Beyond Linear: Time's Evolution in the Picture Stories from Passionate Journey to Wild Pilgrimage to Here

LOTTIE SEGAL
Muhlenberg College

From near complete linear time to the complete abandonment of it, graphic novels have always played with time. An understanding of the dynamics of nonlinear time is necessary to understand the graphic novel. By looking at picture stories over time, the destruction of linear time can be seen in how various artists confront the problem of images' relationship to time and ultimately come to embrace it.

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In graphic novels, the binary of the future and the past need not be so black and white. Graphic novels are free from linear time in a way that traditional novels cannot be. Language must be read in a certain order, from left to right or up to down. But a picture can be "read" in any order, in any way. One person might see the sun in the left corner first and someone else might look at the person in the center of the frame before anything else. Neither person is wrong. They each have their own unique way of interpreting images. Furthermore, each person can choose how long to look at an image before moving on. There is no set amount of time someone needs to spend with a picture to understand it or have an opinion on it. This simple fact destroys any notion of linear time in images and thus any attempt at linear time in graphic novels is in tension with the medium itself. As picture stories grew from woodcut novels to the modern graphic novel, this tension became a part of the story instead of something that needed to be worked around. Frans Masereel's *Passionate Journey* (1919) is an early woodcut novel that starts to play with nonlinear time. *Wild Pilgrimage* (1932) by Lynd Ward takes this even further with the introduction of fantasy sequences. Linear time truly collapses in Richard McGuire's *Here* (2014), a natural extension of the nonlinear image where nonlinear thought is not only encouraged but built into the narrative. An understanding of the dynamics of nonlinear time is necessary to understand the graphic novel. By looking at picture stories over time, the destruction of linear time can be seen in how various artists confront the problem of images' relationship to time and ultimately come to embrace it.

Frans Masereel was the first woodcut novelist and therefore the first to realize the problem of time. His work was deeply influenced by early film, a linear medium: as Perry Willett argues in an essay on Masereel's influences, "Masereel's emblematic use of the crude woodcut over the more refined wood engraving, which allows for more exact lines, is a constant reminder of both medieval art and early film" (Willett 126). His use of "the crude woodcut" could be seen as an attempt to control time and force it into a linear flow. The more simplistic designs mean that a person can flip quickly through his books and still get the whole story. By following a single character as they go through their story, Masereel limits time to a single point of view. The reader experiences time roughly as the character does. Masereel was also deeply influenced by World War I; Lasse Antonsen goes so far as to claim that "in the aftermath of World War I, Masereel was seen as giving voice to a people haunted by 'the spectacle of death'" (Antonsen 154). The sense of time became warped during the war as mass suffering created a different perception of time in the populace. By focusing on a linear sense of time, it could be said Masereel is attempting to bring back order to a disordered

world. His audience would have been looking for straightforward time, as well as something that is easily understood. Masereel achieves this through his woodcut novels specifically through ignoring the written word but still adhering to linear time. On the differences between images and writing, Gottfried E. Lessing notes that "all bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time" and that "actions, on the other hand, cannot exist independently" (Lessing 91-92). Lessing identifies the difficulty of telling a story with images. However, while Lessing argues that paintings can never be as important or as interesting as poetry, he also highlights the way Masereel will use sequenced images to tell a story. If bodies exist in time and actions cannot exist alone, then Masereel uses his woodcuts to show a body moving through time by their actions.

As his work was influenced by film, the way Masereel tells stories relies on a filmic sense of time. Film guides the audience's eye. A filmmaker can decide how long to linger and how quickly to move on from any particular moment. Masereel varies his level of detail to achieve the same effect. In *Passionate Journey,* time is shown to be linear, at least on the surface. There are no flashbacks or flash-forwards but rather one thing happening after another in real time, much like early film. An early sequence in the book offers little detail, encouraging a reader to move quickly. The protagonist stands alone in a crowd (Masereel 4) and then on a busy street (5), followed by two more images of him in a crowd once more (6-7). (Figure 1) The details in these panels give just enough to convey what is going on and who is important without giving enough for a reader to linger. Therefore, the fast paced environment of the city is conveyed in the same way it would have been in a film. Though time is still linear, it is being skillfully manipulated by Masereel.

