

# Look Behind You! Playing with Sexual Surveillance in You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter and how do you Do It?

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Résumé de l'article

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## Article

## Look Behind You! Playing with Sexual Surveillance in *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?*

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### Abstract

In this article, I consider two indie videogames, *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* (Seemingly Pointless 2017) and *how do you Do It?* (Freeman et al. 2014), that share an interest in the affective impact of parental surveillance and discipline on childhood sexual exploration. Using close playing as my method, I argue that the videogames reveal the perils of surveillance and its pleasures. Drawing on assemblage theory, I demonstrate the contingency of videogames' affective impact on players and the world and the—sometimes contradictory—potentials that surveillance produces as part of a sexual assemblage. Sometimes, using surveillance as a game mechanic amplifies sexual affect and pleasure and can thus be conceptualized as an example of “flirting” with surveillance. At other times, players orient themselves toward the videogames as the archetypical “parent”—finding pleasure in “catching” a videogame about sexual exploration and attempting to discipline it. Finally, drawing on Kathryn Bond Stockton (2004, 2009, 2017) and José Esteban Muñoz (2019), I argue that, by allowing players to relive childhood sexual exploration as adults, *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* provide players with the opportunity to become a playful child, to loop back through time and re-explore sexual discovery, and thus shape nuanced critiques of the way surveillance shapes sexual possibilities.

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### Introduction

“There are no monsters. There is no death. Only you, 1990s Internet, and the fear of being caught.” This is the pitch for *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* (Seemingly Pointless 2017), a videogame about the first, sweaty-palmed time you search for internet pornography on your family computer. In this article, I analyze *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and another indie videogame, *how do you Do It?* (Freeman et al. 2014), which depicts a young girl's use of covert play to satisfy her nascent curiosity about sex. My focus is on what these two videogames, which (re)produce for adult players the affective intensities of early sexual experimentation under the threat of surveillance or being caught, can tell us about how surveillance shapes sexual horizons of possibility.

I begin by briefly discussing my Deleuzo-Guattarian approach to these two videogames and my methodology before describing my playthroughs and proceeding with my analysis. In the first analytic section, I argue that the videogames use the threat of surveillance to amplify sexual affect and pleasure in a way that can be conceptualized as “flirting” with surveillance (Bell 2009). In the second analytic section, I argue that some players orient themselves toward the videogames as the archetypical “parent”—finding pleasure in “catching” a videogame about sexual exploration and attempting to discipline it, its players, or its creator. In these instances, normative conceptualizations of childhood sexual exploration as risky and adults as unplayful are reterritorialized. I extend these arguments through the third analytic section, where I draw on Kathryn Bond Stockton (2004, 2009, 20017) and José Esteban Muñoz (2019) to argue that *You*

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*Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* allow players to become a playful child, to loop back through time and re-explore sexual discovery. More precisely, I link Muñoz's (2019: 1; emphasis added) understanding of queerness as a "mode of *desiring* that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" with Stockton's (2004) conceptualization of children's inherent queerness and ability to disrupt linear sexual pathways as "growing sideways." I see these videogames as animated by a desire to (re)become a "playful child." This figure allows adults to imagine new futures and disrupt hegemonic conceptualizations of "proper" sexual maturity. Here, I am also drawing on Paasonen's (2018: 36) conceptualization of play as "curiosity towards possible ways of being and acting out in the world" and Grosz's (1994: 175, 179) reading of becoming-child as a form of deterritorialization that can disrupt "the modes of cohesion and control of the adult."

## Theory and Method

In this article, I conceptualize sexual videogames (videogames that either depict explicit sex or that speak directly to the sensory, embodied, and affective experience of sex) as desiring-machines. As Buchanan (2021: 56, 38; emphasis in original) argues, Deleuze and Guattari think of desire as "the basis of all *behaviour*" and as a fundamentally productive and generative force that drives the formation of the world. As Malins (2017: 128) eloquently explains, desire is a "kind of primordial soup," a "pre-subjective, pre-conscious life force or energy that flows between bodies, connecting, animating and transforming them, enabling the ongoing differentiation essential to life itself." Similarly, Gao (2013: 406) compares desire to labour ("productive and actualisable only through practice"), and Grosz (1994: 165) emphasizes that desire *does* things, including "bringing things together or separating them, making machines, making reality." Following these scholars, as well as Buchanan (2021: 62; emphasis in original), I understand desiring-machines (or assemblages) as being "*desire in its machinic modality*" (see also Lim 2007). Desire "selects" the materials that make up a machine and gives them their value or properties (Buchanan 2021: 56).<sup>1</sup>

I understand *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* to be two such desiring machines shaped by desire-force that brings together the player, developer, controller, screen, and any number of "diegetic objects and the multiplicities they are comprised of" (Cremin 2016: 12). This theoretical framework points toward a central question: "given a certain machine, what can it be used for?" (Buchanan 2021: 63). In other words, what do these two videogames that use sex and surveillance playfully to fuel their affective intensity tell us about how surveillances interfaces more broadly with sexual pleasure and politics? This approach differs from those rooted in Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) "surveillant assemblages." While there is a parallel process by which playing videogames on platforms abstracts bodies and produces flows of data, I am more centrally concerned with the ways that surveillance articulates with assemblages of play and the embodied experience of playing.

