

“See Ya Real Soon”: Destaging Fantasy in COVID-Era Disney World

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ABSTRACT

Disney Realism is generally effective at erasing present consciousness, but the specific nature and implications of Covid prevent WDW from discouraging guest awareness of it. The interjection of present real-world problems/solutions ruptures fantasy. These barriers came in the form of distance, emptiness, and opacity. The social distancing guide markings on the ground, the shielding, the closed spaces, and the open backstage areas all created visible invisible barriers to the Disney park promise of the spectacular, the immersive, and the nostalgic.

Keywords: Walt Disney World, Covid, Tourism, Immersion, Fantasy, Theme park attractions, Theme park characters, Staged and themed spaces

“Nos vemos muy pronto”: Destruyendo la fantasía en el Disney World de la era del Covid

RESUMEN

El realismo de Disney es generalmente efectivo para borrar la conciencia presente, pero la naturaleza específica y las implicaciones de Covid evitan que WDW desaliente a los huéspedes a que se den cuenta. La interjección de problemas/soluciones actuales del mundo real rompe la fantasía. Estas barreras llegaron en forma de distancia, vacío y opacidad. Las marcas de guía de distanciamiento social en el suelo, el

blindaje, los espacios cerrados y las áreas abiertas detrás del escenario crearon barreras visibles e invisibles para la promesa del parque de Disney de lo espectacular, lo inmersivo y lo nostálgico.

Palabras Clave: Walt Disney World, Covid, Turismo, Inmersión, Fantasía, Atracciones de parques temáticos, Personajes de parques temáticos, Espacios escénicos y temáticos

“再见，欢迎再来！”：新冠疫情时代下迪斯尼世界的幻想破灭

摘要

迪士尼现实主义通常可以有效地消除当前意识，但新冠疫情的特定性质和影响却阻止了华特迪士尼世界（WDW）消除游客对新冠疫情的感知。当前的现实世界问题/解决方案打破了幻想。这些障碍的形式包括保持社交距离、场地空旷和模糊性。地面上的保持社交距离标记、屏障、空间关闭、以及开放的后台区域都为迪士尼乐园在壮观、身临其境和怀旧方面的承诺制造了可见的无形障碍。

关键词：华特迪士尼世界，新冠疫情，旅游业，沉浸感，幻想，主题公园景点，主题公园角色，营造的主题空间

The appeal of Disney parks' version of sentimental utopia is so strong and the effect of the utopian enclave so consuming that the parks are perceived by patrons as spatially as well as temporally removed from everyday reality. The parks are true enclaves of the imaginary where cares of the outside world are temporarily put aside and forgotten.

—Meyrav Koren-Kuik, “Desiring the Tangible: Disneyland, Fandom, and Spatial Immersion”

I found that this time, understandably, there was no escaping reality—even in “the most magical place on Earth.”

—Tarah Chieffi, Insider.com, Opinion piece, Mar 6, 2021

Disney parks center the tourist or guest experience on lived fantasy. The theme parks stage lands, rides, attractions, and atmosphere to embody and expand Disney intellectual properties (IP). The theming and staging enhance the idea of that what appears in the parks, and what visitors can do/see, is fantasy come to life. Matthew Wilson Smith frames the Imagineering term “Disney Realism” as the parks “aiming to unify spectacle and spectator into a single, idealized reality. ... this reality is located in a mythic time that encourages nostalgia, hope, and fantasy while discouraging present consciousness” (Smith 268). Fans of Disney/Marvel/Star Wars/Pixar can explore and indulge in IP-related stage shows, character meet ups, immersive play and rides, and staged atmosphere. The theme parks even have their own

fan following, with recurrent visitors who Disney Bound¹ as a “Tower of Terror” bellhop or sing all the lyrics to “A Great, Big, Beautiful Tomorrow” on The Carousel of Progress. Disney parks, in the last few decades especially, cater to guests experiencing this Disney Realism—the spectacular, the immersive, and the nostalgic, sometimes all at once.

From late 2020 until late 2021 at Walt Disney World (WDW), all three often seemed literally and figuratively out of reach because COVID was/is part of collective present consciousness. The important reality of health measures ensuring public safety, like masking and social distancing, could not reconcile with the theatrical and fantastical realisms built into an immersive theme park. Disney Realism is generally effective at erasing present consciousness, but the specific nature and implications of COVID prevent WDW from discouraging guest awareness of it. The COVID protocols are necessary, and the parks still advocate on websites and in on-site signage/directives for tourists to follow safety measures. COVID required logistical changes to the park that could not be pushed into the background. Walt Disney World reopened after the initial COVID shutdown earlier than its global Disney-park counterparts and implemented several health and safety measures to redirect visitors, protect cast members,² and try to maintain some business during the first waves of COVID.³ Most COVID protocols were relatively

1 Bounding is a fan phenomenon: “To Disney Bound is to go into the parks in twenty-first century attire that reflects the coloring, patterns, or general makeup of a Disney character. . . . Bounders visit and interact in the Disney environment as tourists, not as the characters, but they do pay homage by using clothing to reflect their interest in or admiration for a character” (Lantz, 1343-44).

2 Disney refers to its employees as “cast members.”

3 Many protocols and precautions were largely gone by December 2021. Visitors can still see some evidence of where line markers were or some

short-lived or ephemeral, with stage and fireworks shows running again and social distancing markers now merely discolorations on the ground. The parks, like mass collective imagination, want COVID reminders to be something past-tense or temporary or historical, or that never happened in the first place. Disney often maneuvers around complex socio-political and environmental concerns, or other nebulous problems by offering guests immersion into fantasy and away from present consciousness. COVID safety protocols directly influenced or interfered with immersive theming.

Part of the issue was COVID’s newness and novelty. The COVID protocols were/are disruptive because the parks did not have time to sanitize and fold into the fabric of their fantasy worlds, so these elements appear on top of or oppositional to the aesthetic theming and theatricality throughout. The collective trauma or disruption of COVID is ongoing and complex, and cultural juggernauts like the Disney company crafted several solutions to continue producing content and making profits, all while giving fans new and nostalgic experiences. The ways in which WDW attempted to evoke Disney Realism in a pandemic offer insight into how much staging and performance feeds lived fantasy in the theme parks. Disney Imagineering defines park development as “utopian in nature,” which “carefully program[s] out all the negative, unwanted elements and program[s] in all the positive elements” (qtd. in Wallace 255). This idealistic approach to theme park creation does not factor in real-life, global events disrupting every crafted, staged element in the parks.⁴

rides still have some shielding, but by and large, most shows are open, and barriers are down.

