

Free Will vs. Determinism in *The Matrix*: Metanarrative Approaches to Philosophical Dilemmas

Osric G. Falkenrath¹

¹ Independent Researcher, Scotland

Correspondence: Osric G. Falkenrath, Independent Researcher, Scotland.

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Abstract

The Matrix, directed by the Wachowskis, is widely recognized as a landmark in both cinematic history and philosophical discourse. The film delves deeply into the timeless debate between free will and determinism, using its dystopian narrative to explore the constraints of human agency within a technologically controlled universe. Through its depiction of the Matrix as a deterministic system where human choices are manipulated and controlled, the film raises profound questions about the nature of reality, perception, and autonomy. This paper examines Neo's journey from determinism to the assertion of free will, analyzing the philosophical implications of his evolution and the broader metanarrative that *The Matrix* constructs. By engaging with concepts from existentialism, postmodernism, and classical philosophy, *The Matrix* challenges viewers to reconsider their understanding of freedom, control, and the potential for human agency in a world increasingly mediated by technology. The film's layered narrative and symbolic imagery serve as a metanarrative that critiques not only the characters' perceptions of reality but also the audience's, making *The Matrix* a powerful commentary on the human condition and the philosophical dilemmas that define it.

Keywords: *The Matrix*, free will, determinism

1. Introduction

The 1999 film *The Matrix*, directed by the Wachowskis, has become a significant cultural and philosophical touchstone, especially in discussions surrounding the perennial debate between free will and determinism. At its heart, the film is not merely a science fiction thriller but a deeply philosophical text that explores the nature of human existence, reality, and the possibility of agency within a seemingly predetermined system. Set in a dystopian world where human beings unknowingly live in a simulated reality controlled by intelligent machines, *The Matrix* serves as an allegory for

the tension between free will and determinism. It presents a world where reality itself is an illusion, meticulously crafted to maintain control over the human population, thereby questioning the very possibility of free agency.

The film's narrative structure and character development are heavily laden with philosophical undertones, drawing on a range of ideas from existentialism, postmodernism, and classical metaphysics. The central premise of humans being unknowingly trapped in a simulated world designed to keep them in bondage is a direct challenge to the concept of free will. If our perceptions, choices, and actions

are all determined by an external, controlling force, then the very notion of free will comes into question. This mirrors the philosophical debate between determinism—the idea that every event, including human action, is determined by preceding events in accordance with the natural laws—and the concept of free will, which posits that humans have the capacity to make genuine choices independent of such determinism.

The Matrix invites viewers to consider the implications of living in a world where reality is not what it seems. The film's portrayal of the Matrix as a virtual prison raises profound questions about the nature of reality and our ability to know and understand it. This, in turn, brings to the fore the philosophical concept of epistemological determinism, where our knowledge and understanding are shaped—or perhaps limited—by the very framework of the reality we inhabit. The characters in the film, particularly Neo, Morpheus, and the Oracle, embody different aspects of the philosophical debate, representing varying degrees of awareness and acceptance of the deterministic nature of their reality.

Neo's journey throughout the film is emblematic of the struggle between accepting a deterministic universe and seeking out genuine agency. Initially, Neo, like the rest of humanity, is unaware of the deterministic forces that control his life. His awakening to the truth of the Matrix parallels the philosophical journey from ignorance to enlightenment—a process that is fraught with existential angst and the realization that what one believed to be true is, in fact, an illusion. This awakening is a pivotal moment in the narrative, as it forces both Neo and the audience to confront the possibility that free will may be nothing more than a comforting illusion in a world governed by deterministic forces.

In this context, *The Matrix* functions as a metanarrative that not only explores the philosophical implications of free will versus determinism but also critiques the very nature of storytelling and reality. The film blurs the lines between fiction and reality, asking the viewer to question not only the world of the characters but also the nature of their own reality. By doing so, it raises critical questions about the possibility of true knowledge, the limits of human agency, and the extent to which our lives are determined by forces beyond our control.

Through its complex narrative, rich symbolism, and philosophical depth, *The Matrix* challenges its audience to reconsider their understanding of free will and determinism, making it a powerful commentary on the human condition. The film's exploration of these themes resonates with the works of philosophers such as René Descartes, who questioned the nature of reality, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who explored the concept of will and the possibility of transcending determinism. In this way, *The Matrix* serves not only as a piece of entertainment but also as a profound philosophical text that continues to provoke thought and debate about some of the most fundamental questions of human existence.