Also important to my argument are the Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts of "line of flight" and "becoming." The term line of flight describes a path of deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 508), a moment where the territory, the "liveable order" that we deliberately create for ourselves, wobbles or becomes undone in some way (Buchanan 2021: 85). Lines of flight produce all sorts of outcomes, good and bad. For example, Fournier (2014) argues that lines of flight are critical for trans becomings and create new ways of being in the world. Alternatively, Buchanan (2021: 91) reminds us that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) see the development of fascism as a line of flight. Lines of flight might loop back on themselves (reterritorialize), or they might deterritorialize and "succee[d] in creating a new earth, a new beginning, one that does not lead back to old territories" (Buchanan 2021: 89). Similarly, becoming emphasizes the inherent and ever-present change and movement of life. As Garner (2014: 30) explains, becoming has been taken up by many

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<sup>1</sup> As Buchanan (2021: 21, 63; drawing on Deleuze 2006: 278) suggests, "desiring-machines" is the term initially used by Deleuze and Guattari to denote an assemblage. As a term, it centers on the importance of desire. However, Buchanan (2021) argues that Deleuze and Guattari abandoned it because of misunderstandings and concern that the original term caused people to focus on the components rather than the machinic force of desire.

scholars in feminist, queer, and trans theory because of its ability to undermine rigid binaries (e.g., body/technology) and conceptualizations of the body as being in “stasis.”

This framework highlights tensions in how we might think about how surveillance shapes sexual exploration. That is, it allows us to focus on the idea that surveillance is a force that articulates in different ways with different assemblages. Surveillance can impede or promote sexual pleasure; when absent, sex may feel more free or less exciting. What a given assemblage or machine *does* is not neatly predictable because its elements and connections are contingent, and it always remains possible that they could make other, different connections (see Slack and Wise 2005: 152). The videogames discussed below ought to be thought of as things shaped by desire that emerge from a particular cultural context: the growing importance of networked intimacy (Paasonen 2021); the way the internet has changed the accessibility of digital pornography and its condition of production and consumption (Attwood 2013); the emergence of platform governance regimes that deplatform sexual content (Tiidenberg 2021); the shifting parental responsibilities and anxieties associated with shepherding children through an online adolescence (Jeffery 2021); and data extraction and surveillance on videogame platforms, sex toys, and dating apps (O'Donnell 2014; Sundén 2020; Egliston and Carter 2021; De Kloe 2022); among a myriad of other things. Videogames articulate with these contexts and, with our embodied experience of play, do work to make certain things possible.

This article employs close textual reading of two videogame and related paratexts, including Steam (a major online videogame distribution platform) reviews. Following humanities-based affect theory scholars, I understand videogames as “exerting forces that arrange bodies and ideas” and producing affects in the bodies of their audiences (Ioanes 2017: 57). My approach to reading emphasizes “the relationship between a text and a reading body” (Ioanes 2017: 58) and is thus informed by recent game scholarship including work by Anable (2018) and Keogh (2018).

## Youthful Sexual Play and Surveillance

Children and adolescents are subject to surveillance, discipline, and control of their fledgling sexual lives, shaped by a variety of social, legal, and cultural forces. Below, I discuss the work of several notable researchers who explore this issue, focusing on Canada and the US because the two videogames in question are embedded most closely in those national contexts. The hegemonic precept of dominant Anglophone Western culture is that “Children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions” (Bruhm and Hurley 2004: ix; for more on the history of how child sexuality has been conceptualized, see Angelides 2004; Egan and Hawkes 2008). This shapes adults’ fears about contamination through association. As Bruhm and Hurley (2004: xxiii) write: “Discussions of queerness and child sexuality all too quickly invoke the spectre of the pedophile, which all too quickly destroys one’s political credibility.” This, in turn, impacts the relative underdevelopment of literature on childhood sexual development, a lacuna that is particularly evident when comparing the literature on agentic and consensual sexual exploration and the literature on child sexual abuse (for a discussion of the literature, see, for example, Ryan 2000; Wurtele and Kenny 2011). As Renold, Egan, and Ringrose (2015: 1) argue, children are often not recognized as “complex sexual subjects who are actively negotiating sexuality in their everyday lives.”

While recognizing that children can have sexual feelings was commonplace in the early 1900s, Angelides (2004: 147) argues that there was a “monumental shift” in this thinking in the 1970s and 1980s, driven in part by the feminist anti-sexual abuse movement. While few would dispute the importance of the feminist movement in refocusing cultural concern from “stranger danger” toward the real threats of incest and sexual violence in the patriarchal private sphere and the associated work of retooling laws to protect children against sexual abuse, Angelides (2004) argues that these feminist projects were yoked to the (already extant) construction of children as sexless. He argues, “Rigorous attempts to expose the reality and dynamics of child sexual abuse have been aided, if not in part made possible, by equally rigorous attempts to conceal, repress, or ignore the reality and dynamics of child sexuality” (Angelides 2004: 142). Importantly, Angelides (2004) argues that this is related to a linguistic slippage, wherein “child” comes to mean young people of all ages, from babies and toddlers to adolescents and teens, which facilitates the erection of a strict

binary between the broad categories of sexless children and sexual adults. Angelides (2004: 163) argues that there is thus a strong feminist attachment to “linear and sequential model[s] of age stratification”—to “straight time,” if not repronormative linearity.

