying the ideal values and ideas that East Asian nations want to display so that they can present perspective and understanding besides these negative stereotypes.

The game developer of Genshin Impact is trying to represent the image of the Chinese nation through the character Zhongli as a signifier. This can be seen in Zhongli's character, who shares the physical characteristics of the Mongoloid race who inhabit the plains of East Asia with the purpose to strengthen the representation of Chinese people who shares the same characteristics as Mongoloid race. But as it mentioned before, the Chinese people don't seem like how they are represented in mass media hence the game Genshin Impact tried to put other icons or signifiers in Zhongli's character to debunk those negative claims about Chinese people. It can be shown by the gold color that dominates Zhongli's character and the ornament of the dragon on his clothes.

The gold color often symbolizes authority, dignity, and wealth but it also has social meaning to convey the impression of grandeur, luxury, and glory (Karja, 2021). Meanwhile, the dragon ornament on the clothing design of Zhongli's character symbolizes goodness and prosperity. In Chinese culture dragon/*liong/long* (龍, 龙) is also believed a symbol of virility and fertility, elements of yang (陽), and masculinity (Kustedja, Sudikno, & Salura, 2013). These icons later on become the signifiers in this

research and show how the game Genshin Impact tried to circulate the images of the Chinese nation as a prosperous nation. Genshin Impact created a new myth about Chinese society and nation, portraying China as a superpower nation with a strong economy so it could become a prosperous country. Chinese people themselves believe that self-esteem and prestige are a form of honor (Daryono, 2016). The game Genshin Impact tried to emphasize the value of Chinese people through the character Zhongli. The ideal values believed in by Chinese society are also represented through the values of Buddhist beliefs which explain the concept of wisdom in managing someone's mind through the non-playable character Adeptus (signifier) that depicted as a divine or demonic animal creatures.

This depiction of gods and demons in the form of animals is an adaptation of the "Journey to the West" series of stories. A classic work that tells the story of the adventures of a human-like monkey named Sun Wukong who is on a journey in search of sacred texts and religious principles believed in Buddhist beliefs related to the concepts of karma, compassion, emptiness, and life skills. On his journey, Sun Wukong faced various obstacles to achieving the concept of 'Buddha'. In the novel, the Adeptus character is also described as an illuminated beast, a god, and a mythological creature. The depiction of the Adeptus characters who do not resemble humans is done to convey the value of Buddhist beliefs which every living creature can achieve absolute wisdom if they can control their minds (signified). However, on the way to aiming this goal, various forms of tests will be encountered, these tests then strengthen the concept of 'Buddha' which already exists within the self and spirituality of anyone who believes in it (Bantly, 1989). It later created a myth and represented the immanent quality of the mindset of the majority of Chinese society through the representation of the Adeptus character. Through the deception of the character Adeptus, the game Genshin Impact strengthens a claim to debunk the negative stereotypes about Chinese people and Mongoloid race that are identical and associated with 'Mongolian Idiocy' syndrome. The character Adeptus represents the ability and wisdom of Chinese people to control their minds so they can achieve the immanent quality of mindset and the concept of Buddha that most Chinese people adhere to.

Likewise, the Chinese people wanted to present their national identity and values to debunk the misconception of their people and nations from conventional media, the Japanese people are also trying to present themselves with a 'nationalist' image and refute claims related to the representation shown by conventional media and stereotypes formed by Western media regarding their nation by presenting themselves as a progressive and transnational nation. Firstly, this can be seen in Yae Miko's character. As a signifier depiction of 'Miko' or shrine maiden, the character Yae Miko shows the strong influence of Shinto beliefs held by the majority of Japanese society to move on from the isolated and traditional nation into a transnational and open up to globalization nations, it is showing the progressive mindset of Japanese people (signified). The word Shinto itself comes from Chinese where *Shin* means *kami* or god and *To* means path. This understanding of Shinto beliefs (Shintoisme) ultimately formed the thinking of Japanese society where gods served as guides or guides on the path that must be followed for its

believers. The concept of Shinto beliefs was used to change the traditional thinking of Japanese people in the *bakufu* era to bring them towards progress and development of modernization (Ismail, Khalid, & Ramli, 2021). Later on, it created a myth that gave an understanding related to the Japanese people who are mostly Shinto believers realized that their society and nation were far behind from catching up with other nations because of the isolation policy during bakufu era (called Sakoku). With that spirit, they wanted to bring their nation towards modernization.