2. The Matrix as a Deterministic World

In the deterministic world of *The Matrix*, human existence is entirely scripted by a sophisticated computer program that defines reality itself. This world, crafted by intelligent machines, symbolizes the ultimate deterministic system, where every aspect of human life, from thoughts to actions, is governed by a preordained set of rules embedded within the Matrix's code. The notion of determinism in this context is not merely philosophical but also technological, as the Matrix represents a deterministic universe designed with precision to control and subdue the human population.

The Matrix itself can be seen as a metaphor for the deterministic philosophies that argue all events, including human actions, are the inevitable results of preceding causes. This mirrors the classical determinist view, such as that articulated by philosophers like Pierre-Simon Laplace, who posited that if one knew the position and momentum of every particle in the universe, one could predict the future with absolute certainty. In the world of *The Matrix*, the “particles” are lines of code, and the “universe” is the virtual reality in which humans are unknowingly trapped. The deterministic nature of the Matrix reflects a closed system where the outcome of every action is already encoded in the fabric of its digital reality.

Neo, the protagonist, embodies this deterministic paradigm at the beginning of the narrative. His life, like that of all individuals trapped within the Matrix, is seemingly predetermined by the system's code. He follows a path laid out for him, responding to stimuli

and making choices that, unbeknownst to him, have already been accounted for by the program. This aligns with the philosophical stance that free will is an illusion—a perspective rooted in determinism, which holds that every decision we make is the result of prior causes that are themselves the outcome of a chain of prior causes, extending back indefinitely.

The deterministic universe of the Matrix is further reinforced by the role of the Agents, particularly Agent Smith, who represent the enforcers of this predetermined order. These entities act as the guardians of the system, ensuring that the rules of the Matrix are adhered to and that any anomalies, such as Neo's growing awareness, are swiftly neutralized. The Agents' ability to possess any individual within the Matrix and their seemingly invincible nature underscore the extent to which the deterministic system controls every aspect of the simulated world. This omnipresence of the Agents highlights the lack of genuine autonomy within the Matrix, reinforcing the idea that within this system, free will is not only constrained but effectively non-existent.

The Architect, introduced in the sequels to *The Matrix*, personifies the deterministic nature of the Matrix at a higher level. As the creator of the Matrix, the Architect reveals that Neo's very existence as "The One" is itself a function of the system—a carefully calculated anomaly that has occurred multiple times across different iterations of the Matrix. This revelation shatters the notion of Neo as a free agent and instead places him firmly within the deterministic framework of the Matrix. The Architect's cold, mathematical approach to creation reflects the deterministic idea that everything, including supposed acts of rebellion, is already determined and accounted for within the system's design.

This deterministic outlook is further explored through the concept of cycles and recurrence within the Matrix. The existence of multiple versions of the Matrix, each with its own iteration of "The One," suggests a cyclical determinism, where history and events are doomed to repeat themselves within a closed system. This idea resonates with the concept of eternal return in Nietzschean philosophy, where events recur in an infinite loop, and any sense of progression or genuine change is an illusion. In the world of *The Matrix*, this cyclical determinism is embodied in the Architect's

revelation and the repeated cycles of destruction and renewal that the Matrix undergoes.

Yet, despite this overarching deterministic structure, the film does not entirely dismiss the notion of free will. Neo's journey, particularly his growing awareness and eventual transcendence of the Matrix's rules, challenges the deterministic order. However, within the context of this section, it is crucial to recognize that *The Matrix* primarily establishes a world where free will is heavily constrained by the deterministic nature of the system. The film thus serves as a commentary on the tension between determinism and free will, questioning the extent to which our actions are truly our own or merely the result of a complex, predetermined system.

The Matrix presents a world where determinism reigns supreme, encapsulated within the very fabric of the simulated reality that entraps humanity. The Matrix itself serves as a metaphor for a deterministic universe, where every action, thought, and decision is preordained by an underlying code. The characters, particularly Neo, initially navigate this deterministic landscape, embodying the struggle between accepting a predetermined fate and seeking out the possibility of genuine agency. Through this exploration, *The Matrix* delves deep into the philosophical debate surrounding free will and determinism, offering a rich and complex narrative that invites viewers to question the nature of reality and their own autonomy within it.

