ED FORNIELES
C E L

21 March — 20 April 2019
Private view 20 March, 6—9pm

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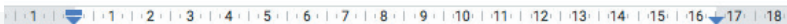
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A collaborative text between artist Ed Fornieles and independent writer and curator Tamara Hart.

Cel was an immersive role play performance that ran over 72 hours, simulating a set of hyper-aggressive patriarchal structures through means of 10 participants. Operating within a contained installation, the performance took the form of a radicalised alt-right gamer group that embarked on a program of self betterment, undertaking a radical act of self-destruction as their ultimate revenge against the world.

Appropriating ideological and symbolic structures of gamer and incel[1] culture, *Cel* largely drew on the content of 4chan and reddit to create a complex social framework that foregrounded a particularly destructive brand of mas-culinity. In employing role play tools, it served as a vehicle to explore the conceptual architecture of these patriarchal structures through first-person immersion. Participants

1 *Incels* refer to members of online communities who identify as involuntary celibates, individuals who are incapable of finding sexual or romantic partners. In contemporary discourse, incel has become synonymous with misogynist, racist, transphobic and alt-right communities. Ironically, the term 'involuntary celibate' was coined by a queer-identifying woman in 1993 on a blog to discuss her sexual inactivity and later appropriated by predominantly male communities on 4chan and Reddit.

navigated a fictional simulation of the social ecosystems in dank online spaces, nourished by a medley of existential misogyny, supportive empathy, neoliberal affirmations and nihilistic fantasies.

The key objectives of this project were to explore the ideologies that shape men who inhabit aggressive hierarchical and patriarchal structures and to create a space in which these patterns of thought and behavior might be dismantled and rethought. With these goals in mind, the performance was divided into two stages:

(1)   Survival of the fittest
The first stage was defined by the protocol *you must always have someone lower than yourself*. In this precarious environment, rules, actions and scenes directed participants to assert themselves over others at all cost, forging hierarchical structures that were continually reinforced through interactions.

(2)   Mass shooting and suicide
The second stage was defined by the act of a mass murder suicide. Two characters killed

their peers and then themselves, at which point all participants transitioned into a state of abstract play in a non-defined environment. This symbolically marked the collapse of the group's existing hierarchies, paving the way for alternative social structures to emerge.

Far from distancing himself from the value systems that underpin incel culture, Fornieles became a distinct part of them in an attempt to illuminate the logic behind such destructive processes. As a designer and player, he exploited his own internalised patriarchal values as well as those of his counterparts to understand the ideologies that contribute to such radicalised views. Rather than sympathising with these misogynist, alt-right, male groups, *Cel* proposes a mode of critical empathy to engage with them through play.

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IN THE BACK

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THE WILL TO DOMINATE

Patriarchal thinking is the central subject of investigation in *Cel*. By manifesting a deeply aggressive and hierarchical system, the performance explores the forces that sustain and perpetuate such structures. It plays out these systems immersively, allowing for their effects, both positive and negative, to be understood, felt and reimagined.

My understanding of patriarchy is based on bell hooks' notion of the will to dominate. This logic can be incredibly effective as an organising principle but has at its heart a set of human relations based on conflict over collaboration, hierarchy over shared power structures. As hooks asserts, patriarchy is not gender-specific, but rather is an ideology that permeates all types of people. On a personal level, the impact is often a sense of detachment. To function effectively within a patriarchal system, we are encouraged to strip back the emotional registers that inhibit us from manifesting a self-sufficient Father figure.

Often men can feel that to criticise patriarchy is to criticise their own individual identities. Yet, patriarchal thinking is not an individual issue, it is a collective organising principle; one so deeply embedded in our lives that its effects are often mistaken for a necessary natural state or law. Like all ideologies and patterns of behaviour, it is possible to rethink and reconfigure such structures. As men, we should commit to this course of action, not because of an external moral imperative, but because to do so will improve our relationships and lives.