The development of the Japanese nation is not only shown through the character Yae Miko, who represents the Shinto belief which is the main belief of Japanese citizens and the basis of their thoughts for moving towards modernization, it is also represented through the character Kamisato Ayaka as signifier and focuses to represent the social and cultural behavior of the Japanese community. Through the character Kamisato Ayaka, the developer tries to represent the historical reforms that occurred in Japan and their impact on the socio-cultural behavior of Japanese society at that time. In the Genshin Impact, it is said that the character Kamisato Ayaka comes from a continent that takes inspiration from Japan. However, the character Kamisato Ayaka is seen wearing clothes in the form of a dress in the style of a European nobleman in the Victorian era, through the clothing design of the character Kamisato Ayaka. It can be the signified which conceived that the developer of the Genshin Impact tries to describe the socio-political and cultural conditions that existed in Japan in the 18th century, precisely when reforms occurred in the country to overthrow the tyrannical leadership of the Shogun (*bakufu*), which was later called the Meiji Restoration.



Image 2 Kamisato Ayaka's character's alternative clothing design with a fashion style like European royalty in the 18th century or the Victorian era

Following the regime change, the Japanese government recognized the extent of its

technological and cultural lag behind the Western nations and immediately took action to bridge the gap. This process began with the decision to end its isolationist policies during the Shogunate in 1862, the new regime government took the lead in sending delegations of their human resources to Europe to broaden their horizon (Ong, 2020). The character design of Kamisato Ayaka who dons European-style clothes, reflects the condition of Japanese society after the overthrow of the tyrannical leadership of the Shogunate, in which the newest regime tried to open up to globalization. It articulates a myth of the spirit of Japanese society and illustrates Japan's openness to globalization which evokes a modernization in response to global influences.

Furthermore, another representation highlighted about the Japanese in the game Genshin Impact is the socio-cultural conditions of Japanese society from the Bakufu era to the modernization during Meiji Restoration. It can be shown from the folding fan that is identical to the character Kamisato Ayaka (signifier). The folding fan is one of the properties of traditional Japanese stage performance art called Kabuki. In the Bakufu era, Kabuki performances were considered low-class artistic performances and were even considered as a form of prostitution (signified). Since, the Japanese government at that time assumed Kabuki art did not reflect the social, political and moral values of the Bakufu government. Kabuki art was considered a 'dirty' art performance because the Japanese government at that time believed they adhered to refined values and tradition while on the other hand kabuki was the opposite of the values they believed

Nevertheless, kabuki art was very popular and became a hub for the citizens of Edo (the capital of Japan during the *bakufu* era) since the civil society was interested in the stories, beauty of the art, and fantasy presented in kabuki art performances. In the wake of the reform era during the Meiji Restoration, kabuki art developed into a traditional Japanese performing art and became a medium for depicting the life of contemporary Japanese society that could be enjoyed by all social levels (Payne, 2007). In representing Japanese culture, game developer Genshin Impact emphasizes the socio-cultural changes that occurred in Japanese society, especially during the Meiji Restoration era. Overall, Genshin Impact's developer tries to present another perspective regarding the Mongoloid race which is often depicted negatively in conventional and Western media. The developer of Genshin Impact then offers a new perspective by showing how national identity can influence the ideas and ideal values held by the Chinese and Japanese people which then become their national identity and bring the two nations to move towards progressive and transnational national development.

Representation of Race and Religiosity in Middle Eastern Society

Middle Eastern is a term used to describe the region that politically and culturally is part of the continent of Asia or Africa-Euria with the center of the region belonging to the plains between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf as well as an area that extends from Anatolia, Arabian Peninsula, and the Sinai Peninsula. If we talk about Middle Eastern society, it will always associated with Arabian and Islamic countries, despite not all countries included in the Middle East region being Islamic

countries. It is due to media representation which often shows the Middle East as an Islamic or Arabian country, especially Western media.

Stereotypes regarding Middle Eastern people have been shaped historically by American military interventions regarding this region which contributed to the generalization of negative perceptions. American media tends to perpetuate these stereotypes, portraying Middle Eastern civilization as barbaric, rude, and lacking the ideal civilization of Western nations (Hirchi, 2007). In contrast, Genshin Impact seeks to represent the cultural and religious diversity of Middle Eastern societies by showcasing the rich tapestry of traditions that is the forerunner of Middle Eastern society today. It is shown by the character of Nilou and the non-playable character, King Deshert, serve as signifiers of this cultural diversity and highlight the historical roots of Middle Eastern culture today.

Firstly, as a signifier, the character Nilou is shown wearing traditional Persian dancing clothes. It represents the ancient beliefs held by the Persian people or the ancestors of the Iranian people as the understanding signified.



Image 3 Nilou's character's clothing design takes reference from traditional Iranian dancer garb.