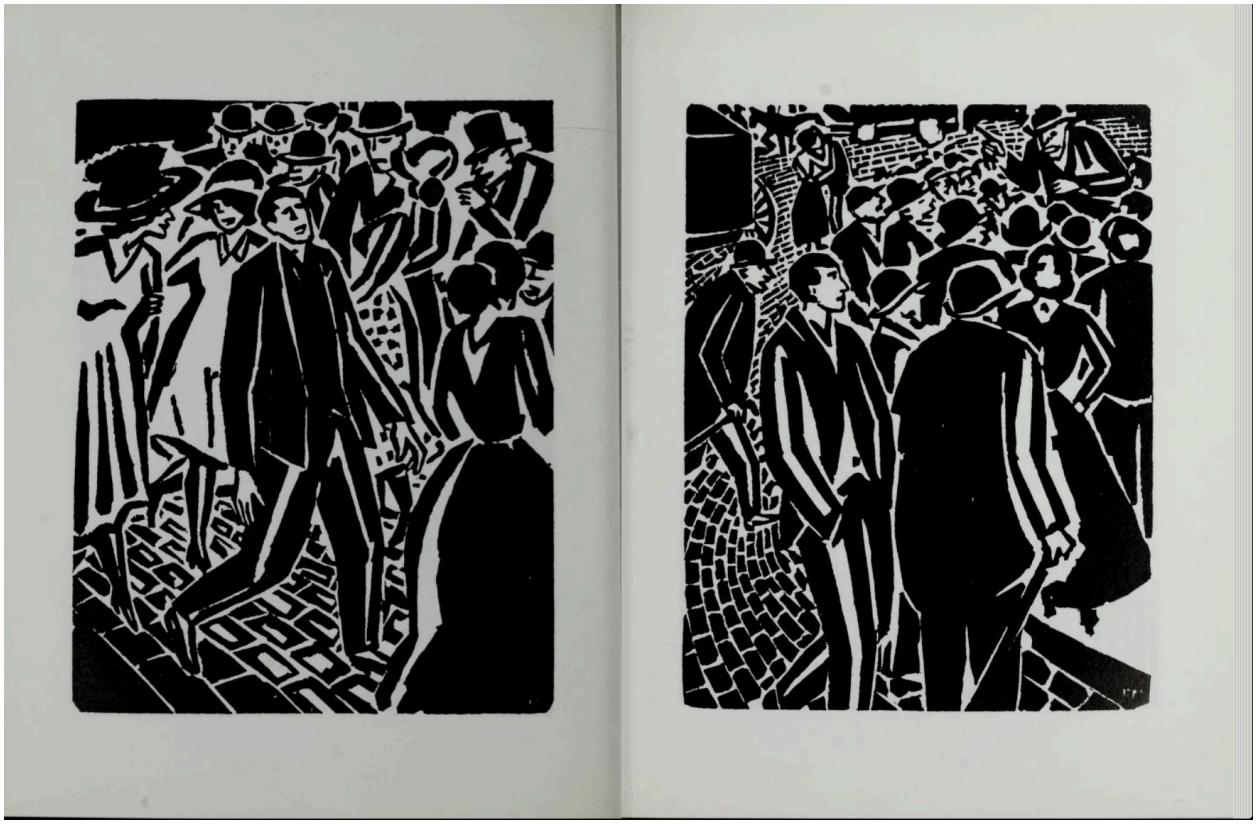


Figure 1, Masreel's protagonist walks through the world in linear time

At the end of the story, Masereel complicates time even further. When the protagonist leaves society behind, the imagery takes a turn. In the last image, there is more detail in the background than there has been in almost every other image. Here, the protagonist is shown to be beyond human as he stands larger than life amidst a star field and his face has turned into a skull (165). (Figure 2) The detail makes the reader linger on this last image, taking in everything that is going on. This image is also different from the rest of the panels in the novel. The protagonist himself is now out of time. The rest of the story sees him interacting with others

on a normal time scale but now, through death as shown by his change in looks, he is out of time. He has moved onto a different plane of existence. Masereel complicates the linear prescription of time but he leaves it open ended. The protagonist is out of time but because this is where the story ends, the audience does not get to follow the protagonist beyond linear time.