4 Considering a global event like 9/11, there were substantial changes in WDW security that were highly visible and disruptive at the time but that have become less salient to tourists because cultures are desensi-

Masks, social distancing, changes to character meets, or closing attractions happen inside the parks in very visible ways.

The parks offer guidelines for lived fantasy, in what Jennifer A. Kokai and Tom Robson call “thematic invitations” (Kokai and Robson 19). In their discussion of COVID-era Disney park-going, Kokai and Robson posit that without invitations, “the tourist is no longer being offered a relationship, a relationship with a costumed character it is their prized turn to meet, within the dramaturgy of the shows themselves, or with the narrated structured day of a theme park visit” (Kokai and Robson 19). In the attempts to offer smaller experiences in place of character interaction/stage shows/spectacular experiences, the WDW parks⁵ created instead feelings of obfuscation, which rescind the invitations or block the narratives parks offer guests. Following Smith’s framing of Disney Realism, the interjection of present real-world problems/solutions ruptures “mythic time” and dilutes “nostalgia, hope, and fantasy.” These barriers came in the form of distance, emptiness, and opacity. The social distancing guide markings on the ground, the shielding, the closed spaces, and the open backstage areas all created visible invisible barriers to the Disney theme park promise of the spectacular, the immersive, and the nostalgic.

DISNEY REALNESS: THEMED SPACES AND LIVED NARRATIVES

COVID-era Disney destabilized the standard practice of staging through multi-sensory scenic elements and performance

tized to post-9/11 security measures. In comparison to events like 9/11, COVID is still unique. A security checkpoint and bag search is limited to just outside the park, and security within the park can be hidden in various ways.

- 5 Walt Disney World is the only park I visited in 2021, going twice (May and December), so I am only discussing the COVID experiences there.

with live actors/workers. In quickly implementing COVID measures, Disney destaged areas of the parks by eliminating performances and character experiences and disrupting visual narratives. Destaging interrupts any attempts at authenticity and realism in themed spaces. Scott A. Lukas, cultural anthropologist and theme park theorist, details the importance of sensory experiences and staged elements for visitors when he states, “In the theme park and the themed casino, a new form of consumer authenticity is created. . . . As the patron picks up on sensory cues, [they are] taken with the performative dimensions of the theme and the sense that things seem real or authentic because *they are happening*” (“Theming as” 81). His emphasized point is that guests accept all experiences as authentic because themed spaces actually craft / stage realness, even if the realness is based in fiction. That is to say, WDW relies on mythic, fictitious, or fantastical source material in the parks to actualize or materialize story-worlds fans and guests can occupy. Immersive elements provide realness to these narratives. Disney, as a contemporary company in the business of historical and fictional fantasy, struggles with how to reimagine immediate problems in its themed spaces.

The swiftness of COVID was a hinderance to the way WDW crafts and maintains fantasy illusions and attempts to off-set cultural critique. Disney Imagineers actively engage with *some* global concerns or avoid *some* criticism through interactive and immersive attractions. To fold environmental concerns into their sea and animal parks, the Disney corporation fictionalizes historically colonized parts of the world and scripts these spaces with a peaceful, conservationist message. Animal Kingdom’s Kilimanjaro Safaris, for example, offers guests the premise that the Harambe Wildlife Reserve will guide them through an African savannah. Cast members and the line queue emphasize the concept of being in Haram-

be, a fictionalized African community, and what work that community does to preserve African wildlife.⁶ Much of the park, including Harambe, informs guests about conservation practices Disney does and how people can actively participate in global preservation. Animal Kingdom offers Harambe as an immersive Africanized space and hires African-born cast members and artists to offer “authenticity” to the land. The aesthetics, architecture, food, and soundscapes create an atmosphere of what guests expect of contemporary Africa. What the park avoids is any real narrative understanding or engagement with damning colonial histories, destructive global economics, etc. in favor of theming. Essentially, as Lukas states, “the emphasis in theming is representation, or how something is said, not what is said” (“Theming as” 81). Disney visually presents unique elements like African décor crafted from rubber and bicycle parts but does not explain *why* those recycled materials would be used in a neocolonial developing nation.

A similar practice happens when the parks attempt to downplay racism through “representation” with a character like Princess Tiana. The filmmakers held to the problematic notion that Tiana’s race was not as key to her character as her personality or drive was, or essentially colorblind characterization. As Sarah E. Turner explains, “Color-blind racism denies difference based on skin color by simply refusing to see color; therefore, Tiana is ‘just a princess,’ not a *black* princess” (Turner 84). As with Harambe, Disney avoids factual trauma with Tiana. The movie does not engage the idea of Tiana’s friendly/rich/white friends, racial tension in the Jim Crow South, etc. and the main villain is a Black voodoo priest. The

6 The original end to the safari famously showed animatronic poached animals to highlight the importance of conservation, but the scenes were deemed too graphic and cut before opening.

framing of Tiana as one of many princesses meant Disney could avoid direct engagement with racial concerns when convenient, but also market her as the first Black princess, arguably profiting off a fictionalized Black female body. This concept is not only troubling and tired, but Tiana’s Blackness is a fundamental part of her selfhood for many fans, and her popularity and race cannot be understated in terms of importance.⁷ Tiana immersive meet and greets in the parks create both a space of empowerment and racism.⁸ Tiana never actually gets to be just a princess even if originally created through what Turner calls a “lens of color-blind ideology” (Turner 91). The presence of Tiana and Harambe Village speak to how WDW erase everyday reality and craft fantasies where discussions of history, trauma, and global concerns do not fit the narratives.

COVID restrictions disrupted these narratives and the ability of the parks to immerse visitors into assumed “ideology-free” utopias, following Koren-Kuik (150).⁹ WDW removed live performances and character meets, which help establish and maintain narrative immersion. Lukas provides context for theming and immersion in six distinct categories: “Architecture, Material Culture and Design, Narrative, Technology, Performance, Guest Role/dive” (“Introduction” 5). All theme elements blend or work together to stage authenticity and encourage guests to embody the reality of the themed

7 As a Black character Disney property, her narrative served as a means of half-addressing/half-avoiding Splash Mountain after George Floyd’s murder with Disney announcing a ride overhaul to create Tiana’s Bayou Adventure.