This representation is further emphasized by the graceful finger movements showcased in Nilou's character promotional splash art. Additionally, the developers of Genshin Impact illustrate the influence of Zoroastrianism, the ancestral faith of the Persians through Nilou's character. Historically, traditional Persian Dance was performed during religious rituals to honor Zoroastrian deities (signifiers). Nowadays, it has evolved and featured prominently in cultural celebrations such as the Nowruz Festival

which marks the Persian New Year (Zamani-Farahani, 2013). During the Nowruz festival, the offerings are made using seven kinds type of dried fruits and nuts representing seven traditional concepts related to the virtue and order of life in Zoroastrian beliefs. Circulating a myth about the strong influence of Zoroastrian beliefs on the Iranian cultural background nowadays despite its believers declining over the years.

Apart from traditional Persian beliefs, the Genshin Impact game also tries to display the faith held by the Ancient Egyptians civilizations were also the ancestors of today's Middle Eastern society by representing the visualization of the non-playable character King Deshert as signifier. In traditional Egyptian belief, there was a figure of Amun-Ra as the absolute proof of God's greatness which was represented and believed by the people of Ancient Egypt through depictions of the sun, since they could not see God's form. For Ancient Egyptian society, this was evidence of the concept of universal complexity only God possessed and depicted in the form of the sun (Hart, 1986). Furthermore, the eye symbol displayed in the King Deshert character represents the symbol of the Eye of Horus believed by Ancient Egyptians.

The mythology surrounding the Eye of Horus has its roots in the Egyptian legend of Osiris, who was brutally murdered by his brother, Set, in a power for the Egyptian throne. Set dismembered Osiris, scattering his body into fourteen pieces across the land which led to widespread disaster in Egypt. The Egyptians believed the calamities happened on their land as a result of the improper burial of Osiris it leads to preventing him from receiving judgment in the afterlife for his sins. To ease the sufferings of the Egyptians, Horus, the son of Osiris undertook a quest to recover his father's remains with the help of Isis, Hephthys, and Anubis. Their goal was to give Osiris a proper burial so it allowed him to enter the underworld. Furthermore, Horus confronted and defeated Set, it is allowed him to liberate the land of Egypt from the calamities struck (RaFaey, Quinones, Clifton, Tripathi, & Quinones-Hinojosa, 2019). This narrative illustrates the understanding of the complex and abstract nature of divinity deities believed by Egyptians, on the other hand, it explains the attributes of the divine, such as omniscience and protection embodied by the Eye of Horus. Therefore these elements contribute to the construction of the 'exotic far East' image in the Genshin Impact.

Both signifiers existed during the ancient Egyptian civilization giving an understanding of the absolute concept of a divine deity of God, it is still believed and held by today's society. The representations of Middle Eastern traditional culture, beliefs, and/or faiths of its ancestors become vital values lasted until today, as the historical roots of modern socio-cultural civilization of Middle Eastern society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aims to determine the racial stereotypes and concept of religiosity of

a nation that is represented in the game Genshin Impact, these representations influence players' understanding regarding the identity of the nationality or society. As a media representation, the game Genshin Impact displays several stereotypical depictions related to a race or religiosity adhered to by a particular nation. This stereotypical representation then perpetuates players' judgmental thinking regarding belonging to a particular nation as seen from the social characteristics of the sense of religiosity held by a particular nation or community group.

However, as a media representation, Genshin Impact's developer continues to be selective in presenting certain events or cultures in certain ways. In this case, the selectivity carried out by Genshin Impact's developer aims to show another side of a particular nation or society, as is the case regarding the representation of East Asia which is often shown with negative stereotypes by conventional media or Western media. These negative stereotypes are identified with the social characteristics inherent in certain races, where these social characteristics are also formed due to depictions in the media. Because the Genshin Impact game was developed by a game company from China, the depiction of East Asian nations and cultures displayed according to their ideal, nationalist, and transnational values held and believed by East Asian society, offers the opposite perspective of certain ideas or stereotypes regarding their nations believed by Western media.

In contrast, it is quite unfortunate since Genshin Impact does not display racial variations and the religiosity of a nation. Until the latest version update as of August 2023, Genshin Impact predominantly only represents certain nations. It is safe to assume the nations represented in Genshin Impact are quite dominant including Europe and Asia (which includes parts of East Asia and the Middle East) and do not yet display cultural diversity, from other religious races and other nations that are excluded from the dominant two continents above. Additionally, this research is also limited due to the lack of emphasis on the ludic aspect of the Genshin Impact, which causes the character from Genshin Impact to be a linear source of message. It impacted stereotypes or myths regarding certain races, religiosity, or nations being perpetuated in people's minds. Indeed, this is also an impact of the limited interaction between the players and the game itself since it does not give space for the player to deconstruct meaning.

Due to the limitation of the ludic component or interaction between the players and the gamespace in the Genshin Impact game, it is hoped there will be future research that explores or examines this interaction by taking a different topic or research focus.

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