In his influential work on children and sexuality, Kincaid (1996: 211; emphasis in the original) argues that the Western conceptualization of the child is made up of a “coordinate set of *have nots*” and “evacuation[s].” He argues that this produces the very problem we seek to remediate. Children who are denied sexual agency simultaneously become erotic objects for adults because they are conceptualized as “blank page[s]” onto which adults can project meaning (Kincaid 1996: 2011).<sup>2</sup> Kincaid (1996: 212) asserts that adults cope with their desire for this empty figure through a performative frenzy wherein they “becom[e] hysterical, [and] writ[e] a kind of pious pornography” through which they can express concern, create scapegoats, and revel in “lavish publish spectacle[s]” that construct children as constantly under threat of sexual abuse or contamination.

The conceptualization of sexless, innocent children also articulates with Foucauldian notions of power. Angelides (2004: 153) argues that “the dual concept of child ignorance and child powerlessness is that on which adult efforts to control child sexuality pivot.” Constructing children as sexless, innocent, and naïve is a move that secures adults’ power over knowledge and discourse. Children’s voices and perceptions are largely absent from the scholarly work on child sexuality, even though they are actively engaged in the process of questioning, learning, and thinking through intimacy, sex, and sexuality and are often willing to share and discuss these ideas with adults if we engage with them on their own terms (see, for example, Blaise 2010). The result of failing to consider children’s ideas and voices is that the work on the history of child sexuality “translates most often into the history of adult perceptions about the sexuality of children and their attempts to manage it” (Egan and Hawkes 2008: 360).

My analysis below explores how these sociocultural dynamics shape what the videogames make possible. While dominant approaches to child sexuality are arguably characterized by paranoia, surveillance, and adult power—and these inform how players interact with the videogames—it is also possible that the videogames produce a more playful, slantwise orientation towards the figure of the child.

### Playing You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter and how do you Do It?

In *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* (Seemingly Pointless 2017), players embody a young person taking advantage of a moment when their parents are out of the house to explore online pornography for the first time. Visually sparse, the videogame relies on sound to produce affective intensity and sexual thrill. The visuals and mechanics of the videogame are designed to simulate the experience of navigating a rudimentary internet browser. When I play, I navigate through the videogame using my mouse to click forward through text and to select search options. The game opens with the following text:

The front door clicks shut.  
You hear keys in the lock.  
The car’s engine.  
The car pulling out of the driveway,  
onto the street  
into the distance.

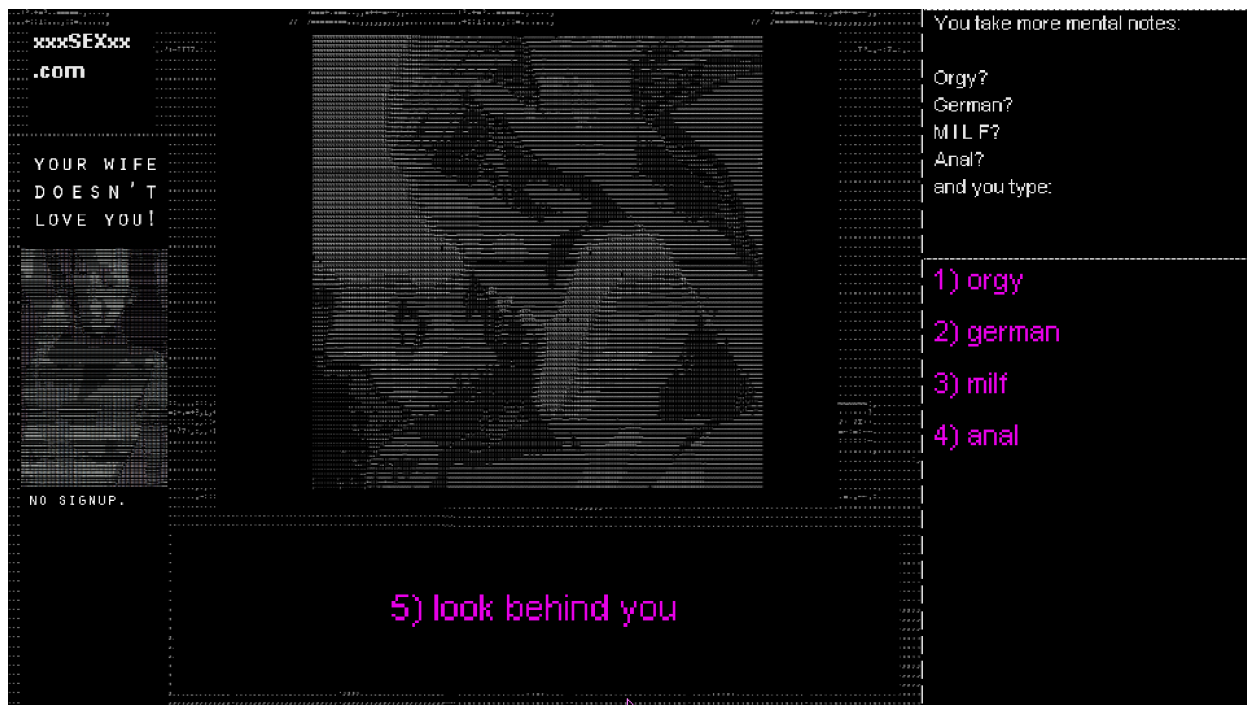
As I read these textual prompts, the videogame pulls my attention to the sounds of my digital house and neighbourhood. Like the beginning of a meditation practice, enumerating these sounds draws my focus into my body and the game environment. I click forward, hold my breath, and listen hard to the subtle soundscape:

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<sup>2</sup> Although this is, of course, dependent on race, class, and gender (see Kincaid 1996: 212).

You hold your breath:  
the sound of the Tv  
a neighbor's dog,  
the clock on the wall  
no parents.

Straining to hear, I sharpen my focus. Then, feeling silence fill the house, I sneak down the hallway into the computer room. The sparsely represented computer monitor comes to life, and I connect to the internet slowly and painfully using a noisy dial-up connection. I might only have a few minutes before my parents return home, so I work quickly. Keywords appear on the screen, indicating that I can start my search with: “porn,” “people doing it,” “sex,” and “4th base” and then navigate to a website with a name like xxxsexxx.com or porntub.com by clicking on one of the options. The website loads slowly, and images begin to appear. The pornographic pictures I find—stylized ASCII images (images made from text characters)—are of pixelated and almost unrecognizable sexual acts, so I need to spend time deciphering them. My gaze is slow and searching; I furrow my brow as I try to parse what they are showing, caught between confusion and anticipation for the following image. Compared with the lightning-fast loading times of my current internet connection and the seemingly endless variety of modern porn sites, I play with a slowness and yearning that feels nostalgic and outdated.



**Figure 1:** Screen capture from “You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter.” The image depicts the user interface of the game. Players can click on the search terms in the right-hand bar to open new pornographic images or click the “look behind you” button at the bottom of the screen to check that their parents have not caught them.

The door creaks, and I jump and click the “look behind you” button at the bottom of my screen. The text informs me, “There is no one there—just the house settling.” I take a breath and continue to spelunk the pornographic potential of the early internet. Next, I am presented with a fresh set of search terms, and I decide whether I want to click searching “doggy style,” “missionary,” “guy on guy,” and “girl on girl.” Another sound jolts me, but I persist and continue deeper. The search possibilities become more “hardcore” as I continue: “POV,” “striptease,” “dildo,” and “masturbate” is followed by “orgy,” “German,” “MILF,” and “anal.” Suddenly, pop-ups flash across the screen, and an obnoxious blaring noise breaks the silence.

I—the actual, physical me—yelp and panic as I try to close the cascading windows filling my screen. My heart is pounding, and my hands shake.

*You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* transports me back to my teenage years. My family had one computer capable of connecting to the internet with a dial-up connection, located centrally in the kitchen. My sisters and I would bicker over who would get to use the internet every evening. However, this privileged position was often interrupted as work-related phone calls for my father would force us to disconnect. Despite these technical and logistical challenges, the internet connection that the computer afforded did give me some of my first sexual thrills. Not porn, but flirting and proto-sexting through MSN messenger.

By and large, what I remember from these moments is not the sexual *content* of the messages—small mercy, no doubt—but the affective intensities produced by that particular assemblage of body and machine. Affective peaks and valleys characterized my experiences on these early messaging platforms. There were often hours or days of boredom or frustration when no one was online, or the opportunity to connect contemporaneously was missed by minutes or hours. Boredom and disappointment were interspersed with intense sexual affect—time spent flirting or receiving sexual messages while listening intently for a parent who might venture downstairs, body poised in anticipation for pleasure or panic.

These are my specific and situated early experiences with surveillance, sex, and technology, textured by my experience as a member of a middle-class, white family living in a small, relatively rural province and as a Millennial whose own sexual development coincided with the development and availability of the internet. To borrow a turn of phrase from Aubrey Anable (2018: 9), they constitute a story shaped by “fits and starts, hazy memories filtered through gendered and classed access to computers and home gaming systems and coloured by generational and geographical specificity.” While these memories help excavate how the affective intensities of videogames can make sexual meaning—and surveillance’s role in producing this meaning—they should also be taken as subjective, situated, and contingent on my particular desires and assemblages.

*how do you Do It?* (Freeman et al. 2014) plays with similar ideas. It puts you in the place of an eleven-year-old girl who takes advantage of the short window of time while her mother runs an errand out of the house to explore her questions about sex through play. The videogame begins as we see the mother leaving the house, followed by a close-up image of a young white girl with yellow-blond hair and blue eyes—this is the playable character. While this playable character is a semi-autobiographical interpretation of Freeman, we might also read her as the ideal girl (a white, middle-class child in a nuclear family) to whom the idea of children as asexual and vulnerable is most readily applied (Renold, Egan, and Ringrose 2015: 3).