It's hard to talk about why I came to *Cel* because to do so is to talk about my personal history, my relationships and and the painful realisation that certain ideas, forces and expectations

are damaging to myself and those around me, and that to move forward responsibly requires me to confront this.

This story starts at a rural state school in the south of England that at the time seemed like a battle royal in which the stronger, larger kids asserted themselves over the smaller kids. It was an environment that I personally failed to perform in and felt totally defeated by. I remember willing myself to forget what had happened. Repression became a kind of fantastic tool by which I could move forward. In part *Cel* became a confrontation with this past, with pressures that encourage brutalisation and drive us to seek self-worth through the domination over others.

In the context of *Cel*, I was able to deploy different strategies and perform myself differently. My character Eli, although often beaten physically, was able to survive by simply giving up the need for personal or social bonds. Instead, he turned to the demands of the leader and the objectives of the group to feel a sense of purpose and worth. As with many embedded in patriarchal structures, he felt detached and alone but rewarded with a misplaced sense of self-assurance and belonging.

> *To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused and the absurd.*[2]

Post-script: The white male position can often seem invisible. It is the status quo by which all else is articulated through or compared against. It is often the unstated voice of history,

2 Audrey Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You: Essays and Poems* (Silver Press, 2017).

news, facts, and authority. This allows for the male subject to retreat into a space where his own position, past, feelings, and body are lost in exchange for a comforting fiction of objectivity. Talking about this project, I will do my best to acknowledge my own position, to relate it to my own experiences and to speak from the vulnerability of my own subjective experience.[3]
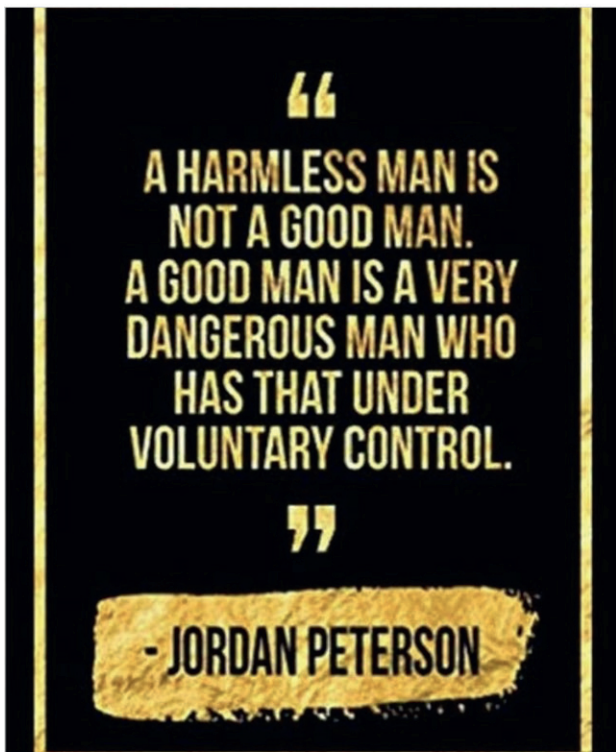

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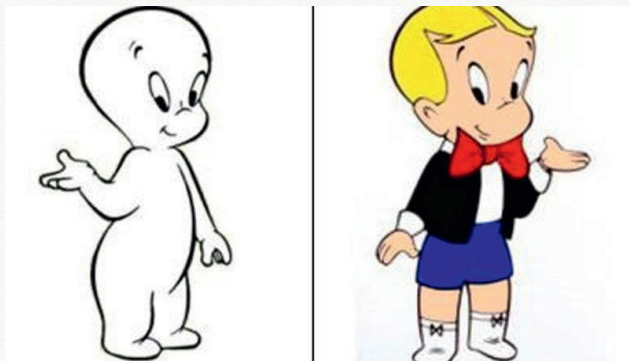
3 Sometimes something as simple as a linguistic convention, such as the use of the third person authoritative voice, contributes to a state of damaging repression, a state in which the personal register is never articulated and therefore ceases to exist.

masculinity_mastered   •••

A HARMLESS MAN IS NOT A GOOD MAN. A GOOD MAN IS A VERY DANGEROUS MAN WHO HAS THAT UNDER VOLUNTARY CONTROL.
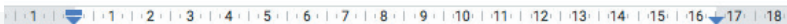
- JORDAN PETERSON

NEOCONSERVATIVE MASCULINITY

It is often assumed that gaming and 4chan communities are composed primarily of white cis men who feel themselves to be alienated, disenfranchised and unable to develop meaningful relationships. This alienation has led many to question their masculinity, looking for answers in a mix of pop-psychologists, neoreactionary imageboards, and alt-right forums.