3. The Illusion of Choice

The concept of the illusion of choice in *The Matrix* serves as one of the most compelling critiques of the idea that humans possess true free will within a deterministic framework. This theme is deeply interwoven into the narrative structure of the film, particularly in the scenes that explore the psychological and philosophical implications of choice, as exemplified in Neo's journey. The iconic scene where Neo is presented with the red pill and the blue pill by Morpheus is often interpreted as a quintessential moment of free will. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that this choice, much like others throughout the film, is heavily influenced, if not predetermined, by a complex web of manipulations and circumstances.

At face value, the choice between the red pill, which offers the truth and an escape from the

Matrix, and the blue pill, which allows Neo to remain in blissful ignorance, appears to embody the essence of free will. Neo seems to be making a conscious decision between two distinct paths, each with its own set of consequences. However, the narrative leading up to this moment suggests that Neo's choice is not entirely free. His decision is shaped by a series of events orchestrated by Morpheus and the other rebels, who have meticulously guided Neo to this point. From the initial contact through the computer screen to the series of encounters that make Neo question his reality, every step is designed to lead Neo towards the red pill. This orchestration aligns with the deterministic philosophy, where what seems like a free choice is, in reality, the culmination of a predetermined sequence of events.

Furthermore, the character of the Oracle plays a pivotal role in reinforcing the illusion of choice within the film. The Oracle, who presents herself as a prophet, possesses knowledge of future events, which implies that these events are already determined. Her interactions with Neo are particularly telling. For instance, when she tells Neo that he is not "The One" and later suggests that he has already made the choice to save Morpheus, she is not offering insight into possible futures but rather confirming that certain outcomes are inevitable. The Oracle's foresight suggests that the choices Neo believes he is making are not truly his own but are instead preordained by the deterministic fabric of the Matrix.

The Oracle's role as a seer who can predict the future raises significant questions about the very possibility of free will in the world of *The Matrix*. If the future is already known, and the Oracle's predictions always come to pass, then the notion of free will becomes suspect. This concept aligns with the philosophical idea that if the future can be predicted with certainty, then it must be determined by the present and the past, leaving no room for free will. In this sense, the Oracle's prophecies serve as a narrative device that blurs the line between choice and predestination, suggesting that what the characters perceive as free will is, in fact, an illusion.

The illusion of choice in *The Matrix* can be seen as a broader commentary on the human condition, reflecting the deterministic arguments of philosophers such as Baruch Spinoza, who argued that human beings are part of a deterministic natural order and that our sense of

free will is an illusion created by our ignorance of the causes that govern our actions. In the film, the Matrix itself can be viewed as a metaphor for the deterministic universe, where the choices available to individuals are confined within the parameters set by an external controlling force. The characters' perception of free will is shaped by their lack of awareness of the true nature of their reality, much like Spinoza's assertion that humans believe they are free because they are conscious of their actions but unaware of the causes that determine those actions.

This deterministic interpretation is further emphasized in the conversation between Neo and the Architect in *The Matrix Reloaded*. The Architect reveals that Neo's journey, including his perceived choices, has been meticulously planned as part of a recurring cycle within the Matrix. Each iteration of the Matrix has produced a "One" like Neo, and each has made similar choices, leading to the same outcome. This revelation not only undermines the notion of Neo as a free agent but also suggests that the very concept of choice is a controlled variable within the system. The Architect's cold, logical explanation reinforces the idea that the illusion of choice is a necessary component of the Matrix's design, serving to maintain the illusion of free will while ensuring that the system remains in control.

Ultimately, the illusion of choice in *The Matrix* serves as a critical examination of the limits of free will within a deterministic framework. The film suggests that while characters like Neo may perceive themselves as making free choices, these choices are heavily influenced, if not outright determined, by forces beyond their control. The narrative challenges the audience to question the reality of their own choices and the extent to which they are truly free or merely following a path laid out by a deterministic system. In this way, *The Matrix* transcends its status as a science fiction film, offering a profound philosophical exploration of the nature of choice, freedom, and control in a world that may be more deterministic than we are willing to acknowledge.