8 Cast members have reflected on guest encounters when playing Tiana in meet and greets.

9 Assumed of course because the cultural standard set up in the Disney parks tends towards a heteronormative middle-class privileging European colonial narrative.

space. While Harambe Village still had the visual markers of a conservation-centric Africa, lived fantasy elements such as streetmospheres and outside performances were missing.¹⁰ The Tam Tam Drummers of Harambe, “impressive musicians in *authentic* dress,” set the tone of the village by calling guests to dance and perform with them (“Tam Tam Drummers,” emphasis mine). WDW tells guests via the website that the drummers are authentic before they arrive and therefore set up the idea that Hamabre is authentic because real African citizens perform there. This premise feeds the guest role—“forms of phenomenology, psychology, existential state, and identity”—as visitors enter an immersive, though imagined, Africa (“Introduction” 4). The Drummers’ absence during early COVID meant that live human interactions which convey Disney narratives was missing, and part of Disney guest identity/state was disrupted.

In *Fan Sites: Film Tourism and Contemporary Fandom*, Abby S. Waysdorf discusses the relationship between physical space and spatial transmedia in terms of Universal Studios’ Wizarding World of Harry Potter, which shares ideological DNA with Disney in immersive theming. She suggests that theme parks “are specific places in which fantasies, mythologies, and cultural icons can be enacted and played with” (Waysdorf 90). Embodiment and play are inherently performative aspects of fan culture and theme parks like WDW offer guests a set stage for these fan performances. Theme parks use Lukas’s grouping of Architecture, Material Culture and Design, Narrative, Technology, Performance, Guest Role/drive to

10 Streetmospheres is a portmanteau of street and atmosphere that Disney uses to describe performances guests could walk by or happen upon. The term was directly used for Old Hollywood performers in Disney-MGM Studios, but the company now uses it across the parks for a variety of performances and interactions.

establish full sensory sites. Many areas of the parks blend visual, aural, tactile, and olfactory stagecraft to encourage narrative play that helps guests have real sensory responses and feel real emotional investment. Waysdorf considers themed spaces to craft story-worlds, and “the story-world becomes immersive because it is inhabitable—as detailed as the ‘real world’ and shared with others as a sort of imaginary habitus” (92). Realness, in this context, is habitable space and WDW offers fans a variety of lived/habitable IP-related areas to explore. COVID and safety implementations made WDW spaces feel distant, empty, and opaque. These barriers meant the parks felt less inhabitable, and therefore less real.

ABSENCE AND STAGECRAFT: ARIEL'S GROTTO

Deep in the back of Fantasyland, in WDW's Magic Kingdom, visitors can find the princess-mermaid Ariel. The park website advertises the Ariel Meet and Greet as a genuine interaction with a real-life fictional fantasy: “*Venture into a seaside grotto, where you'll find Ariel among her treasures. She has gadgets and gizmos aplenty, and she's always happy to make new friends—especially human ones*” (“Meet Ariel at her Grotto,” emphasis mine). Of course, meeting Ariel is real, in that it is an in-person interaction in the parks. But what the website implies is that visitors accept their narrative of a real grotto, with a real mermaid who wants more friends—human ones. This is typical of how Disney sells and narrates experiences inside the parks, as fundamentally real and true: Visitors meet Ariel-as-mermaid¹¹ in her personal space; the website does not say a “meet a white female cast member who fits the costume and wig in a staging area that looks like the animated movie.” The general conceit in the parks is that

11 Guests can meet land/walking Ariel at some events and locations. The Grotto is mermaid underwater Ariel.

theatricality and staging do not exist; the adult tourist/fan accepts these experiences as real, and both guests and cast members ignore the obvious signs of their theatrical, staged nature. The pre-COVID in-park character meets feed that invitation for immersive play as visitors can touch and talk with the characters.

In fact, characters cease to be “characters,” as that implies their fictive nature, but instead become real, *nonfictive* beings. Rebecca Williams notes this transformation, stating, “the theme park worker behind the mask or in the costume becomes erased whilst the character they are playing is the object of fannish adoration and celebrity reverence” (Williams 25-26). Adult fans in particular default to nonfictive relationships with characters on Instagram, and Ariel is just one example of how themed space and social media blend to commemorate meeting a real Disney princess.¹² People extend the dramatic staging and narratives inherent to meet and greets in the themed space of the Grotto to their social media. Twin users and Orlando residents, Kaitlyn and Skylar Dickerson, posted ten Grotto meet up pictures on their shared account @thenottwintwins to celebrate Ariel’s birthday and stated “Happy Birthday Ariel!!!! 🎉🎊 enjoy a few throwback pictures of us with her over the years!” (Kaitlyn & Skylar Dickerson). The pictures show a wide range of years and group members, with the main uniting factor being Ariel in her Grotto. It is apparent the cast members playing Ariel changes, but that does not matter because Ariel the live/d character is consistent.

User @mistthemermaid, a New York mermaid performer highlights that she and Ariel have shared physicality and

12 All Instagram posts referenced use Instagram’s locator feature and posts list “Ariel’s Grotto in the New Fantasyland” as the location.

experiences: “Remember that time we met Ariel, Caylis?! She was just the best, especially when we talked about our scales shifting into legs when we went on land!” (Mist the Mermaid). The conceit here is that Mist the Mermaid and Ariel share both human and mermaid abilities. Improv from the cast member means shared experience and makes *Ariel* “just the best,” but not the cast member for improvising, reinforcing Williams’ assertion of erasure. The posters accept the premise that they met the mermaid Ariel in her home and the images reinforce that idea, showing guests hugging, goofing, and relating to finned Ariel. Both posts also bring Ariel into their real lives. The Dickersons celebrate Ariel’s birthday and show how often they interact. Mist, a professional mermaid performer, insists that she and Ariel share that trait, or at least both have fins. Ariel is both someone to meet in the parks and someone to fold into their lives outside the parks. The nature of mythic time and Disney Realism allow for this slippage. What happens to a princess-mermaid in a cave-like grotto during COVID? Like all character meets, she disappeared, awkwardly and overtly as the real-world crisis took over areas of the parks.