Such platforms attempt to establish forms of male identity grounded in biological imperatives that are supposedly inescapable from male DNA. For instance, they generally draw on the belief that men who do not fit into dominant masculine archetypes are failures / an issue that must be blamed on society / a society which, in turn, must be punished.

Cel questions how to effectively communicate with these individuals who are simultaneously agents and victims of patriarchal structures. From the point of view of incels, for instance, not all men benefit from the privileges that a tyrannical patriarchy supposedly affords them. Incels are isolated from social systems, incapable of developing intimate relationships and, consequently, are often won over by a model of masculinity preached by reactionary philosophers such as psychologist Jordan Peterson. Peterson is deeply sympathetic to men who experience feelings of alienation,

depression and anxiety in the era of political correctness and feminist movements:

> *If you're made out to be a potential manifestation of rape culture, if you're part of toxic masculinity, if your competitive drive is regarded as part of a tyrannical impulse, if the heritage to which you belong is regarded as an oppressive patriarchy, then how in the world are you going to step forward with confidence and shoulder that burden?[4]*

In response to the isolation and fear experienced by these men, he assures **it's okay to be a white (cis) male!** Peterson attests that men, disenfranchised by their homogenised identity, no longer have a place in society. Their masculinity is demonised and punished at every turn. History becomes a battlefield of the oppressor [white cis men] and the oppressed [everyone else] – a constant opposition between victim and perpetrator. The war on men does not acknowledge their individual circumstances, it simply acknowledges their collective identity as white

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4 Jordan Peterson Brilliantly REACTS To Gilette Ad," January 25, 2019, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2KcQZWcIg8.

male oppressors. Peterson speaks about a deficit in the young men he encounters, who, born into a society with a lack of direction in their lives, are left floating in search of meaning. In return, he offers them a solution grounded in taking responsibility for oneself.

**Patriarchy
has no
Gender**

- Bell Hooks
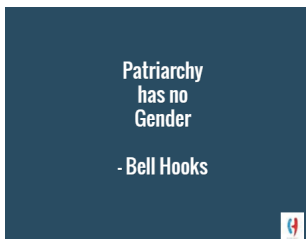
It becomes clear why men gravitate to such philosophies; it gives them validation, reassurance and purpose. Yet these philosophies embody a deep-seated resentment of femininity and societal structures, mobilizing men to combat a perceived cultural backlash against masculinity.

In a landscape where sexual freedom and political correctness are viewed as oppressive tools of the radical-left to destroy family structures and emasculate men, there must be a capitalist 'restoration of the patriarchal
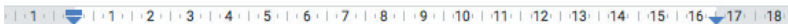
law'. If Western society is in danger of being penetrated by femininity, Peterson becomes the Father to shut its gates and to restore traditional forms of masculinity. The ultimate *neoconservative daddy*, he re-brands traditional ideologies of male identity in shiny, new, digestible packaging.

Peterson resonates with so many young men because he offers them a positive identity, imbuing a sense of meaning in their lives that is otherwise lacking. This meaning emphasises individuals taking responsibility for themselves, to 'stand up straight' and to be the masters of their own destiny. These ideas, when taken in isolation, perhaps aren't that bad, but when attached to Peterson's other philosophies culminate in a doubling down of patriarchal thinking, which does not fully address the needs of the individual. Because Peterson only tells half the story, only speaks to half the person, he leaves out what has been neglected for so long. What is needed is the creation of an emotional and empathetic language for men, the diffusion of the will to dominate and the path to full maturity of the individual.