4. Neo's Journey: From Determinism to Free Will

Neo's journey from determinism to the realization of free will is one of the most compelling and philosophically rich aspects of *The Matrix* trilogy. At the outset, Neo is depicted

as a character deeply embedded within the deterministic structure of the Matrix, a system that dictates every facet of human existence. However, as the narrative unfolds, Neo's path illustrates a gradual awakening to his potential for agency and self-determination, culminating in a journey that challenges the very nature of the deterministic universe in which he resides.

Initially, Neo is portrayed as an ordinary individual, unaware of the deterministic forces that control his life. His awakening begins with a growing sense of dissatisfaction and the feeling that there is something fundamentally wrong with his reality—a sentiment that reflects the existentialist notion of alienation in a deterministic world. This sense of alienation is a critical turning point in Neo's journey, marking the beginning of his quest for truth and autonomy. His decision to take the red pill, while seemingly a free choice, is deeply influenced by his burgeoning awareness of the artificiality of his world and the manipulations of those guiding him, such as Morpheus and the Oracle. This moment can be interpreted as the first step in Neo's transition from a passive participant in a deterministic system to an active agent seeking to assert his free will.

As Neo becomes more aware of the true nature of the Matrix, his journey begins to embody the existentialist struggle for authenticity and freedom. Existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger argue that individuals must confront the constraints imposed by their circumstances to realize their own potential for freedom. Neo's increasing ability to manipulate the Matrix—bending its rules and defying its physical laws—symbolizes his growing recognition of his capacity to transcend the deterministic constraints of his environment. His realization that the Matrix is not an immutable reality but a malleable construct represents a critical shift in his understanding of his agency. This awakening reflects the existentialist idea that while individuals may exist within a deterministic framework, they can still assert their will and define their own existence through conscious choice and action.

Neo's journey is further complicated by his encounters with the Oracle, who represents a paradoxical blend of determinism and free will. The Oracle's prophecies often seem to reinforce the deterministic nature of the Matrix, as she accurately predicts future events. However,

these predictions also serve to guide Neo towards a deeper understanding of his own agency. For instance, the Oracle's declaration that Neo must choose between saving Morpheus and his own life forces him to confront the nature of choice and consequence. By choosing to save Morpheus, Neo begins to exercise his free will in defiance of what appears to be a predetermined outcome. This decision is a pivotal moment in Neo's journey, marking a departure from passive acceptance of fate to an active engagement in shaping his own destiny.

The climax of Neo's journey occurs in his confrontation with the Architect, the creator of the Matrix. The Architect reveals that Neo's rebellion is not an unforeseen anomaly but rather an anticipated part of the system's cyclical design. This revelation initially seems to undermine the notion of free will, as it suggests that even acts of rebellion are accounted for within the deterministic structure of the Matrix. However, Neo's response to this revelation is crucial to his evolution as a character. Instead of resigning himself to the Architect's deterministic vision, Neo chooses to act in a way that defies the system's expectations. His decision to return to the Matrix to save Trinity, rather than following the predetermined path laid out by the Architect, represents a significant assertion of his free will. This act of defiance is emblematic of the existentialist belief in the power of individual choice to transcend determinism.

Neo's ultimate sacrifice at the end of the trilogy further underscores the theme of free will triumphing over determinism. By choosing to sacrifice himself to save humanity, Neo performs an act of true autonomy, one that cannot be fully explained or predicted by the deterministic logic of the Matrix. This act of selflessness breaks the cycle of control and resets the system, suggesting that free will, though difficult to achieve, is possible even within a deterministic framework. Neo's journey thus becomes a narrative of existential triumph, where the individual, through conscious choice and moral agency, can transcend the constraints of a predetermined universe.

In conclusion, Neo's journey in *The Matrix* trilogy is a profound exploration of the tension between determinism and free will. While the Matrix represents a deterministic world designed to control human action, Neo's evolution from a passive participant to an active

agent of change illustrates the potential for individual autonomy within a seemingly predetermined system. His journey from ignorance to self-awareness, and ultimately to self-sacrifice, embodies the existentialist idea that true freedom is found not in the absence of constraints but in the conscious decision to act against them. Through Neo, *The Matrix* offers a powerful commentary on the human capacity for free will, even in the face of overwhelming determinism.

