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Exploring the Potential for Narrative Analysis in Maps:
The Case Study of the Georgia-South Ossetia Conflict

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Abstract

The use of narrative analyses has been used to further our understanding of conflict. While maps have been recognized as objects of power and identity, study of them as narratives has until recently been under-developed. This paper will present exploratory narrative study of maps and mapping associated with a conflict case study; Georgia and South Ossetia in the Caucasus. Texts and stories embedded into Western cartographical maps will be examined using structuralist, functionalist and post-structuralist analyses.

Keywords

Georgia,Ossetia, maps, cartography, narrative analysis

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Introduction

Narrative analysis offers useful insight into understanding the stories that underpin sides of a conflict. Casebeer and Russell (2005) describe narratives thus: "Stories influence our ability to recall events, motivate people to act, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure our problem-solving capabilities, and ultimately perhaps even constitute our very identity" (p. 6). As Cobb et al., (2013) note, "Narrative provides a lens that has been shown to be useful for analyzing meaning making and for designing interventions in situations of protracted and escalating conflict" (p. 3).

One area where there appears to have yet been little work on narrative analysis but could benefit from its insight is maps. While maps have been recognized as objects of power and identity, study of them as narratives has until recently been under-developed. As discussed below, maps have been categorized as texts and can be analyzed as such. While traditionally recognized texts of various types have undergone analysis as narratives, more recently recognized texts, such as maps, have not generally gone through the same critique. The below provides a discussion of maps as narrative and an exploratory narrative study of maps and mapping associated with a conflict case study, Georgia and South Ossetia in the Caucasus.

The development of narrative theory itself has gone through several changes, generally in line with the progression of social theory. The evolution from structuralism to functionalism to post-structuralism has led to growing understanding of narratives and ways to analyze and understand them. It seems perhaps odd but also fitting to run a map case study through this progression to see what insights come of it, particularly given that a narrative analysis methodology for "traditional" maps (i.e. in the Western cartographic style) appears to be under-developed and the study of maps as narrative within the discipline of conflict analysis and resolution has also been less developed than in other fields, such as geography.

Theory and Maps as Narrative

> **"**Overall, the critical turn in cartography has dramatically modified the relations between maps and narratives in two ways: by deconstructing and exposing the metanarratives embedded in maps, and by envisioning maps as a compelling form of storytelling" (Caquard, 2011, p. 136).

There is considerable theory concerning maps, knowledge, social construct, and power that has originated primarily in postmodern geographic thought. Such theory naturally extends to and enhances understanding of maps as narratives, particularly in terms of conflict relations. However, a long-standing view commonly held is that maps are neutral means of communicating geographic data (Craib, 2000). They may be more or less scientific, more or less artistic (a common dialectic in the cartographic literature; Krygier, 1995). However, the underlying power they hold and mean to convey has been less well studied until relatively recently, when advancements in both theory and technology have led to more refined, more appropriate understanding of the roles maps play and their social impact.

Some of the fundamental key contributions were developed by Harley, particularly with his 1989 "Deconstruction of the Map." Crampton (2001) explains the significance of Harley's employment of deconstruction to unravel the power relations inherent in maps as follows:

> Maps are situated in a particular set of (competing) interests, including cultural, historical and political; maps can be understood by what they subjugate/ ignore/ downplay (what [Harley] called the silences and secrecies); and the way to interpret maps is not as records of the landscape but tracing out the way they embody power (in creating/ regenerating institutional power relations such as serf/lord or native/ European) and are themselves caught up in power relations, i.e., are not innocent... In sum: 'Deconstruction urges us to read between the lines of the map – "in the margins of the text" – and through its tropes to discover the silences and contradictions that challenge the apparent honesty of the image'. (Harley, 1989, p. 3)

Harley explores postmodern thought to relook the nature and role of maps as representations of power, stating that "an alternative epistemology, rooted in social theory rather than in scientific positivism, is more appropriate to the history of cartography" (Harley, 1989, p. 2). He relies on Derrida and Foucault in support of his deconstruction of the map. From Derrida he takes the concept that rhetoric is embodied in all texts. He takes from Foucault the idea that there is power in all forms of knowledge. Thus, by demonstrating that the map is both a text and a body of knowledge, he opens up the map to deconstructive pursuit.