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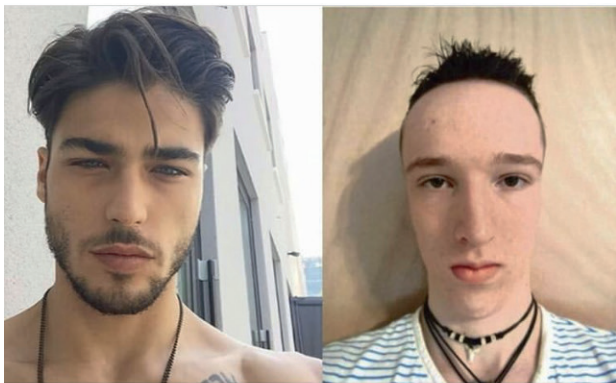

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Just Be Confident Bro!

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~~underestimate the importance of being~~

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SPECTACULAR MASS SHOOTINGS & SUICIDES

This is my war: one man war against humanity, governments and weak-minded masses of the world! No mercy for the scum of the earth! HUMANITY IS OVERRATED! It's time to put NATURAL SELECTION & SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST back on tracks![5]

Through its philosophy and structure, *Cel* interweaves black pill ideology with the phenomenon of spectacular mass shootings. A creative composite of misogyny and nihilism, black pill ideology posits that men will forever be subordinate to women, who control the world through means of sexual manipulation. Drawing on biological determinism, it asserts that certain men are predisposed to remain celibate their entire lives. This philosophy is coupled with the idolisation of mass shootings of the Stacys and Chads of the world; those who are attractive, popular and sexually active. As Stacys and Chads benefit from such biological structures and use their privilege to

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5 Pekka-Erik Auvinen's manifesto, quoted in Franco Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (London: Verso, 2015).
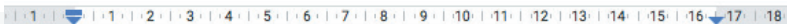
humiliate the weaker members of society, they deserve to be punished. This is generally embodied in a fantasy of incels performing mass shootings to punish society, accompanied by ideas of gory spectacles, glorious success and eternal fame.

Political theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi argues that the past fifteen years has seen an unprecedented number of mass murder suicides among young men who adopt such ideologies. He characterises this new brand of mass murder as a 'suicidal form of the Neoliberal will to win.'[6] In the late capitalist era, neoliberalism has foregrounded competition and self-regulation as essential laws of survival. Drawing on the logic of social darwinism, it posits that, in the social realm, as in the economic realm, the way to win is through evolution: survival of the fittest / the weak die and the strong live. In the case of these young male mass murders, however, it is clear that they will not win. Rather, in their competition against Stacys and Chads, they will always lose. Berardi explains,

6 Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide.*

> *The mass murderer is someone who believes in the right of the fittest and the strongest to win in the social game, but he also knows or senses that he is not the fittest nor the strongest. So he opts for the only possible act of retaliation and self-assertion: to kill and be killed.*[7]

Isolated, bullied, and alienated from society, incels know that they are not winners. Instead, as Berardi asserts, they decide to be winners for a moment: to kill, to win, to die. *Cel* follows the narrative of such members of society in their mission to win. Just as 1999 Columbine shooter Eric Harris wore a t-shirt with the slogan NATURAL SELECTION, participants of *Cel* sport such neoliberal affirmations on their clothing, post them to online forums and incorporate them into their nihilistic fantasies of death and glory. Once they rightfully punish the Stacys and Chads of the world, who will play their heroic characters in a Tarantino film? Ordering AK-47's off Amazon, murdering enemies in video games, raping female blow-up dolls: it's all preparation for the final scene. In the end, two members carry out the ultimate act of self-asserted