During 2021, the four WDW parks reallocated space, shut down experiences, and limited movement for safety, and in doing so, disrupted much of the cultivated Disney park narratives for visitors. In May 2021, there was no Grotto. As a means of social distancing, the Little Mermaid ride used Ariel’s Grotto for a COVID back exit in order to spread out and separate guests (FIG. 1). This extended exit for guests covered the meet-and-greet area with pinned up cloth tarps. Not very fancy ones at that. This is unusual because Disney parks typically craft and stage work projects in a way to obscure park updates and maintenance and give guests something dynamic or themed in workspaces. These tarps are not that.



FIG. 1: The Character Meet and Greet stage, Ariel's Grotto, covered to make a back exit for the ride Under the Sea - Journey of the Little Mermaid, May 2021 (photo by author)

They are obvious, and very obviously covering up a previously used space. They indicate to guests that they are missing something. The tarps are a visible barrier to all guests, implying that this is an unused or unusable space. Any empty space could conceivably be said to be “unused.” The problem with the Grotto is worse than that. The space was originally

specifically crafted as a show space, a theatrical staging for Ariel visits. Its architecture was literally designed to focus audience attention at its staging area. With nothing in that area, the Imagineering is working against itself. The covering draws guest attention to the very thing the parks do not want people to look at, because looking at that absence only causes guests to ask why it is empty, allowing the present consciousness of COVID to intrude and rupture the fantasy.

The absence in the Grotto is less apparent for first-time or non-frequent visitors. Park fans know that Ariel is absent, as the Instagram posts make clear. Hints of her presence exist everywhere in this space, in the soundscape of Ariel’s sea-birds and waves and in the stage design of the shell lights and the sand/shell concrete flooring. For park goers in the know, Ariel is felt but invisible. It is fundamentally a “Little Mermaid” space, but without the titular character to make new human friends, it is just a hallway with some pinned up cloths. Even the immersive elements of hallway stage craft are disrupted by the tarps. The parks needed the additional exit space, and protected guests and cast members by eliminating the character meet, but the result of a hasty fix is guests seeing multiple indications of missing experiences. For recurring and first-time park goers, these spaces created a sensation of “not like you remember” or “something is off” throughout the WDW parks.

BACKSTAGE VISIBILITY: RISE OF THE RESISTANCE

In May 2021, small and large disruptions appeared everywhere in the parks, from the empty stages and the Voices of America singing outside to a total lack of international cast members in the World Showcase at EPCOT and WDW’s most narratively immersive and fantastical ride having the entire plot interrupted. Star Wars: Rise of the Resistance

plays into embodied fan/guest experiences in the story-world of the Star Wars franchise. Staging and theatrical elements make the queue line feel like an enclosed rebel base and before the physical ride starts, multiple performances immerse visitors into the story. Holograms and videos of Rey and Finn give specific duties to guests, along with a non-film character named Beck who informs passengers on his shuttle that they are rebel forces right before the shuttle is captured. Following that, First Order forces detain guests on an imperial ship that looks as impressive as scenes from Star Wars films. Rebels help guests escape to vehicles and that, technically, starts the ride. The pre-ride parts of the attraction return to Lukas's key elements of themed immersion: "Architecture, Material Culture and Design, Narrative, Technology, Performance, Guest Role/drive" ("Introduction" 5). The cast members, movie narratives, and ride mechanics working together to give visitors stakes, objectives, goals, and identity, all markings of performative authenticity, leading to a climax of intense immersion and spectacle of being held captive on a star destroyer. The verisimilitude of the ride defines the guest experience through markers of reality such as living human performers improvising with guests and highly themed stage spaces of the shuttle and star destroyer bay.

In her discussions of the Wizarding World at Universal parks, Waysdorf assesses the importance of these converging elements, or staging. She states, "The visitor knows that they are not actually in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, but there is no more 'real' version, and it is a physical experience with all the cultural markers of reality. This makes it a convincing pretense, one that matches the existing imagination with physical sensation" (Waysdorf 100-101). Guests, especially fans of Star Wars, accept on one level that the ride is fiction, but they indulge the performances and immersion because the attrac-

tion is marked with realism. Guests pair imagination with physical interaction to fully invest in the story-world. Adjustments made for COVID bypassed many of these elements, including the key plot point of the shuttle ride and capture, and disrupted this immersion. The line of guests did not become rebel fighters totally surrounded by the meticulously sculpted and designed Galaxy’s Edge in Hollywood Studios, but instead were just tourists entering the literal backstage, an employee hallway that looked like an office building, before entering the star destroyer. Similar edits to immersive narratives happened in rides throughout WDW.¹³

The backstage area of Rise of the Resistance was jarring and broke with the aims of the ride, the immersion of a shuttle capture. The guest experience, or frontstage, works to highlight the alienness, the adventure, and the energy of being a rebel in Star Wars. The ride itself is situated in Galaxy’s Edge/Black Spire Outpost/Batuu, an area of the parks that is one of the most seamlessly immersive part of WDW. There is a sense of intentional staged authenticity in the ride, or following Waysdorf, no more real version of Star Wars exists outside this themed space. Tourism scholars have for decades relied on theatrical framing to discuss tourist spaces, with Erving Goffman, Dean MacCannell, and John Urry all framing the tourist quest for authentic experiences through frontstage and backstage spaces. David Weaver states that frontstage is, in terms of tourist sociology, “manipulated and

13 The Haunted Mansion includes a scene when guests cram into a stretching room where they first hear the voice of the Ghost Host. The new Run-Away Railroad usually has a scene with a movie playing before Goofy crashes through a wall. In May 2021, guests just walked through a big hole without explanation. The stretching room provides guests with a moment of terror and darkness before the ride starts and the missing scene in Run-Away Railroad sets up the narrative premise of the entire ride.

managed to accommodate tourists,” and the backstage is the everyday reality. But these spaces are not always entirely separate (Weaver 154). Weaver explains that for MacCannell, in many tourist locations, “frontstages [are] decorated with artifacts from the backstage” to ascribe a kind of authenticity for the tourists, so they feel like they are getting some kind of true experience (Weaver 154). True experiences in Disney center on fantasy and hyper-reality.