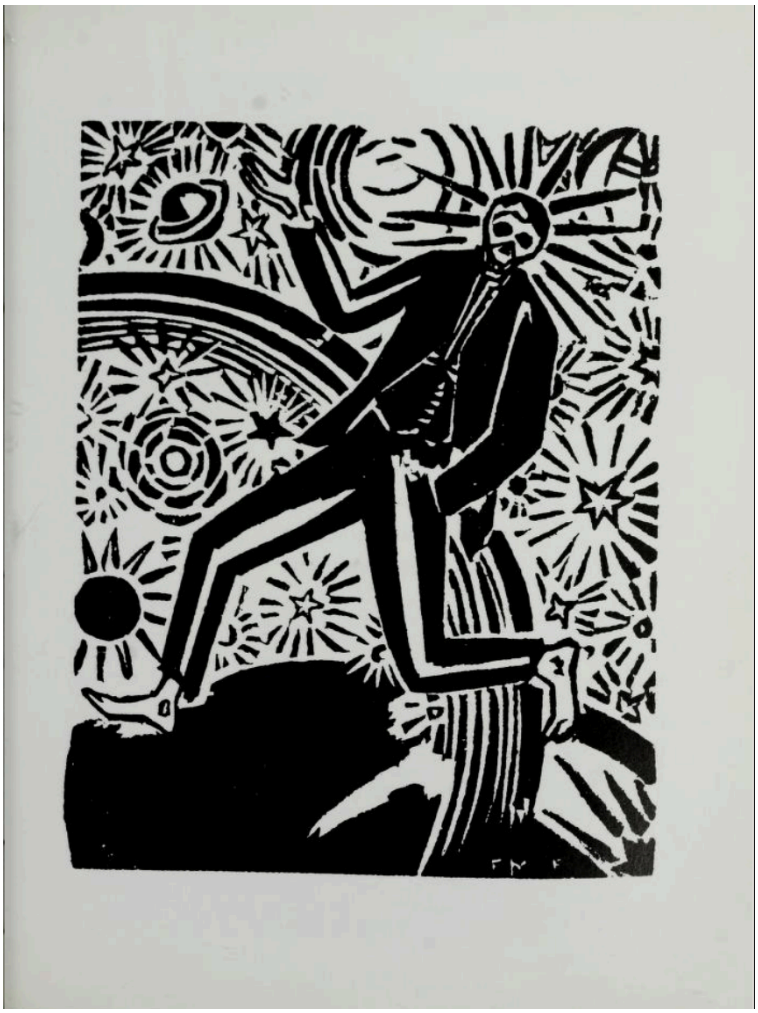


Figure 2, The protagonist moves beyond time

Lynd Ward's woodcut novels stray from linear time. In *Wild Pilgrimage,* he uses red printed sections to denote the inner life of the protagonist. There are multiple realities laid on top of each other: as Grant Scott explains in his book on Ward, "These red engravings operate on varying levels of consciousness - from fantasy, waking dream and traumatic memory to premeditated action and political commitment" (Scott 100). In each red sequence, time shifts and breaks from the previously linear narrative. Ward uses color to signify this change in consciousness and prescription of time. This is a departure from Masereel's work as well as Ward's earlier work. By including color, Ward is able to build on the genre and suggest more complex notions of time. There is more than one type of time happening in *Wild Pilgrimage.* In a way, he is ahead of his time. David Ball suggests that Ward looks forward to what graphic novels will become: "Ward is thus undertaking a radical experiment in reader response, a project whose aims might be more legible through the lens of contemporary graphic narrative" (Ball 134). Instead of guiding the reader through a safe linear sense of time, Ward uses the unexpectedness of color to create uneasiness in the reader which is expanded upon by the discomfort of nonlinear time. This is further enforced by the nature of the narrative. The protagonist doesn't experience completely linear time which makes it harder for the reader to trust him and understand what is

truly happening.

Wild Pilgrimage follows the story of a worker as he escapes his life and job and runs away from society to live with a hermit before returning to lead a failed worker revolution. The red dream and daydream sequences offer a window into his mind as he makes the choices that will lead him to his ultimate end. Prior to the first red sequence, the protagonist is seen gazing at the factory (Ward 7) (Figure 3). He is setting up the daydream to come.