In order to analyze the power inherent in map knowledge, Harley positions cartographic methodology, i.e. the "rules" used to create maps, as discourse, a primary Foucauldian unit of analysis. Harley states that, "The steps in making a map – selection, omission, simplification, classification, the creation of hierarchies, and 'symbolization' – are all inherently rhetorical"

(Harley, 1989, p. 11). In other words, which items are mapped, which items are not mapped, how mapped items are portrayed, how the legend is organized, all embody some of the rules (i.e. the map discourse) that convey the power relations, with their concomitant views and values, materialized in the map.

Zeigler (2002) discusses the contributions of semiotic theory to both cartography and political geography. In terms of cartography, semiotics identifies and highlights the importance of signs and symbols and how they relate to each other in the map "system." Moreover, Zeigler brings special attention to Gottmann's theorization on iconography (1951), i.e. "the set of beliefs, symbols, images, and ideas to which a community shows a profound attachment" (p. 675).

Recently, the concept of the "geo-narrative" has become popular in geographic theory and research (Mennis et al., 2013). "Geo-narrative" is defined by Kwan and Ding (2008) as a method of GIS-based narrative analysis that is able to incorporate qualitative data, and, therefore, is well-suited to "facilitate the creation and interpretation of contextualized cartographic or visual narratives… . It is intended to be helpful in the analysis of various types of narrative materials, such as oral histories, life histories, and biographies" (Kwan and Ding, 2008, p. 446).

The "geo-narrative" is primarily a methodology for mapping qualitative information and for integrating qualitative and quantitative data in a geospatial environment. While the work on geo-narratives has been extremely helpful in several ways, such as providing excellent insight into relations between individuals and their environments and giving cartographic voice to the disadvantaged, geo-narrative analysis is different than the narrative analysis of maps proposed here. To be sure, the geo-narrative holds great potential to be a means of providing insight into people's narratives. However, the narrative analysis of maps proposed here is a study into the meaning of the texts and stories embedded in more traditional maps, particularly those developed under the internationally adopted Western cartographic approach because of their yet huge dominance and, therefore, inherent implications for conflict dynamics.

Below, structuralist, functionalist and post-structuralist approaches will be used to demonstrate how narrative analysis of maps can provide valuable insight into a conflict. After the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, South Ossetia was one of two areas (the other being Abkhazia) that declared independence from Georgia and status as a sovereign state. The conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia is longstanding and has resulted in war before. This time, the

declaration of independence has resulted in a new round of separatism and nationalism justified through a narrative of being victimized at the hands of the Georgians over centuries.

Structuralist Approach: What's in a Name?

The structuralist approach to narrative analysis focuses on specific parts or features, i.e. plots, characters, and themes, as well as form in terms of genre and narrative syntax. Maps have similar components and features. While structuralists such as Labov and Waletzky (1967) focus on analysis of the clause, phrase or word, a structuralist narrative analysis of a map might focus on discrete elements such as the meaning conveyed in the icons, legend, labeling, and structure.

Figure 1 presents a CIA Factbook map of Georgia. The map physically centers on Georgia, considered by the US to be an ally, albeit a lesser power. Interestingly, the map is not titled, e.g., "Map of Georgia," an omission similar to not titling a report or other text. There is also no legend, also unusual for an officially published map. As a result of lack of specified meaning (the function of a legend), the status of South Ossetia is unclear. It cannot be an independent nation, as the international borders between Georgia and its neighbors such as Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, are identified by the typical solid boundary. But is South Ossetia considered an autonomous republic, as it had been before the war? Indeed, the boundaries delineating South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Ajaria within Georgia all appear different. Within Georgian international boundaries, there is a solid, thin brown line outlining Abkhazia, the other 2008 breakaway republic. A very slightly thinner boundary identifies Ajaria. However, South Ossetia is outlined with a dashed brown line. Is this meant to signify the Georgian Administrative Boundary Line that traditionally identified South Ossetia and has now become a point of contention between the two political entities? It is clear that South Ossetia's status is something different. As there is no legend, the map reader is left to surmise its meaning. South Ossetia appears to be some sort of internal, undefined "Other."