I begin my experimentation by grabbing two Barbie dolls. I have a brown-haired and muscular Ken in one hand, and in the other, a blond-haired, red-lipped Barbie with a thin waist and curvy hips and chest. I can move the dolls towards one another using the right and left arrow keys. Using the up and down arrow keys, I can rotate their bodies and make them connect at new angles.

The toys and the act of playing feed my sexual imagination and exploration. I use the keyboard keys to move the two naked dolls up, down, and side-to-side. The fun comes in slamming their smooth plastic bodies together to make a pleasing click-click-click sound. As I experiment with the limited body positions I can achieve with the simple controls (which mirror children’s relatively limited knowledge of the particularities of bodily anatomy, sexual positions, and mechanics), my avatar wonders about sex and love. Absorbed in my experimentation, I do not hear gravel crunching under tires. The videogame ends abruptly as my scandalized mom arrives home and catches me at play. If players are more attentive than I was during my first play-through, they can pull the dolls apart quickly when they hear the car, and the game will end with an image of the girl blushing and holding the dolls behind her back as her quizzical mother re-enters the house.



**Figure 2:** Screenshot of *how do you Do It?* showing the main character experimenting with her Barbie dolls. The player can interact with the dolls using their keyboard.

The girl's mix of naïveté and curiosity is viscerally nostalgic for me. Her—our—sexual exploration is partly fueled by the sex scene between Jack and Rose in the movie *Titanic* (Cameron 1997). As a child of the 1990s, the game brings back a rich sensory memory of being around eight years old, sitting in my best friend's basement watching *Titanic* on VHS. It was the first time I had ever seen a sexualized naked body or a sex scene, and I remember feeling as bewildered as the young avatar in *how do you Do It?* For me, this basement was a place of (mild) transgression. It was a place where I could temporarily elude my parents' surveillance and the constraints of my relatively strict household rules about what media I could consume.

Both videogames engage directly with the surveillance and threat of discipline that young people are subject to as they begin to explore sex and their sexuality. But they can also be read as an analogy wherein in-game parents represent videogame platforms' practices of data extraction, discipline, and control as they become ever-more-important spaces for exploring eroticism while, paradoxically, deplatforming sexual content (Paasonen 2021). The remainder of this article analyzes how the videogames make sexual meaning within these overlapping contexts and explores the many and often contradictory affects that the games produce in their players. *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* resonates with my experiences on the early internet, accessed using janky technology. *how do you Do It?* brings me back to a specific time and place where my early sexual curiosity intersected with media. For other players, as for me, these texts have the potential to surface the many emotional and affective contradictions and tensions around childhood, sex, porn, and the internet, and the way childhood life articulates with various forms of surveillance and discipline. Part of the videogames' potency is connected to how they put adults in the position of children and how this can produce lines of flight—instances of intense deterritorializing affect.

## Surveillance and Affective Amplification

In his study of how pornography viewers reconcile their nostalgic memories with the current anti-porn discursive fervour, Taylor (2021) explains how prohibition and surveillance can amplify sexual intensity; he quotes a participant who recounts how bypassing the porn blockers installed on his family computer produced intense and “thrilling” affect: “there was this like massive thrill for us in that not only like looking at porn which we’d never seen before, but also like figuring out ways to access it and, you know, accessing something that’s meant to be inaccessible and it’s meant to be wrong, and we’re not meant to look at. So, it came with all that kind of thrill” (study participant qtd. in Taylor 2021: 47). In other words, the “censorship and inaccessibility” of pornography can amplify its titillating potential (Taylor 2021: 48). Similarly, *how do you Do It?* (Freeman et al. 2014) and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* (Seemingly Pointless 2017) mobilize the threat of surveillance to amplify sexual affect, repurposing the embodied experience of being subject to surveillance for new, pleasurable ends.

*You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* turn surveillance into a game mechanic that gives play sexual meaning and erotic thrill. The affective pleasure of discovery and exploration is held in tension with fear of surveillance and discipline, and the strategies that young people use evade it. These come together to produce sexual intensity and to set the tempo of the game. In *how do you Do It*, the gleeful liberty of experimentation would not be possible in the same way without the looming threat of your mother returning home. Concern with being caught is the motivation for the frenetic pace of exploration. This is also true of *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*, although this videogame also resists this pleasure by slowing the player’s ability to consume the titillating images quickly. This tension generates sexual tension and anticipation. This push and pull gives affective intensity to the otherwise simple play mechanisms. This shows that what surveillance *does* in a given assemblage is not necessarily predictable. Instead, surveillance assemblages connect with specific desiring-machines to produce a variety of affects and lines of flight, including those that resonate with or amplify sexual experiences.