Sue Beeton suggests theme parks also work towards staged authenticity, and in fact “issues of authenticity and reality become blurred and at times inverted in the theme park” (Beeton 187). Disney, like many locations, even sells the backstage. Guests can pay for special tours to see some of the “magic and secrets” in the parks. But access to those spaces is mediated and controlled. Those tours do not include an employee hallway or a plainly wrapped mermaid grotto that disrupt highly prescribed fantasy narratives. The context of encountering the backstage on a special tour is different. Guests pay extra money to seek out the backstage. In a ride like Rise of the Resistance, guests work hard to maintain their immersion.¹⁴ COVID divergent paths present a backstage counter narrative, where guests who usually indulge in the Disney illusion have to confront a lack of Imagineering in the tarp-covered Grotto or a windowless cast member hallway. For the sake of expediency, the hope of temporariness, and the safety of people in the park, the key element of the Disney park experience, the lived fantasy and narrative invitations to embody fandom, were shelved. The parks, quick-

14 Even in the meticulously immersive Black Spire Outpost, guests would have to try *really* hard to ignore the thousands of other tourists around. In fact, in some ways, the more convincingly immersive these spaces become, the more dissonant the tourist’s presence in them becomes. The number-one enemy of tourist immersion is the tourist.

ly, reframed highly personal immersive interactions. If some event or attraction was not totally shut down, then it was roped off and set away from guests. These distanced experiences, some highly controlled and some totally unscripted, hinted at promised fantasy without giving guests the opportunity to live in it.

DISTANCE: CHARACTER SIGHTINGS

Walking into Magic Kingdom in May 2021, guests saw mascot members of *The Sensational Six*¹⁵ and cast members welcoming guests at Magic Kingdom, but they were set above and away from guests in the roped-off second story of the Train Station, with masked cast members below blocking guest access to stairs, creating an additional barrier. Guests saw, heard, and waved to them all, but were unable to get close for pictures or hugs or any level of one-on-one acknowledgment and interaction. The parks included some atmosphere/streetmosphere that recurring guests would recognize but that had been restructured for distant and mobile performances. The barbershop quartet, the Dapper Dans, rode a streetcar while singing. Characters appeared on balconies or in walking groups, but all were moving, surrounded/protected by masked cast members, and kept socially distanced from each other and guests. For Waysdorf, themed spaces need interactivity: “Other people create the sense that the Wizarding World is a lively and living space . . . To complete the sense of immersion, the space must be occupied” (Waysdorf 103). Occupation and collaboration are key elements to embodied fantasy in the parks, and that was unachievable as

15 The Sensational Six are core characters from classic Disney animation: Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Daisy Duck, Goofy, and Pluto. Prior to Daisy’s inclusion, they were referred to as *The Fabulous Five*.

guests could not physically interact with characters and characters could not interact with each other.

Character meet and greets are a big part of immersive guest narratives. The cast members create for visitors a brief moment of interactive, improvised fantasy. COVID protocols precluded all such meeting and greeting. Instead, the parks implemented character sightings of various kinds, some of which were in a way accidental. The parks deliberately created character sightings, but there was no schedule or planned structure for guests.¹⁶ With meet and greets, visitors plan their trip around waiting and meeting specific characters they are fans of. It is a deliberate part of the park visit for many guests. In the COVID character sightings, characters just appeared at a distance in any available locations conducive to distancing, and if guests noticed, they might wave or take pictures, meaning “the character visit, a usually highly scripted private highlight of Disney park trips, was reduced to a rushed, impersonal photograph obtained by those passing by” (Kokai and Robson 17). The characters themselves benefit from the meet and greet locations, allowing cast members to evoke the world of the films or shows and offer guests glimpses into characters’ private lives. As Kokai and Robson explain, “Characters were removed from any contextual theming or presentation, ripped out of carefully constructed environments that typically help construct interpretation” (Kokai and Robson 17). The insertion of characters into non-contextual spaces meant guests were unclear on how or unmotivated to interact with characters in their story-world or other imaginative ways.

In terms of verisimilitude, sightings are more “realistic” than a meet-and-greet, which has many elements that feel staged

16 As COVID protocols continued, some character sightings did get schedules posted to the Disney World website.

and structured. Darth Vader marching somewhere with his storm troopers seems more realistic than Darth Vader hanging out to snap some pics with guests. The character sightings share a lot in common with the illusory “naturalism” of viewing animals in a zoo. However, following Lukas, the performativity of character meets creates authentic guest experiences. He states, “Actors, workers, and performers in these venues use a variety of tools—costume, rhetoric and acting, and behavior—to better immerse guests” (“Introduction” 4). Seeing characters at a distances confines performance to only costume and behavior, eliminating rhetoric and acting. Distance offers naturalism, but not authenticity.

In Kokai and Robson’s framing of character sightings, duration and distance are significant factors. They highlight a rushed and passing experience of selfies with guests in the foreground and characters in the background. EPCOT character sightings included a princess carriage, drawn by a large Clydesdale, carrying most of the princesses of World Showcase. In May 2021, guests could spot Belle, Aurora, Jasmine, and Mulan together. They appeared, with no announced schedule or timetable to help guests catch the moment; encountering a princess carriage was a happenstance rather than a scheduled event. The carriage was slow enough for pictures but no stopping and no talking. The masked cast members created visible-invisible barriers, as they often did, and formed a path, moved guests, and established a socially distanced bubble for the carriage. For a princess, riding in a horse-drawn carriage is a more extreme and compelling version of theatrical staging, in part because of the realness of the horse itself—live animals impart an immediacy to the realism of the staging. However, the lived fantasy and immersion are missing because of the lack of interaction. The princesses are too distant and moving too quickly to create a

sustained moment of participatory fandom. Instead of deliberately seeking out princesses to meet, guests had to be lucky enough to not be in a line for a ride and be in that part of World Showcase at the right time.

All the princesses together on the carriage further muddles the story-worlds the parks work to create. In her discussions of food and fandom, Williams suggests that sense of place is key to fan engagement, and a sense of place is partly missing in the carriage ride. Meet and greets are themed spaces, which, like themed food experiences, further “fans’ immersion in a world” in part through “access, authenticity, and the auratic” (Williams 26). Now the Disney Princesses often share space in consumer goods, such as toy sets, and in the parks, in a show like *Fantasmic!* The princesses appear together in specific all-park events, including special dining, parades, and stage shows. All-park events remind guests of the Big Fantasy, a communal Disney identity. Meet and greets do not overtly promote that communalism but focus more on immersion and participation. In EPCOT, and films, *Mulan* and *Belle* do not exist in the same place and time, but rather have homes in their corresponding parts of the World Showcase. The distinctiveness of the spaces and individual guest access create embodied fan experiences.