Another subtle but interesting aspect of this map is the placement of Georgia so that more of Russia is shown than its southern neighbors of Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. This does not mean that Georgia interacts more with Russia than with its southern neighbors – this is certainly not the case. The larger view of Russia, concomitant with larger font titling, is more likely due to the security bent of the map maker and concerns over Russian interests in the area. Indeed, the title for "Russia" is the largest font on the map.

Thus, the positioning on this map seems to strongly hint at Georgian-Russian relations. However, underlying even that, given the somewhat unusual depiction of South Ossetia, there appears to be another positioning – that of US-Russia tensions with Georgia as proxy. If the map had purely reflected the Georgian narrative, there would have been an administrative boundary line outlining South Ossetia, or there may have been no boundary or coloring distinguishing it at all. The ambiguous depiction of South Ossetia seems to speak to the US narrative of allying with Georgia against Russia but remaining ambivalent in its view of the status of South Ossetia. It is quite possible that this map was extracted as a subset from a larger regional map that contained the standard cartographic elements. However, the lack of at least the expected title and legend leaves a lot of room for interpretation of a space where interpretations are not only very different, they violently conflict.

Figure 1. Map of Georgia. Source: CIA

Beyond fonts and features, another relevant aspect of this map is the influence it carries merely due to its structural format. The Western cartographic tradition has had a strong impact internationally on legitimizing maps after its fashion (Boschmann and Cubbon, 2014; Caquard, 2011; Craib, 2000), e.g., in a Cartesian format (i.e. contextualized within a projected frame), with "standard" symbolic features, such as points, lines, polygons, labels, north-seeking arrow, and scale (Gerlach, 2014). As Jacob (1996) notes, "Scale, grid and projection are cultural variables, not intrinsic features of maps" (p. 195).

Furthermore, production and distribution of such maps have traditionally been the purview of national governments. National governments have historically focused such maps on the security, resources, and control interests and priorities of the state (Craib, 2000). As Caquard

(2011) notes, "production of these fictional nationalistic metanarratives has been supported by the modern need to scientifically measure, control, exploit and claim territories with maps" (p. 136). Such themes dominate even laypersons' expectations of official maps to this day. In other words, there tends to be a propensity not to question the content, accuracy, relevance, and authority of state maps, although that is changing.

Functionalist Approach: Dueling Maps and the Status Quo

A functionalist approach to narrative seeks to understand how narratives support status quo situations. In the case of maps, this might entail trying to understand how borders and boundaries affect communities, enforce the status quo, advantage some, and marginalize or silence others. Use of this approach is useful in studying a counter-narrative. Figure 2, "Map of Ossetia," offers such an opportunity. "Map of Ossetia" stands in stark contrast (literally) to the CIA map of Georgia (Figure 1), which, as intimated above, can be viewed a standard status quo map.

Despite the apparent simplicity of this map, there is a lot being told. In terms of plot, the depiction of South Ossetia and North Ossetia as separate (denoted by different colors and a solid linear boundary between them) but contiguous parts in a "complete" whole stress the idea of a togetherness, a shared similarity. By portraying North and South Ossetia together as a coherent entity, the map gives the impression that the two belong together.

Figure 2. Map of Ossetia. Source: Panonian at en.wikipedia.org.

The map is strikingly simple in its message about characters: all complicating characters who interfere with the Ossetian interpretation of the plot are simply absent. The absence of the international border between the two, as North Ossetia belongs to Russia and South Ossetia to Georgia (at least as recognized by the majority of the international community), connotes a rightful shared identity between the two entities. This is further amplified by the stark yet somewhat elegant "silence" in the form of the absence of any other place or feature, making "Ossetia" look coherent and complete in itself, untroubled by unnecessary "Others" who want to dominate them and keep them apart. There is no geographic context other than the Ossetias – no regional map, no map of the Caucasus. "Ossetia" is an island. The themes are obvious: a unified Ossetia, an Ossetian identity, and independence from the influence of outside powers. This representation quite graphically evokes the narrative syntax of individualism as described by Cobb et al. (2013) as,

> focus[ing] exclusively on benefits for Self; the Other is simply absent in any considerations. This narrative acknowledges that the ends justify the means. It often includes a subplot in which the speaker has been forced into this self-centered position because of how they have been treated by the Other, over time, reinforcing the legitimacy of the Self, and the delegitimacy of the Other (p. 6).