Following David Bell (2009: 211), we might conceptualize this knowing deployment of surveillance as a kind of “flirting” with surveillance. In his research on pornography with a “surveillance aesthetic,” including camming and other “reality porn,” Bell (2009: 203–204) argues that people “flirt... tease, strip, and in countless other ways act sexually, while other people watch, in contexts structured by the logics and aesthetics of surveillance,” and that eroticization can be a mode of resistance or a way of “hijacking” the “dominant uses of surveillance.” *how do you Do It?* and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* are similar in the sense that the pervasiveness of surveillance shapes their game mechanics, but the pleasure and fun that players derive from the surveillance might be understood as a form of resistance, a way of “taking back control over images and their uses” (Bell 2009: 205). The mechanization of surveillance in both videogames might thus be conceptualized as an example of subverting or resisting the normative role of surveillance in videogames, young people’s lives, and online. This resonates with Whitson and Simon’s (2014: 313, 316) argument that, while videogame players are often “cast in the role of pawns” in relation to data extraction and corporate surveillance, this framework ignores the ways players are “unruly” and foster “playful subjectivities that focus on exploring, pushing back upon, and finding loopholes and exploits in rule systems.” We might argue that there are analytically rich overlaps between how young people navigate adult surveillance and discipline and how gamers navigate corporate practices.

While I draw primarily from certain schools of affect theory, there is resonance here with Foucault’s (1990) argument in *The History of Sexuality*, in which he challenges what he calls the “repressive hypothesis,” the idea that sexuality is repressed because of the need for efficient labour under capitalism. He argues this is a “ruse” or fantasy (Foucault 1990: 12). Countering this taken-for-granted assumption, Foucault (1990: 17, 18) asserts that power hinges not on prohibition but on the proliferation of discourses that make sex an object of knowledge. This proliferation produces “sexual heterogeneities” and the expansion of sexual classification systems (Foucault 1990). Sex becomes subject to power systems not through top-down domination but through the way it is drawn out, revealed, and reified by diffuse power that necessitates the production of “truth” and knowledge about sex (Foucault 1990). While there is a “sexual mosaic,” Berlant

and Warner (1998: 559) explain that Foucault wishes to demonstrate that the discourses that produce this diversity are also “techniques of isolation” that categorize people “as normal or perverse, for the purpose of medicalizing or otherwise administering them as individuals.”

My assertion that surveillance—something we might conventionally think of as limiting or constraining sexual expression and experience—can amplify sexual feelings or create new forms of sexual expression resonates with the Foucauldian idea that discourse expands sexual categories. However, whereas Foucault (1990) emphasizes that this ultimately reinforces hegemonic power over sex through moralizing categorization, I follow Bell (2009: 205) in suggesting that these knowing deployments of surveillance for pleasure might be subversive or considered part of the “erotics of resistance.” That is, they might produce lines of flight that have the potential to deterritorialize surveillance assemblages. I return to this in more detail in the third section of this paper, where I suggest that *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* can provoke a desire to resist or subvert the increasingly oppressive surveillance and deplatforming of sex on the internet and the rigid binaries between playful but asexual children and sexual but unplayful adults. However, before continuing down this more hopeful analytic path, I want to unpack how the nostalgia the videogames produce may cause reterritorializations and fuel the idea that modern pornography is increasingly dangerous and harmful and thus in need of ever-stricter measures to discipline and reduce risk and harm for the proverbial children.

### Reterritorializations: Nostalgia, Fear, and Sexual Surveillance

*You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* exist in a cultural context in which pornography is framed as “more dangerous than ever before,” a perspective that has contributed to calls for increased surveillance, discipline, and control of the internet as a way of protecting young people (Taylor 2021: 39). However, as Taylor (2021: 40) argues, the idea that modern pornography is uniquely dangerous or depraved is a “curious selective historicity” that erases the fact that “pornographic content has consistently been understood as uniquely dangerous, despite each previous medium of delivery being cast off as outmoded and harmless.” Videogame pornography is the newest iteration of this phenomenon, with the “immersiveness” and “interactivity” of videogames fueling fresh concern about the risks of pornographic or sexual content (Gallagher 2012).

Nostalgia is one of the central emotional experiences that drives this “selective historicity”; Taylor (2021) argues that adults looking back at how they used or encountered pornography as teenagers generally understand it as a relatively harmless experience of exploration and experimentation. However, the way that they “afford *themselves* agency in their childhood memory” often stands in contrast to their “unwilling[ness] to grant ‘other’ pornography viewers, *particularly children*, the same agency” (Taylor 2021: 49; emphasis added). Drawing on Paasonen et al. (2015), Taylor (2021: 49) argues that adults reconcile their own nostalgic and generally positive memories of pornography with their concern for today’s young people and their opinion that pornography is “inherently risky to young people” through a third-person effect. The “third-person effect” describes the idea that a person watching a given piece of media tends to believe that others are more susceptible to the messages of that media than they are (Davison 1983).

As stated above, nostalgia is one emotional response that amplifies sexual feelings in the two videogames. However, it is not inherently subversive. While nostalgia may contribute to sexual meaning-making, it is always at risk of provoking reterritorializations. Buchanan (2021: 89) defines reterritorialization as “negative deterritorialization... one that is overlaid by reterritorialization, which amounts to saying it is a form of change one undergoes in order to remain the same.”