What makes the princess carriage sighting feel even more out of place or different is the COVID markers. As for the princesses, they were obscured and distant versions of themselves. They waved, each from their own vinyl protected carriage row. Guest awareness of COVID leaks into all encounters in the park. Seeing something different like the princess carriage with vinyl sheeting, guests cannot help but attribute it to COVID. Pre-2020, seeing princesses riding around in a carriage would not necessarily feel out of place or so prob-

lematic. WDW can institute safety protocols to mitigate the spread of the virus in the parks, but it’s a lot harder to filter out guest awareness of the virus. The sighting lacked interactive qualities of a meet and greet, which occurs in a themed/staged space that reflects the character. It lacks the personal interaction and the indulgence of fantastic-reality.

On a more random and surreal level of distance, the character Joy (Fig. 3) from Pixar’s *Inside Out* was just running around a fenced off field near “Journey into the Imagination.” She was doing her own imagined play. She pretended to paint with a stick, she did ballet, she laughed to herself. It was a bizarre solo performance piece that included genuine expressions of fun and play. Unlike the princesses, who were contained within a moving stage, Joy was just let loose in a fenced area. Also, unlike the princesses, she did not wave or acknowledge guests. The character sighting here was as if guests were peeping into her personal backyard or imagination.¹⁷ As Figure 3 demonstrates, few of the people nearby noticed Joy, which indicates the specific kinds of theatrical realism that WDW guests are accustomed to engaging with. While guests want something immersive and theatrically real, they also, paradoxically, want something bounded and structured. It is not a princess in a carriage coming through at random intervals that is less real, but rather it is the wrong kind of real or the wrong kind of theatre. Most Disney park fans only seek novelty and open-endedness in very specific ways structured by Imagineering and Disney institutional memory. Mostly what they want is structure and familiarity.

17 Joy was not the only character to have free rein of this area. Winnie the Pooh also ran around this space with a butterfly net. Whereas Joy was an abstraction of her character, Winnie was an infantilization, with very toddler-like energy and playfulness as part of the butterfly catching.



FIG. 2: Joy at play, with unknown guest not noticing the character sighting, May 2021 (photo by author)

Finding Joy in the field, moving through her own space and time was an interesting experiment in character sightings. Joy did not really act like her character in the film. That version of Joy is mission-orientated, memory-centric, and emotionally complex. Park Character Joy is a mascot character, meaning no moveable face and mouth, so she does not speak, so in all character meets, guests lost a sense of her film identity.

In this field, she was even more abstract. Character Sighting Joy was totally focused on imaginative play, without any attention or engagement with the reality of guests and theming around her. There was certainly a level of intimacy with the idea that guests were all voyeurs watching this imagined cartoon representation of the concept Joy doing ballet in the grass. However, in terms of the Disney theme park aims, Joy was very far away and not really engaged with guests. She was on some level immersive, but the short fence created a clear visible barrier, and along with the invisible barrier created by her absorption in her imaginary play, she became a kind of abstraction, something many guests did not register at all. Like everything in the COVID WDW parks, Joy was out of reach, non-interactive, and a less personal version of what she used to be at the meet and greets.

OPACITY: THEMED LINES

Seeing characters on street cars or carriages at a distance is not actually a new event in the parks; it was just rare to see as the *only* character experience. The least unusual element of the character sightings for many guests, fifteen months into COVID, was the clear plastic sheets between princesses. Clear plastic barriers, with all the implications of “look, but don’t touch” was routine by May 2021 for people in daily activities like going into a bank, doctor’s office, or grocery store. Clear plastic barriers offer up the idea of visibility and access, but the reality is a more obscured and blurrier version of an experience or interaction. As accessible to all park goers as WDW tries to be, the parks rely heavily on visual narratives to heighten the theatricality or immersion. Queues and pre-ride spaces reinforce narrative realness and give guests room to invest in the story-worlds. Being materially surrounded by theming creates “embodied, multi-sensu-

ous and technologized performances through which people are actively involved in the world, imaginatively and physically” (qtd. in Williams 13). COVID visuals override active world embodiment on the part of guests. Inside buildings, each ride line also had clear plastic up, and depending on the ride vehicle, clear plastic attached to boats and cars to protect riders from each other’s germs. The visible-invisible barrier of opacity is especially noticeable in the line and ride experience, or what scholar Tom Robson quipped on a Magic Kingdom visit as the cattle-chute experience when talking about Big Thunder Mountain’s plexiglass line. The plastic tries to perform an impossibly contradictory function of being visible enough that guests feel comforted/safe but also invisible because WDW does not want guests thinking about COVID while in the parks.

Outdoor lines offered a very abstract but obvious barrier in the social distance markings on the ground (see Figure 3). These complicated pathways marked routes in which the parks limited guest physicality and interaction within the staged environments. The pathways themselves were not always clear, which is decidedly un-Disney. The Disney parks incorporate crowd management into the aesthetic design and immersive theming, and Imagineers study guest patterns to best control traffic flow, guest movement, and park narratives. Quick COVID changes such as these extended ad hoc pathway stickers did not encourage clarity or control. At the WDW parks in May 2021, about half of guests were still standing on the designated spots and half were meandering around the directional pathways. A lot of arrows and signage stating “please wait here” attempted to physically define the space, the lines, and the guests. To accommodate social distancing, the lines became much longer and occupied space that the parks typically use for thematic or dynamic environ-

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mental experiences. Immersive worlds like Toy Story Land and Galaxy’s Edge had the entire *mise en scène* disrupted, or at least distorted, by the ground markings.



FIG. 3: The extended COVID line path outside Spaceship Earth, May 2021 (photo by author)

The line stickers in Figure 3 appeared throughout all the parks, regardless of theming. These markings, reminiscent of those in everyday spaces such as government buildings, class-

rooms, and restaurants, create unavoidable physical reminders of the pandemic and pull the usually fantastical space of WDW into the unpleasant concerns of the world outside the parks. Guests, at that moment in COVID, were just recently accustomed to wearing masks and standing away from people.¹⁸ A new factor, which many guests had less experience with despite COVID-adjusted lifestyles, was the use of barriers in small, indoor spaces. Indoor lines in WDW typically use a tightly folded switchback formation to save space and to conceal the actual length of the line, but this format means guests repeatedly pass each other in very close proximity. For safety purposes, the clear plastic liners extended the height of the switchback railing, turning previously open-aired lines into closed spaces. This effect created the sensation of physically penning guests in within indoor lines and further disrupted the themed space and narrative.