The Ossetian narrative as depicted in this map certainly supports this "justification of the means" – that their marginalization and harsh treatment by Russians in North Ossetia and Georgians in South Ossetia has led to their turning inward to each other and self-isolation.

The "Map of Ossetia" contains no legend, no north-seeking arrow, no coordinate system, no title; it is missing many of the cartographic features expected in a standard map. Thus, it gives the appearance of having been made by an amateur, which may be the case. A structuralist likely would interpret this at face value – that this map belongs to the genre of amateur political maps, the cartographic version of the "vernacular" that Labov (1997) and Labov and Waletzky (1967) found so interesting (from their "educated, knowing" position).

Furthermore, the text in the "Map of Ossetia" provides additional information in terms of how the names are identified. South Ossetians and Georgians have different names for locations. For example, "Tskhinval" is the Ossetian name of the ad hoc capital, whereas "Tskhinvali" is the

Georgian name. Likewise, the town "Znaur" is called "Znauri" by Georgians. The town "Leningor" is known by Georgians as "Akhalgori."

Evaluating the "Map of Ossetia" in terms of positioning dynamics (Harre and Langenhove, 1991; Harre and Slocum, 2003) also provides useful insight. Maps offer fertile ground for positioning theory. Harre and Slocum (2003) note that, "Positioning theory is part of a general movement in psychology toward making meanings and conventions, rather than causes and effects… (p. 102)." As maps are rich texts in terms of meaning, more work should be done to evaluate them through positioning theory. Through the use of borders, boundaries, labels, and other symbols, the status quo CIA map of Georgia (Figure 1) sets the first order positioning in terms of who are the global powers (US and Russia), who are their allies (Georgia is allied with the US), and who are considered minor players (e.g., South Ossetia). The map also implies certain rights and duties through its use of boundaries and labeling, e.g., preservation of territorial integrity and security of Georgia, although, again, this is vague because of the unclear meaning associated with the representation of South Ossetia.

On the other hand, the "Map of Ossetia" (Figure 2) counteracts this narrative with secondary positioning. It attempts to establish for the Ossetias voice, identity, agency, and a different vision of rights (e.g., independence, political voice) and duties (to uphold these rights) through establishing the border that concerns them the most: the one that defines and consolidates them, and separates them from the all-powerful Others. Thus, the two maps set up an antagonistic pattern of rights, duties, and obligations (Harre and Slocum, 2003).

Returning to the "Map of Ossetia" (Figure 2), North and South Ossetians (or some elements thereof) have combined efforts (quite literally) to develop a new positioning in response to Georgian, US, Russian, Western, etc., master narratives that, while conflicting or competing with each other, all position Ossetians as marginalized and secondary. Instead, in their map, Ossetians eliminate all features of their marginalization, i.e. international boundaries, world powers, to present a view of themselves as they would like to be seen.

Unsurprisingly, as is common with counter-narratives, this Ossetian counter-narrative can easily be used to "inoculate" the master narrative of status quo power politics in the South Caucasus in the post 9/11 world, a world where, as Casebeer and Russell (2005) discuss, narratives of terrorism dominate. Ossetians, particularly North Ossetians, who hold a higher number of both Muslims and those considered by the Russian government to be extremists, can

be portrayed as potential terrorists. "The Map of Ossetia" can be presented as a case of threatening propaganda.

Post-Structuralist Approach: Power Dynamics and Production of Meaning

Wood (1992) makes an important observation that,

> …because…maps constitute a semiological system…, they are ever vulnerable to seizure or invasion by myth. They are consequently, in all ways less like the windows through which we view the world and more like those windows of appearance from which pontiffs and potentates demonstrate their suzerainty…" (p. 107).