7 Ibid.

winning: they kill. Suicide becomes a way to escape their impending failure once they have achieved this success. When the only social categories that matter are winner and loser, their murderous suicide becomes a 'metaphorical message of pure social Darwinism.'[8]
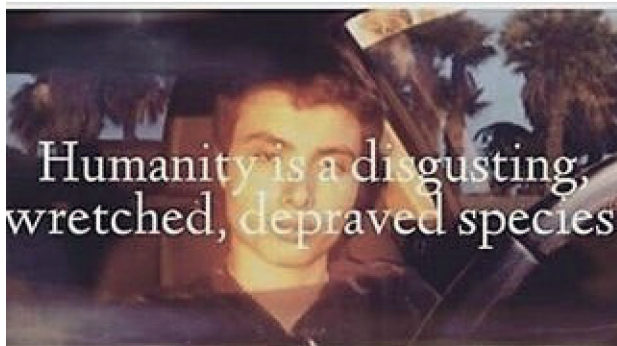

8 Ibid.

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Humanity is a disgusting, wretched, depraved species.

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REALITY IS JUST BAD LARP DESIGN

How do we understand such horrific communities outside of conceptualising behaviour through theory? Role play is an important tool to this end. Between the realms of fictional and real, players are able to embody alternative social positions while drawing from and speaking to their own experiences. Calling upon the tradition of nordic LARP, we can create a structure for reflection through immersion. The Nordic concept of ***bleed*** is important in understanding this:

> ***Bleed-in*** occurs when a player's emotional state, personal or political views affect the character they are inhabiting.

> ***Bleed-out*** occurs when a character's inner state affects the player. This can happen during or after immersive play.

> ***Memetic bleed*** describes the process by which a meme — a unit of culture — carries an idea, behaviour, thought, belief, ethical conviction, or similar cognitive construct between player and character and vice versa. In addition, it describes the process by which memeplexes (complex structures of memes) are transmitted between players and characters that are part of a group, scene, or subculture.[9]

9 Ibid.

To a degree, we will always bring elements of ourselves wittingly or unwittingly to our characters. Conversely, elements of our characters will bleed into our own lives. In this sense, a deep emotional understanding can be gained through play, a different way of being, a lived empathy that has the capacity to affect our sense of self. We will never experience the world as incels do, as first-person experiences are inherently inaccessible to others. Yet, in *Cel* we get a glimpse into a co-created space that allows us to understand the patterns of thought and behaviour that underpin otherwise radically inaccessible communities, and which, rendered visible, might be more easily be identified in the workings of our collective lives.

So how do we begin feeling and understanding through role play? Enacting alternative structures, mindsets, and attitudes can allow us to incorporate these into real world scenarios and interactions. It can allow us to build languages with others, by which we can communicate our shared experiences and motivations. *Cel* proposes an alternative language to communicate individual and collective experiences of patriarchal structures, building a space in which men can be vulnerable and experience self-forgiveness. It opens up a space whereby society is not pushed forward by rewards for winning or

domination. If we design reality as we design LARP, a complex of alternative social structures will emerge to those that currently exist.

CONCLUSION:

[...] then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognise our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self negation, and with the numbness which so often feels like the only alternative in our society. '[10]

I strongly believe that it is important to manifest a hyper-masculine, anti social group not because it is peculiar but conversely because it speaks directly to a patriarchal system that many of us are embedded in. In replicating such extreme structures it renders them visible, so that we might confront and understand what underpins them. This might allow us to dismantle a patriarchal system not from an outer critical perspective but internally, from a position motivated by an understanding of the pain, pleasures and contradictions of our own positions.

To bring about the dismantling of patriarchal structures is going to be hard, it will require various different strategies at different times and in different spaces. *Cel* is a personal attempt to confront the effects of patriarchal thinking from my own perspective, from how I see these forces at play in my own life and in the lives of those who surround me. I have done my best to be considerate, both to those who participated, the community that was represented and the groups of people who find themselves in conflict with such groups and attitudes on a regular basis.