Figure 3, Ward's Protagonist looks back at the factory

The red daydream shows the protagonist in a series of fantastical situations such as in a forest made of smoke stacks (8), in a jail (10), falling off a cliff (11) (Figure 4), and laying among thick ropes (12). The sequence ends with the protagonist sneaking up on a naked woman in the woods (13).



Figure 4, The Protagonist dreams

On the panel after the sequence, the protagonist is walking through the woods (14), very far from where he started. (Figure 5) The images in the daydream are not directly connected to each other; it is not clear if each red panel is linear. Time seems to matter less now. There is also lost time as the protagonist is in a completely different place at the end of the sequence than he was at the beginning. This complicates the notion of linear time found in Masereel's work. The moment after the red sequence clearly comes after the moment before, but the amount of time that has passed between these two moments is unclear. The reader is left to wonder exactly what has happened during the time the protagonist was daydreaming. How far has he walked? Does he know where he is going? How much time did he spend thinking about each red image? Was there more to each red image than is shown? Time briefly stops and stutters. There is space for the amount of time and the meaning of time to be interpreted. It throws the audience off, which adds to the overall "wildness" of the novel.

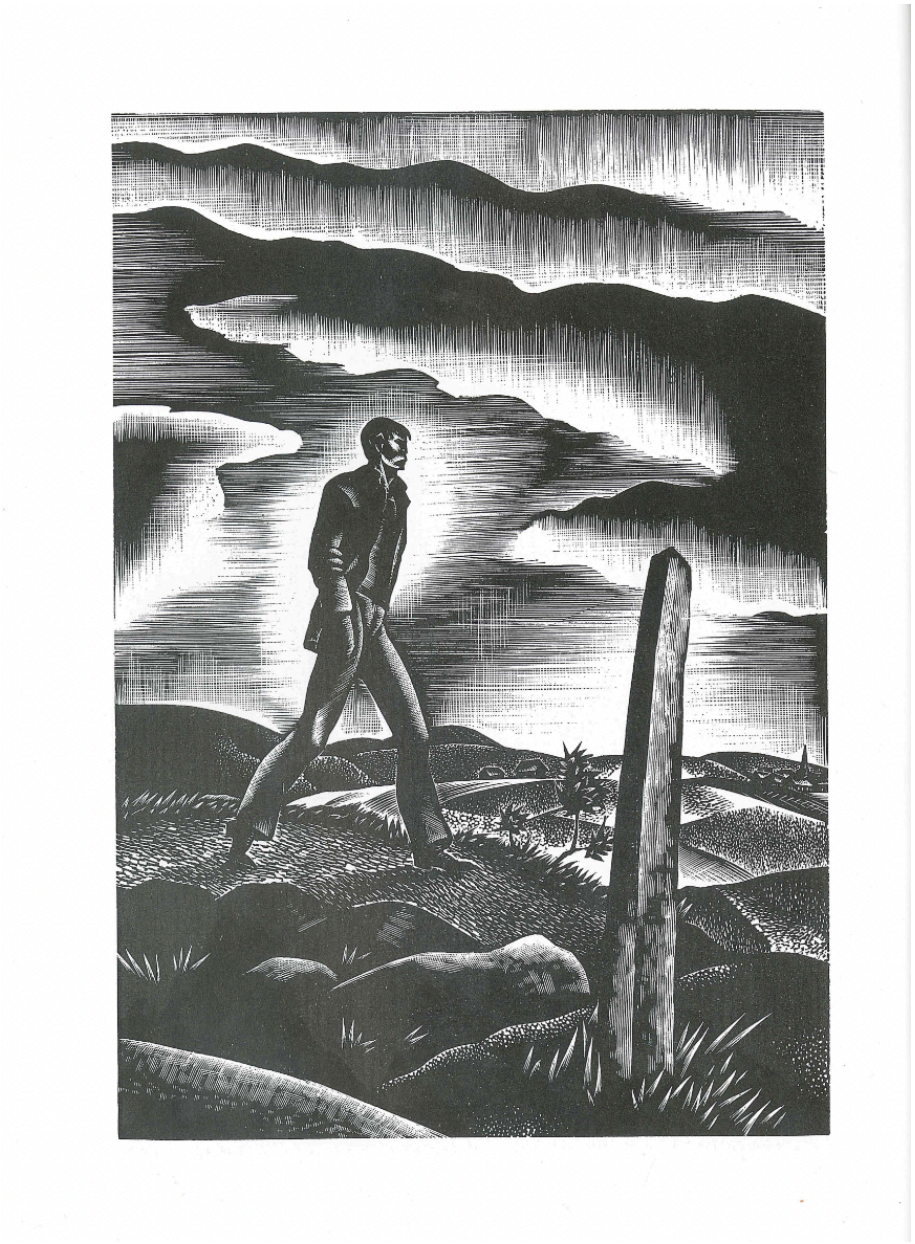


Figure 5, The Protagonist seems far from where he started

Ward's departure from strictly linear time helps him tell his story. Through these red sequences, he is able to show the inner life of the protagonist. In the final red panel, the protagonist holds up the decapitated head of a factory boss that looks eerily similar to his own face (105). He has been dreaming about overtaking the upper class but as the final sequence shows, the protagonist fails. The final image shows the protagonist dead after a failed revolution, his body one of many dead (108). The audience knows what he wanted to happen because it was shown in red, but they also see what happened in reality. Time is skewed in that it could be this red image was the last thought that the protagonist had as he died. The protagonist died possibly thinking he was successful or dreaming of the day when he would be successful. This complex idea, where Ward can present the reader with two ideas at once, layers time on top of itself. There are now two prescriptions of time: the protagonist's and the reader's, breaking from Masereel's single sense of time. While both creators complicate linear time, Ward goes further to decouple storytelling from linear time.