The arguments that study the relationship between this "suzerain's view," i.e. maps, the West and empire are compelling. Harley (1989) discusses the history of cartography in Europe and notes that Western cartography developed (Neocleous, 2003) and promoted itself as a science (i.e. objective, unbiased) since approximately the 17th century in imperial Europe. This approach allowed political and other powers to promote colonial worldviews via publishing world maps that included their visions of their territories and "uncharted lands" (Craib, 2000; Sato et al., 2014).

A particularly gripping concept is that of the map as an imperial tool of conquest – what we might now call a narrative of conquest. Neocleous (2003) asserts that the map may create reality instead of the other way around. In other words, political powers have used, and continue to use, maps as means of planning and shaping the environment – politically, militarily, socially, and otherwise – to their advantage. Edward Said (1993, p. 271) draws the grim connection between imperialism and cartography thus:

> Imperialism is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. And once in place, the map helped to illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain, part of the totalizing classificatory grid which the state uses to order and comprehend civil society. In helping the European powers create a world in their own image, cartography helped stabilize the earth's surface around the territorial imaginary of the modern state (as cited in Neocleous, 2003, p. 419).

In other words, "narratives do not just reflect or respond to violence, they create it." Monmonier (1996, p. 90) adds that the colonial powers used maps "as an intellectual tool for legitimizing

territorial conquest, economic exploitation, and cultural imperialism." He states that "Maps made it easy for European states to carve up Africa and other heathen lands, to lay claim to land and resources, and to ignore existing social and political structures" (p. 90). Cartography is further implicated in the creation of the modern political state by Smith (1994), "Nation-states are, by definition, geographical solutions to political problems" (p. 492).

The simple acts of naming and renaming people and places, drawing and manipulating boundaries, and including, omitting or changing features can have a profound and lasting effect on people – both those being mapped and those doing the mapping. As Harvey (1990) notes, "…the very act of naming geographical entities implies a power over them, most particularly over the way in which places, their inhabitants and their social functions get represented" (p. 419). He commends Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) for its demonstration of how "the identity of variegated peoples can be collapsed, shaped, and manipulated through the connotations and associations imposed upon a name by outsiders" (p. 419).

Returning to the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict, such a contest is clearly demonstrated between the "great power" map and the Ossetian counter-narrative, as already discussed above. But beyond that, there is further insight that a poststructuralist narrative analysis can provide. For example, in her book Feminist Security Studies (2011), Wibben demonstrates how the security master narrative leads to a lack of security for the non-privileged Other, for example, a member of a minority group or the poor.

The nationalist fixation on status and boundaries that fuels the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia seriously jeopardizes the lives and degrades the living conditions of those living on either side at the interface between the two political entities. These people and their situation do not appear to be a significant consideration in the common mapped narrative of either side. The conflict is portrayed at a higher, nation-state scale that makes invisible many local problems, such as lack of water or electricity, contamination with unexploded ordnance and landmines, loss of viable economic means, loss of the ability to trade or visit family or friends across the boundary, and generally being driven to stand as the front-line defenders of their "side," leading to overall safety and security problems. Creation of such a local map, though, would be considered something unique, not a standard political map for general consumption. However, such a map would surely be more useful in conveying to the world local people's narratives, which may not precisely mirror those of their higher governments.

Cartographic Legacy, Structural Violence, and Narrative Dissonance

"…maps, all maps, inevitably, unavoidably, necessarily embody their authors' prejudices, biases and partialities…" (Wood, 1992, p. 24)
"…the map is never neutral." (Harley, 1989, p. 14)

As discussed above, the Western cartographic heritage has played a strong role in how maps are typically designed and made worldwide. Pioneers such as Harley have implicated primarily negative motivations, like greed, ethnocentrism and imperialism, in why maps favor the powerful and fail the rest. However, it seems there may be other, more complex factors involved in the inability of many maps to effectively convey the true narratives of mapmakers or map commissioners.