This dynamic seems to be at play in the reviews of *how do you Do It?* on Steam (an online videogame distribution platform). While most Steam reviews of the game are positive (n=2192), there are many negative reviews (n=406). Of these, many focus on the fact they found the game “creepy.” For example, reviewers often comment sarcastically or ironically about the game’s content. One player says a “pro” of the game is that it is “totally not creepy.” Another says they would “10/10 recommend to all my friends and

pedophiles.” Others write, “I hope there is a second part to this with the FBI intervening here” and “This game turned me into a sex offender.” The underlying assumption in such reviews seems to be that (1) the kind of childhood sexual exploration represented in the videogame is peculiar or abnormal, (2) that youth sexual exploration is not worth depicting or is inappropriate to depict, and (3) that playing a game about sexual exploration as a young person is perverse if not potentially pedophilic, and that any adult interested in (re)experiencing youthful sexual exploration is sexually deviant. I do not want to imbue these reviews with too much weight—they are anonymous, often sarcastic or ironic, and not a particularly intelligible data set without more context about the reviewers themselves. However, I think they hint at one of the ways that the world-making possibilities of nostalgia can be reterritorialized. That this response is particularly fierce concerning *how do you Do It?*, where the playable character is the idealized figure (white, female, prepubescent, and presumably middle class) that animates much of the panic about children, is telling.

In response to an embodied connection with the young girl in *how do you Do It?*, some players seem to orient themselves towards the videogames as overseeing “adults” engaged in monitoring and controlling the nascent sexual explorations of the young girl. This makes sense in the context of a world in which adults’ power hinges on maintaining the idea that children are naïve and innocently asexual. Following Angelides (2004), we might argue that the reterritorialization of nostalgia’s affective potential evinces adults’ desire to maintain power over sexual knowledge. He points to the “near-hysterical outcry regarding children’s access to ‘adult’ material on the Internet”; this panic is provoked, he argues, by the fact that the internet might undermine “adult control of adult sexual knowledge, meanings, and practices” and thus adult power (Angelides 2004: 152).

Alternatively, we might posit that the responses above are about more than knowledge and power. Kincaid (1996) argues that the drive underlying discourse about child sexual abuse, or the preoccupation with identifying pedophilic potentialities, helps adults feel good about themselves while keeping the titillating discourse about and affective fascination with childhood sexuality alive. He argues that scandals and stories about child sexuality “offe[r]... a nicely protected way of talking about the subject of child sexuality” (Kincaid 1996: 210). While he grants that legitimate concern also underlies this discourse, he insists that it nonetheless serves to maintain “the particular erotic vision of children that is putting them in [a dangerous or precarious] position in the first place” (Kincaid 1996: 210).

While the two videogames allow adults to queer linear time (something I will discuss below), the mechanical and narrative elements of *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* might also reterritorialize this disruption of straight time. *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* charts a linear and hierarchical path through various forms of pornography (the options do not change meaningfully from playthrough to playthrough) and implicitly suggests that technological advances accelerate sexual exploration to the extent that even simple childhood curiosity can rapidly escalate and become “too” extreme, risky, or depraved. At the beginning of the videogame, I am presented with relatively “vanilla” search terms. But each new round of searches leads to more “hardcore” sex acts. In the final search of the game, I reach the “depths” of internet pornography: “bondage,” “hentai,” “scat,” and “furry.” The on-screen text that serves as my inner monologue suggests that “[I] feel uneasy” and “this porn seems different.” At this point, an animated pop-up ad depicting a woman bouncing rhythmically up and down on a pixelated phallus flashes onto my screen, and loud, enthusiastic moaning invades my headphones. The videogame gives me one option: “That’s enough for today.”

The videogame’s announcement that I have “had enough” could also be read as having the tenor of a kinky dominant, which might itself increase the player’s sexual excitement and anticipation for the next time the player gets to play with the bossy videogame that teases us with the potential for kinky pleasure.<sup>3</sup> But I experience this hard stop as kink-phobic. The linear progression from vanilla to kinky search terms evinces a cultural assumption that kinky sex is riskier than non-kinky sex, makes assumptions about the players’

<sup>3</sup> For more on the push and pull of power between videogame and player and how this might be read as erotic, see Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán 2015.

boundaries, and suggests that too much exploration is potentially risky. While the videogame otherwise takes a relatively neutral stance toward types of sexual interests, it implicitly suggests that kinky sexuality is the exclusive realm of adulthood and ignores how kinky sexuality manifests in different ways throughout the human lifespan, including childhood and adolescence.<sup>4</sup>

The hard stop imposed by the videogame might be read as an adult move to overcode childhood sexual experiences as troubling or traumatic—even if they are more complex than that framing allows. This is essentially a form of the third-person effect discussed above. It thrusts our positionality as adults back into a frame, forcing us back into embodying the dominant narratives about sex and pornography that center potential harm and risk and that are built on a “one-sided, essentially adult, perspective” (Vertongen, Van Ommen, and Chamberlain 2022: 3).