Graphic novels have the unique ability to complicate linear time. *Here* by Richard McGuire takes this concept to its logical extreme. The book is built on the idea that time is no longer linear and has in fact collapsed to the point where everything that has ever happened is happening all at once. Events that happened centuries apart take place on the same page. Characters that should not know of each other's existence seem to respond to each other. Even the smallest details follow this structure. On every level, McGuire rejects linear time in place of a flat type of time. This flat time shows how various times are related and certain things are repeated over and over again. Flat time shows things not in a random order but in order of theme. The audience is encouraged to look at time all at once instead of at things happening one after another. Instead of showing one or two perspectives of time like Masreel and Ward, McGuire shows many possible perspectives of time.

Here is a book that teaches the audience how to read it. Flat time is not a concept most people are familiar with, so McGuire cleverly lays out exactly how a reader should go through his book. Julia Greenberg argues in *Wired* that McGuire complicates the traditional ways comics are read "by adding to the familiar left-to-right and up-and-down reading of comics a third 'in-and-out' direction of overlapping palimpsests of framed historical space." Flat time cannot read like linear time. By using windows in an "in-and-out" direction, McGuire makes it easier for readers to understand flat time. His clearly labeled years in the corner of each window show the audience what he is doing. But the audience still has control over where they look first. Instead of varying the level of detail to focus audience attention like Masereel, McGuire accounts for the nonlinear nature of images by building it into his work. By fully embracing how time works together with images, McGuire is able to flatten time in order to tell many stories at once.

McGuire's use of flat time was a new concept when he first published *Here.* In *Understanding Comics,* Scott McCloud argues that comics and graphic novels are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 9). However, McGuire troubles this idea. Flat time is neither a "deliberate sequence" nor it is necessarily "intended to convey information" other than that all of this was "here", so to speak. To reduce *Here* to something that only "produce[s] an aesthetic response in the viewer" is to ignore what McGuire is doing with flat time. *Here* is beautiful, but to say it is only beautiful overlooks how McGuire plays with time in order to tell multiple stories on top of and inside of each other while also telling the single story of a single place over time. McCloud fails to account for the possibility of nonlinear storytelling in his definition of comics despite the fact that comics are the perfect form for nonlinear stories. By focusing too heavily on what comics have been, McCloud does not look to the future of what is possible. He cannot imagine an "in-and-out" direction in comics or graphic novels, only the more traditional "left-to-right and up-and-down." *Here* challenges everything comic and graphic novels have been up until that point.