5. Metanarrative and Philosophical Implications

The metanarrative approach of *The Matrix* extends beyond the conventional boundaries of storytelling, transforming the film into a profound commentary on the nature of reality, perception, and the philosophical implications of free will versus determinism. The film's layered narrative structure, where different levels of reality coexist and interact, serves as both a narrative device and a metaphor for the complexity of human existence. This metanarrative framework not only tells a story within the fictional world of the Matrix but also prompts viewers to reflect on their own realities, questioning the very nature of truth, freedom, and control in their lives.

At the core of *The Matrix*'s metanarrative is the interplay between illusion and reality. The film introduces the concept of the Matrix as a simulated reality created by machines to subjugate humanity. This artificial construct serves as a powerful metaphor for the postmodern condition, where reality itself is increasingly mediated by technology, culture, and ideology. In this sense, the Matrix functions as a hyperreality, a concept explored by Jean Baudrillard in his work *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard's theory posits that in a world saturated by images and simulations, the distinction between reality and representation becomes blurred, leading to a state where simulations of reality become more "real" than reality itself. *The Matrix* visually and thematically embodies this concept, presenting a world where the characters' perceptions of reality are entirely shaped by an artificial system, raising questions about the nature of truth and the possibility of genuine knowledge.

The film's narrative structure reinforces its metanarrative themes by blurring the lines between different layers of reality. The

transitions between the Matrix and the "real world" of Zion, the human city outside the Matrix, are portrayed in a way that challenges the audience's understanding of what is truly real. This layering of realities invites viewers to question not only the characters' perceptions but also their own. The film suggests that just as the characters must awaken to the truth of their existence, so too must the audience awaken to the possibility that their understanding of reality may be similarly constructed or mediated by external forces, whether they be technological, cultural, or ideological.

The Matrix's metanarrative approach serves as a commentary on the nature of storytelling itself. The film is self-referential in its use of genre conventions, philosophical allusions, and visual style, creating a narrative that is conscious of its own artifice. This self-awareness is a hallmark of postmodern metanarratives, where the text reflects on its own construction and the role of the audience in interpreting it. For example, the film's numerous references to classic philosophical works, such as Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, are not merely thematic elements but are integral to the film's exploration of the nature of knowledge, reality, and illusion. By drawing on these philosophical texts, *The Matrix* positions itself within a broader intellectual tradition, encouraging viewers to engage with the film not just as a story but as a philosophical inquiry.

The metanarrative implications of *The Matrix* extend to its treatment of free will and determinism. The film's narrative is structured around the tension between these two philosophical concepts, using the characters' journeys to explore the limits of human agency. The Matrix itself, as a deterministic system, represents a world where human choices are manipulated and controlled, creating an illusion of free will. However, the film's metanarrative encourages viewers to question whether this illusion is unique to the Matrix or if it reflects a more universal condition. By presenting a world where the characters must struggle to discern the truth of their existence and exercise their agency within a deterministic framework, *The Matrix* invites viewers to reflect on their own experiences of choice, freedom, and control. Are our decisions truly free, or are they shaped by unseen forces—social, psychological, or biological—that limit our autonomy?

In this context, *The Matrix* serves as a broader commentary on human existence and the philosophical dilemmas that define it. The film's metanarrative approach challenges viewers to consider the possibility that their own perceptions of reality and freedom are as constructed as those of the characters within the Matrix. This reflection is further deepened by the film's use of visual and narrative techniques that mirror the characters' experiences of awakening and realization. The shifts between different levels of reality, the use of symbolic imagery, and the interplay between action and philosophical dialogue all contribute to a narrative that is as much about the process of questioning and understanding as it is about the story itself.

Furthermore, *The Matrix's* metanarrative engages with the concept of mythmaking and the role of narratives in shaping human consciousness. The story of Neo as "The One" is not just a plot device but a modern reimagining of the hero's journey, a narrative archetype that has been explored by scholars such as Joseph Campbell. Neo's journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from passive acceptance to active agency, mirrors the mythic structure of the hero's quest. However, *The Matrix* complicates this narrative by embedding it within a deterministic system, raising questions about the nature of the hero's journey itself. Is Neo truly a free agent, or is he merely fulfilling a role that has been predetermined by the system? By framing Neo's journey within this metanarrative context, *The Matrix* invites viewers to reflect on the power of stories and myths in shaping our understanding of reality and our place within it.