By lacking visual clarity, the plastic barriers created the opposite-than-intended effect. Cleanliness, or the appearance of it, is historically a Walt Disney principle, and important to the WDW aesthetic pre-COVID. During the pandemic, plastic, face-level surfaces focus inadvertently more on germs and contamination. The plastic barriers were trying to achieve two mutually exclusive goals *vis-à-vis* their (in)visibility: they need to be visible in the sense that Disney wants concerned park goers to know that the company is taking responsible precautions, but they also need to be invisible so that guests are not reminded of why they need to take precautions. These barriers are contradictory in both function *and* purpose. The character sightings at a distance might be ignorable or more forgettable, but they are unambiguously visible, and theme parks are a highly visual medium. Additionally, all the charac-

18 These practices have greatly diminished, to the point that masking was rare in the parks by summer 2022 despite rising COVID cases.

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ter sightings were outside, away from ride and attraction lines, so they were open-aired happenings. Within show/ride buildings, staging becomes central to themed narrative and entertainment distraction, so any disruption to the staging means guest experiences shift away from what Williams calls “bodily sensations associated with immersion” (Williams 12).



FIG. 4: The plexiglass switchback for the Frozen Ever After ride, May 2021 (photo by author)

Figure 4, the Frozen Ever After switchback queue, clarifies just how out of place the plastic barriers were/are,¹⁹ and the reflecting lights and layers of glass obscure the highly defined environment. The staging of the space is reflective of Arendelle, the kingdom in *Frozen*, and includes simulation of natural stone and wood Scandinavian architecture. The old queue dividers were posts with a sculpted, somewhat old-fashioned look, connected by lengths of chain. These features were made of material objects that could conceivably exist within the culture and period the theming evokes. The new barriers created dissonance with that aesthetic. EPCOT put in new barriers which are clearly industrially made and lack the softer, organic shapes of the staged architecture reflected in the original barriers, stonework, and barrels. In a place where every element of the design was created with giving guests the *Frozen* experience, the plastic diluted the quality of the design work and therefore the immersion. Switchbacks and winding lines are common, but that is why the surrounding areas are so highly staged, to help entertain and distract. The aesthetically dissonant barriers, and the muddled visuals they create, serve as a reminder of being penned in and confined, emphasizing the waiting and all the elements that look, for want of a better word, more magical without the barrier.

EMPTINESS: INDIANA JONES EPIC STUNT SPECTACULAR AND PROJECT TOMORROW

The plastic dividers are an obvious example of a visible-invisible barrier: they are clear and therefore trying to be invisible, but draw attention to their presence, making them visi-

19 This paper uses were/are because in December 2021, many of these indoor line barriers were still in place, and given the unpredictable, still-developing nature of COVID, it is uncertain what modifications remain or may be reinstated at any given time for the foreseeable future.

ble, and of course they are literally a barrier. They hopefully block COVID transmission, and they block sightlines, which in turn block/impede visitors’ ability to engage in the WDW fantasy. The social distancing markings work in a similar way. The parks rerouted and reformed pathways and open areas and emptied out theatrical stages altogether. Throughout the parks, fully immersive, themed spaces became either areas guests could not occupy or unthemed rest areas where people could spread out. These empty spaces, invisible in the sense that they are outdoor, open-aired parts of the parks, draw attention to themselves because they are so still and quiet, lacking the usual lively entertainment.

Emptiness was perhaps the most abstract phenomenon, and not something typically associated with theme park spaces. In a place that is always full of visitors, WDW has a space issue, in that there few empty, cool, or shaded areas. Outside spaces are staged to fulfill the demands of narrative immersion while also maintaining guest traffic flow, so the park design forgoes an abundance of benches and seating in favor of wide, themed walkways or special theatrical detailing, such as the speakers, lighting, and alien plants in Animal Kingdom’s Pandora: World of Avatar. Parks also want and need guests to move. Guests are consumers, and park design encourages consuming as much Disney realism and merchandise as possible. The best way to stay cool in the Florida parks is to stay moving or go to events, stores, or eateries, where there is often shade and fans or air conditioning. During first wave COVID protocols, however, the stage shows stopped, which created a lot of unused empty stages and audience seating. Stage spaces like Hollywood Studios’ Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular stopped all showings and became socially distanced seating areas for guests, euphemistically named “relaxation stations” (see Fig. 5). Relaxing in the

parks is almost a misnomer, as guests run from ride to ride or from scheduled event to event. The relaxation station sign, on an unthemed plastic sandwich board, is a stark present consciousness reminder negating the Indiana Jones staging. The carefully selected typeface, rope-wrapped beams and poles, and the camouflaged canopy enhance guest narrative immersion when seeing the stunt show. Without the stunt show, and with the COVID reminders, the theatrical staging highlights what is absent.

The Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular was just unused performance space, unlit and unoccupied, with markings of what once was there. Outside the theatre, there was a huge sign that read “Production Schedule,” usually listing daily show times. In May 2021, the sign had a permanent “Production Schedule: No Performances Today” listing. A similar permanent absence was visible just to the left of the auditorium, with an Indiana Jones Stunt Show store that said “Sorry, we’re closed.” Sitting in this area meant processing a COVID reality instead of experiencing or crafting a Disney reality. The empty stage space in the moment acted as a quiet break from the density of a theme park day, with all its consistent movement and sensory overload. A break like that is rare and pleasant in the middle of a Disney park trip. However, a major element of these areas was unused theatricality. The auditorium itself was awash with stage equipment, stage manager booth, trap doors, and empty vehicles. The emptiness foregrounds the impossibility of indulging in fantasy narratives and mythic time without theatricality. All around the relaxation station were reminders of what was not there: unfulfilled spectacle with literally no spectacular stunts, unfulfilled immersion in the action, and unfulfilled nostalgia for the film. This idea of going unfulfilled is what Disney was fighting against, and arguably losing to, in the shifts to limiting experiences.