Because *Here* begins so unassumingly, its use of flat time doesn't become clear right away. The single place that *Here* highlights is most often shown as a suburban living room. There is first a crib in 1957 (McGuire 1). This signals that there has been or will soon be a birth, but there is also a deeper meaning; Christina Bieber Lake explains that "This year, 1957, is also McGuire's own birth year, reminding us that the artist was here- and might not have been!- though knowledge of that autobiographical connection is not necessary to enjoy the novel" (Lake 146). By starting the story in his own birth year but not showing a baby, McGuire reminds the audience that while there are many people here there are also many people missing. He might have been here, many others might have been here or will be here. Only a small portion of flat time is seen. McGuire therefore shows that flat time is much bigger than what can be tackled in a single book. In a way, he is admitting to his own shortcomings as a creator. By starting off the book this way, McGuire slowly introduces his readers to the idea of flat time while showing that he is only revealing a piece of it. The first window looks at a cat in 1999 overlaid on the living room in 1957, however this time there is no crib and instead there is a woman (McGuire 4). The woman says "hmm… now why did I come in here again?" (4). (Figure 6) By having this first window look in on a cat, McGuire shows that even things that seem unimportant are part of flat time. The cat is nothing special, but it was here, or it will be here, so a window opens. Flat time means that both the woman and this cat can exist at the same instance and neither is more important than the other.



Figure 6, *Here* shows us multiple times in the same place

The location of the book is also only a small section of flat time. Time can be made flat in any space, but McGuire chose to set *Here,* and thus flattens time, in this specific place. Time can be flat in any space, and yet this particular spot in the American mid-Atlantic region is what *Here* focuses on. Time becomes less important than the location; Lake argues that "While it is tempting to think of the physical location as that which provides the unity of the novel [...] that is not the case. The house (meaningless without its inhabitants) is what provides it" (Lake 151). While the location is what allows for time to be flattened, it is not what unites the stories thematically. Life is the overarching theme of *Here.* McGuire could have shown windows to death and destruction, apocalypse and hopelessness but instead the windows open up to life and hopefulness. The last point in time is a scene of flowers and birds in 22,175 (McGuire 136). In linear time this would come after the apocalyptic scene of a nuclear wasteland in 2313 (140), but McGuire shows it after the window to 22,175. Therefore, because of flat time, the audience knows that this comes after the apocalypse. Life is still possible. In fact, even in the nuclear waste, there are people trying to clean it up. They won't live to see the fruits of their labor, but flat time means that the audience knows. Flat time means there is neither an end nor a beginning, but rather the knowledge of everything all at once.

By building on top of what came before, McGuire creates flat time in *Here.* This can be seen as the next step from Ward's dual perspective on time and Masereel's filmic sense of time. Each creator builds on what has come before them while also being influenced by their own sense of time. Without Masereel and Ward, McGuire could not utilize flat time. Both Masereel and Ward attempt to direct the attention of the reader, either by varying detail or through color, but McGuire allows the reader to choose how they look at an image. The windows do not necessarily have more or less detail than other parts of the page and while there are different color palettes used, no one color palette stands out from the others. Instead the reader is free to spend as much or as little time on each page, looking at each window. They are given the freedom to piece together the story as much or as little as they please. This is the true end goal of flat time. It does not elevate a

single story but many; it is not given over to guiding the thought of an audience. It simply is. Flat time gives power to the reader, allowing them to decide what is important and where to linger. It rewards close attention, allowing a reader to recreate linear time from flat time, but each reader's linear time will be unique.

Time's evolution in graphic novels shows the unique way that telling stories with pictures can communicate ideas to an audience. From near complete linear time to the complete abandonment of it, graphic novels have always played with time. Even creators as early as Masereel played with time even if he was limited by his own time period. Ward took the next steps towards nonlinear time by using dream sequences to show more than one perspective on time. McGuire created flat time: a way to collapse time at a single place into a single moment where any point in time might come to the forefront without warning. With every step in this evolution, each creator trusts the audience more and more to put together the story themselves. The destruction of linear time means complete and total trust in the audience. Telling stories with pictures was perhaps always headed for this point as pictures themselves are nonlinear, something that all of these creators were clearly aware of. Masereel's protagonist defined linear time even if his audience could not. Ward invites the audience to experience time at two levels but is unable to truly break linear time. McGuire flattens time and thus breaks the linear narrative that graphic novels had been following. As the graphic novel takes on new forms and new ways of storytelling, the reader finally gets to follow the story beyond linear time.

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