It can be argued that little is accomplished in simulating alt-right, hyper-masculine communities. Indeed, in many ways, *Cel*

10 Ibid.

effectively replicates the structures that it seeks to dismantle. However, the key value of *Cel* lies in its ability to open new terrains of dialogue. Employing LARP as a tool and methodology to explore the structures inherent in radicalised communities, it provides an alternative world view. The remapping of masculinity in abstract and uncharted terrains may not immediately change wider socio-cultural structures, but it has the potential to spill over into ideologies and into our lived experiences of the world.

NOTES ON SAFETY:
GAME MECHANICS

For *Cel* to work it was important for participants to develop a deep sense of trust and safety. To accomplish this, character development and workshops were organised in the weeks prior to immersion where actions, scenes and sequences were play-tested. Through the collective development of game mechanics, we were able to ensure the safety of the group.

You are responsible for yourself is a core element of LARP safety. If you are not okay with something you must communicate it to others. This is especially important in extreme role play scenarios, where participants often find themselves performing violent acts. For instance, in *Cel* participants consistently performed physically aggressive acts, pulling violent pranks to assert their power over others. Each participant held the responsibility to monitor their own wellbeing and was encouraged to use the following mechanics to ensure safe play:

Define limits. In workshops prior to immersion, limits of participants were tested to map out how far each individual was willing to go. For example, we experimented with actions such as burning wax on skin so that when it occurred in play it was fully understood. (wax surprisingly doesn't hurt)

Ok symbol. The Ok symbol was a non-verbal communication tool used to indicate that someone was alright and that the intensity of play could be increased. For instance,

in *Cel* I was waterboarded and I made the Ok symbol so that others knew I was fine and that they could continue with confidence.

Break. When someone said break, the role play continued but participants slowed down its level of intensity. For example, if I had said break while I was being waterboarded, participants would have decreased their level of aggression, or perhaps moved on to a different activity.

Cut. When someone said cut play stopped immediately.

A second game mechanic that ensured safety was the debrief session conducted directly after the 72 hours of play. Debrief is an incredibly important part of role play. Following immersive play, a debrief session gives participants the chance to talk about their experiences, to express their feelings and to begin to make sense of what happened. It is an opportunity to talk about safety and bleed, and to share one's individual experience of the collective scenarios that occured in play.

In *Cel* our debrief was based on a buddy system, so that participants could communicate with one another at a more intimate level. After our initial debrief session, we continued to discuss our experiences over the following months. The effects of such an experience are often felt in waves. After the initial impact, there is a slow unfolding as you begin to make sense of your experiences and integrate those lessons into your own personal life. These insights also supplied the structure of the film you are about to watch, a film that can only ever be an interpretation of ten deeply personal experiences.
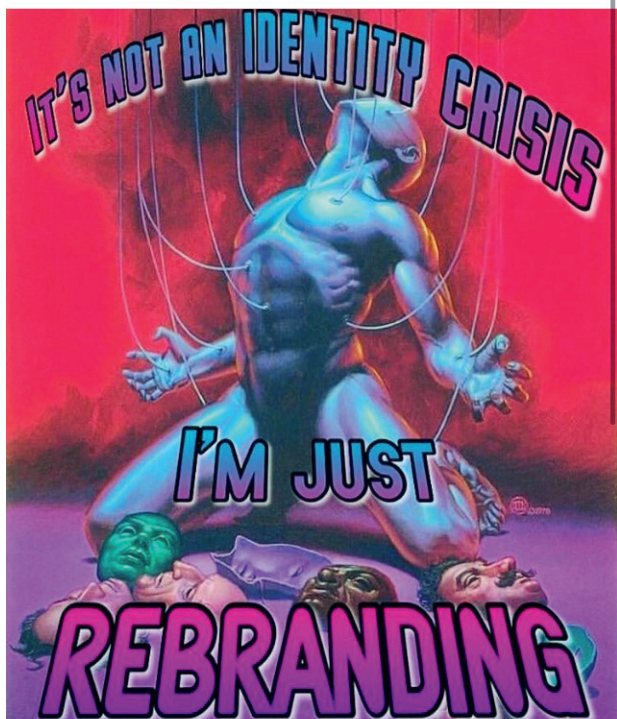
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DEEP THANKS