First, the global dominance of the West-originated cartographic tradition can be viewed as a case study in structural violence. What historically was developed as a key tool of exploit turned into a global scientific standard that both wittingly and unwittingly does damage by favoring certain types of knowledge collection and presentation and marginalizing or dismissing others (Bjorn and Jones, 1987). Throughout history, some "alternate" mapmakers have tried to adapt. Craib (2000) discusses how subalterns learned to read and make maps like their conquerors in order to stake (or re-stake) indigenous claims to land and resources. As Craib notes, some even learned to craft "fugitive landscapes," conventional-looking maps designed to hide and protect their lands and people from colonizers. In the long run, though, Craib asserts that the indigenous adoption of Western maps may have done more harm than good in conveying local concerns and interests. This is in large part because the West-originated cartographic system was, until recently, largely geared towards interests, entities, and phenomena at the national scale. Thus, even when leadership or power dynamics have changed, local level concerns or dynamics have often remained obscured or even unmapped.

Second, the use of Western-style cartography is so ubiquitous and taken as the standard that it seems there can be no other way to map. As Craib (2000) notes about the Western map tradition, "The most oppressive and dangerous of all cultural artifacts may be the ones so naturalized and presumably commonsensical as to avoid critique" (p. 8). This sounds reminiscent of Galtung's (1969) comment about structural violence as being "as natural as the air around us" (p.173). This is despite the fact that oftentimes such maps are not ideal for conveying

certain types of information or geospatial perspectives. In other words, it may not always be that people are disallowed other options for expressing their narratives geospatially; they simply may not know how to do so. Field and Demaj (2012) attribute Balchin and Coleman (1966) with coining the term "graphicacy," as "an intellectual skill necessary for the communication of relationships which cannot be successfully communicated by words or mathematical notation alone" (p. 76). They note that while we learn other skills, such as mathematics and reading, we rarely learn the "medium of visual communication." Thus, many people (aside from cartographers) tend to lack the skills, creativity and confidence in map making (Liben, 2009). Second, the global standardization of Western cartography has left little attention until recently for the consideration of "alternate" mapping traditions or needs.

Interestingly, in many cases, indigenous mapmakers have created good maps, but ones that focus on interactions, relations, and the blending of space and time (Craib, 2000). This approach is in stark contra-distinction to the traditional Western map based on representational locational reference of places and things, e.g., borders and resources (Gerlach, 2014). Thus, it appears there have been other ways to map; they just have been subordinated along with their creators. One of the most significant impacts of this situation appears to be the considerable dissonance between the mapped narratives of some peoples and their written or spoken narratives. In many cases, there is no mapped narrative at all. Nevertheless, as Caquard (2011) notes from Wood (2010),

> While, historically, scientific maps have been used by nation states to assert territorial rights over indigenous communities, indigenous groups all over the world are now challenging the authority and the limits of the state borders fixed by maps through different forms of narratives and expressions (p. 139).

Thus, the incidence of counter-narrative mapping is rising. But what is to be done about it, particularly within the conflict analysis and resolution community?

Conclusion: Mapping as Narrative Intervention

To return to a quote at the beginning of this article from Cobb et al. (2013): "Narrative provides a lens that has been shown to be useful for analyzing meaning making and for designing interventions in situations of protracted and escalating conflict" (p. 3). From the conflict resolution perspective, it is good that the disadvantaged, powerless, and unmapped are finding

their cartographic voice. However, there is a question of how can conflict resolutionists harness the power of narrative in maps for designing interventions in conflicts?

Deeper discussion of the current status and ways forward in terms of "narrative-friendly" maps is beyond the scope of this article, although (hopefully) a follow-up article will delve further into this potentially quite useful area of narrative work. Cases like that of the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict stand to benefit from such cartographic narrative intervention. For example, the discord between the local versus national narratives could be addressed. One way to do this could be to provide local people the capability to map their own narratives to counter, or at least augment or refine, the national ones, and the ones superimposed by outside global powers. For example, there has been a history of informal cooperation along the boundary between Georgia and South Ossetia, although current politics has greatly problematized such cooperation. At least after the 1991-92 war, there were various efforts at cooperation. Nan (2005) notes, "Georgians and South Ossetians have cooperated on confidence building measures such as reducing armed forces in the areas, conducting joint patrols, and also engaging in mutually beneficial development initiatives" (p. 164). It appears there have been, and maybe still are, local narratives of cooperation and respect that contradict the national narratives of nationalism and mutual antagonism. In the interest of peace and security, it would be helpful to capture and leverage such narratives within mediation efforts. Cartographic narratives offer such a potential venue.

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