FIG. 5: A Relaxation Station in Hollywood Studios, formerly the seating area for The Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular, May 2021 (photo by author)

The emptiness in the Indiana Jones theatre space is something visitors must seek out to experience. The stage area, like others in the WDW parks, is tucked away for traffic flow. A theatrical stage, like the shutdown Fantasmic! or Festival of the Lion King or the stunt show, needs a huge spatial footprint to produce shows and house audiences, so they are

more readily cordoned off or ignorable than other areas of emptiness in the COVID-adjusted parks. The park redesign also required active discouragement of immersion and play for the operational attractions and rides, not just shuttering stage shows. The carefully crafted and themed spaces within WDW ride lines are key to entertaining, fascinating, and immersing visitors who are waiting for rides. The interactivity helps with the mythic time that crafts ride narratives and distracts from the reality of long lines, hot weather, and crowded park areas. Space is most at a premium in ride lines, and the use of highly sculpted staging and narrative playthings help maximize guest distraction.

Concern over lack of line entertainment, in something like Magic Kingdom's *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* ride lines, might seem a bit precious, but the lack of access and empty spaces highlight unfulfillment—precisely the quality that WDW world seeks to avoid. In the line up to the *Winnie the Pooh* ride, there are many activities to interact with. The target audience for the ride skews toward younger children, so having entertainment helps with impatience. But again, interactivity leads to narrative play and fantasy realism. Pulling up Rabbit's garden or spreading the honey on the digital honey wall heightens the immersion into Pooh's world, the spectacle of the experience,²⁰ and the nostalgia for Milne's characters, as guests tramp through the

20 There is a large multi-sided digital wall in the queue, filled with the image of dripping honey. Set in the pages of a book as a kind of living storybook, the wall is tactical and visceral. The look of the digital honey is goopy and thick, and it is very pleasing to move around by touching the screen. The more guests wipe the screens, the more of the book reveals itself, with images of Pooh and friends. Guests in fact must wipe the screens to reveal the imagery under the honey. It is a high tech and engaging part of the queue line, but communal with a lot of hands touching the screens at the same time.

Hundred Acre Woods. Instead of interactivity, these spaces were roped off and empty. Guests moved through these interactive staged spaces, with touchable, playable elements, all with signs that read “FOR YOUR SAFETY NOT AVAILABLE.” The signage, like the Relaxation Station sign, shifted focus from a magical illusion to COVID reality. Also, like the Relaxation Station, the sign implies not touching is for the benefit of guests. The sign indicates that Disney as a company is keeping guests healthy as well as keeping parks open. As guests did not, because they could not, enter and embody the Hundred Acre Woods, guests instead notice the actual lack of bodies at play and the emptiness around play structures.

Emptiness might be the most intuitive, and certainly the most apparent, visible-invisible barrier, as the Project Tomorrow figures (Fig. 6, 7) clarify. Everyone walked directly to the exit after EPCOT’s Spaceship Earth rather than exploring around Project Tomorrow. There was no direct messaging about what guests could and could not do after the ride, outside of cast members’ general gesture for people to move off the ride and into the large room full of imaginary ideas for the future that encompasses Project Tomorrow. In a room traditionally full of sounds, screens, and interactive stations, everything was quiet and empty. It was implied that everyone should walk out. Stepping out of line to photograph the area was perfectly acceptable, but just not something to do, so very few people did. In part, guests did not stop because there was nothing to photograph. All the interactive screens were blank, eliminating play. The “Energy” part of the room, consisting of large digital shuffle boards, was being used as storage for chairs. The emptiness was palpable; standing around looking at blank screens and social distance seating felt intrusive. To stay was to break with some unstated COVID social

convention within the parks, the visible line of people exiting and invisible lack of anyone staying and exploring. It was a lonely, uninviting place, which is the opposite of how people imagine WDW and how Disney advertises its parks.



FIG. 6: Project Tomorrow exiting Spaceship Earth,
May 2021 (photo by author)

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FIG. 7: Project Tomorrow exiting Spaceship Earth, May 2021 (photo by author)

CONCLUSION: UNFULFILLED NARRATIVES

The implications of the COVID changes mean the Disney parks, as a place marketed to wish fulfillment and fantasy becoming reality, was not really providing that experience during 2021. The COVID protocols translated to limitations, “cannots” and “for your safety, do nots,” in place of open ex-

ploration and purchase of fantasy. In May 2021, guests could not just walk into stores; there were cast members doing head counts. Guests could not sit and watch a parade because there were no parades. They could not talk with and hug their favorite characters or enroll kids in the Jedi training academy. Again, the COVID safety protocols set in place helped the health of employees and guests. They were important restructurings that also created constant reminders of real-world traumas, crises, and problems. Returning to Koren-Kuik's idea in the epigraph, if "parks are true enclaves of the imaginary where cares of the outside world are temporarily put aside and forgotten," then the COVID additions and changes mean the outside world cannot be put aside. For some fans and guests, park going is central to their engagement with popular culture or immersion with intellectual property, and they invest time, energy, and money into these enclaves of the imaginary. The reminders and signals of the outside world meant an inability for guests to find mythic time or fulfill themed invitations.

In attempting to give some level of exhibition, fantasy, and magic during COVID, Disney inadvertently gave audiences reminders of all these cannots, leading to a lack of immersive, spectacular, or nostalgic fulfillment. Consider the cavalcades. The WDW Prep School website states "cavalcades are kind of like a mini parade. They typically have one float and some characters" ("Complete Guide"). During the day in Magic Kingdom, masked cast members cleared small areas of Main Street and Frontierland for these small cavalcades like Tinkerbell riding a treasure chest, which is one float from previous parades. Tinkerbell alone on a treasure chest is a hint of the spectacular, with the size and artistry of the float. It is a reminder that Tinkerbell, like other mainstay characters, is part of the Magic Kingdom fantasy. But it is mostly a remind-

er of previous experiences. This treasure chest float is actually part of many Magic Kingdom parades, including one part of the huge (and hugely popular) Mickey’s Not So Scary Halloween Boo to You parade. Her isolation, as one parade float on its own, highlights what’s missing: huge shows, a variety of entertainments, and Tinkerbell flying over Main Street during fireworks. Here she is, in broad daylight, a piece of nostalgia for what’s currently missing in the parks.

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