In conclusion, *The Matrix* functions as a metanarrative that transcends the boundaries of conventional storytelling, offering a profound exploration of philosophical questions about reality, perception, free will, and determinism. Through its layered narrative structure, self-referential style, and engagement with philosophical and mythological themes, the film challenges viewers to reflect on their own experiences of reality and agency. By questioning the nature of truth, freedom, and control, *The Matrix* becomes not just a story about characters within a fictional world but a broader commentary on the human condition and the philosophical dilemmas that define it. In this way, *The Matrix* remains a powerful and

enduring cultural text that continues to provoke thought and debate about some of the most fundamental questions of human existence.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion of an essay that deeply explores the philosophical dimensions of *The Matrix*, particularly the tension between free will and determinism, must synthesize the various strands of analysis into a cohesive understanding of the film's broader implications. *The Matrix* is not merely a science fiction narrative; it is a complex philosophical text that challenges viewers to reconsider fundamental aspects of human existence, reality, and agency. The film's exploration of these themes through its characters, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery offers a profound commentary on the nature of free will and the deterministic forces that shape our lives.

At its core, *The Matrix* presents a deterministic universe, meticulously controlled by intelligent machines, where human beings are unknowingly trapped in a simulated reality. This world, governed by the laws of the Matrix, represents a sophisticated metaphor for the deterministic philosophies that argue all events, including human actions, are the inevitable results of preceding causes. The Matrix's deterministic framework is reinforced by the roles of characters like the Architect, the Oracle, and the Agents, who embody the controlling forces of this system. These characters highlight the extent to which the illusion of choice permeates the world of the Matrix, questioning the very possibility of genuine agency within such a construct.

However, the film does not leave the audience in despair over the inevitability of determinism. Through the character of Neo, *The Matrix* presents a narrative of resistance and the potential for transcendence. Neo's journey from ignorance to self-awareness and ultimately to self-sacrifice illustrates the possibility of asserting free will within a deterministic framework. His ability to manipulate the rules of the Matrix, his defiance of the Architect's cyclical design, and his ultimate choice to sacrifice himself to save humanity all serve as powerful symbols of human agency and the existential struggle for freedom. Neo's actions suggest that while determinism may shape the framework within which we operate, it does not necessarily dictate every aspect of our existence.

The potential for free will, though difficult and fraught with challenges, remains a central theme of the film, offering a glimmer of hope amidst the deterministic backdrop.

The metanarrative structure of *The Matrix* further deepens its philosophical inquiry, inviting viewers to engage with the film on multiple levels. By blurring the lines between reality and illusion, the film challenges the audience to question their own perceptions of reality and the extent to which their choices are truly free. The Matrix's layered narrative, with its references to philosophical works, mythological archetypes, and postmodern theory, serves not only to tell a story but to provoke critical reflection on the nature of truth, freedom, and control in our own lives. This metanarrative approach positions *The Matrix* as a significant cultural text that transcends its genre, engaging with some of the most enduring and complex questions of human existence.

In concluding the analysis of *The Matrix*, it is essential to recognize the film's dual role as both a cautionary tale and a narrative of empowerment. On one hand, it warns of the dangers of a world where technology and control systems can create a deterministic reality that limits human freedom. On the other hand, it celebrates the human capacity to recognize, resist, and transcend these limitations. The film suggests that while we may be shaped by deterministic forces—whether they be social, psychological, or technological—there remains within us the potential for self-awareness, resistance, and the assertion of free will.

Thus, *The Matrix* stands as a profound exploration of the tension between free will and determinism, offering a narrative that is as much about philosophical inquiry as it is about action and adventure. The film challenges viewers to consider the nature of their own reality, the forces that shape their lives, and the possibilities for agency within a world that often seems controlled by external forces. By engaging with these themes, *The Matrix* continues to resonate as a powerful and enduring exploration of the human condition, provoking thought and debate about the fundamental questions that define our existence.

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