In this section, I have argued that aspects of the two videogames, including mechanical and narrative elements and associated audience responses, reterritorialize the potentially transformative potential of reliving childhood sexual experiences through videogame play. *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* put the adult players in two places and times simultaneously. On one hand, players have the embodied experience of being a sexually curious child who experiments and tries to understand sex but understands that this is taboo and should be done outside the disciplining gaze of adults. On the other hand, players are, in fact, adults who may feel that that it is correct and proper that young people be sexually innocent and naïve or whose responses to the videogames are, at the least, shaped by their normative role as adults with power in controlling what is and is not considered appropriate for children. This in-betweenness is, I would suggest, an uncomfortable position for the player to inhabit precisely because it provokes a deterritorialization—a movement away from established binaries between the playful but asexual child and the unplayful but sexual adult, and thus a move toward chaos (Buchanan 2021). Some players may resolve this disorientation by doubling down on the notion that any youthful sexual expression is abnormal, and that adults who roleplay as children are potentially dangerous or perverse. Nonetheless, in creating a potentially anxiety-inducing space for the player between adult and child—what Stockton (2004: 297) calls their “estrangement”—the videogames also create a space of possibility from which sideways growth might emerge.

In the following section, I oscillate back toward a more optimistic analysis and explore the importance of the child as a playful figure.

### Becoming the Playful Child

As discussed above, the videogames at hand use surveillance to put players in a liminal position—in play, they embody both children and adults. In this section, I focus on the political potentiality inherent in this in-between state of play. To do so, I extend my discussion of the literature on children to discuss work on the child as a symbol or a figure, mainly by Edelman (2004) and Stockton (2004, 2009, 2017). In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman (2004: 3) argues that the child, as a figure or symbol, shapes the terms of political debate and is the “fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.” Edelman (2004: 3; emphasis in the original) sets up queerness in contrast to this figure, arguing that “*queerness* names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children’ who are not attached to the ‘absolute value’ of reproductive futurism. Rather than seek to redeem queerness, Edelman’s (2004: 4) intervention hinges on leaning into the way queerness is associated with negativity.

All of this raises the question of queer children—children who subvert the expectation that they are innocent, sexless, and on a linear pathway toward heteronormative sexual relations (see, for example, Bruhm and Hurley 2004: x). For Kathryn Bond Stockton (2004: 278), children are already-always queer (“Scratch a child, you will find a queer”). In talking about queer children, Stockton (2004: 279) coins the term “growing sideways,” a concept she uses to “prick (deflate, or just delay) the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of

<sup>4</sup> For more on the “origin stories” kinky people tell about themselves, see Hughes and Hammack 2022.

growing up” (Stockton 2009: 11). Stockton uncoils her argument about growing sideways, in part, as a response to Edelman’s (2004) configuration of the child. Stockton (2009: 13) writes that, whereas Edelman (2004) is content to “smash the social order and, along with it, the child,” she believes that “there are other ways to circumvent” the limiting power of the child-as-symbol. That is, in focusing on growing sideways, “One could explore the elegant, unruly contours of growing that don’t bespeak continuance. I coin the term ‘sideways growth’ to refer to something related but not reducible to the death drive; something that locates energy, pleasure, vitality, and (e)motion in the back-and-forth of connections and extensions that are not reproductive” (Stockton 2009: 13). Growing sideways suggests lateral movement, metaphorization, oscillations through time, and asynchronicities (Stockton 2004). Therefore, growing sideways is potentially transformative because it “questions developmental models based on one’s steady progress toward genital maturity and one’s ‘growing up’ to reproductive goals” (Stockton 2004: 281). Thus, Stockton (2004, 2009)—counter Edelman (2004)—recognizes the child’s inherent capacity to question the taken-for-granted status of straight time and reprofuturism as the dominant rhythms of our sexual lives.

There are productive resonances between growing sideways and a conceptualization of becoming-child. The affective potency of *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* is related to their mobilization of the figure of the child in a way that adults can embody. As such, they highlight that we can all grow sideways, and videogames—as playful machines—are particularly generative instantiations of this desire and mechanisms of so doing. Stockton (2017) has also made this observation. In “If Queer Children Were a Video Game,” she explores the connection between growing sideways and videogames. She explains that videogaming, in its “strangeness” and virtuality, approaches childishness and, thus, queerness. Stockton (2017: 225) is captivated by the childishness of games and how “indulg[ing] in alluring virtualities” allows players to grow sideways and experience jouissance. She compares gaming to candy: “libidinal, captivating, repetitive, time waster, *grandly lateralizing of adults and children*, and linked to the pleasures of self-destruction” (Stockton 2017: 232; emphasis added). In other words, videogames make queer children of us all.

*You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* give the player an opportunity for child-like sexual play and experimentation. In doing so, they recreate a bit of the affective thrill and a sense of open potentiality that comes with childhood and adolescent sexual play. Therefore, though both videogames gain meaning and affective power because they reference the past, they are potent iterations of queer futurity. On the relationship between the past and queer futures, Muñoz (2019: 30) argues: “A turn to the past for the purpose of critiquing the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity. Queer futurity does not underplay desire. In fact it is all about desire, desire for both larger semiabstractions such as a better world or freedom but also, more immediately, better relations within the social that include better sex and more pleasure.”

*You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* step out of linear, or straight, time and look to the past—to the child—to critique the present and create new futures. Playing them can be considered a practice of queer world-making animated by productive, generative desire. Above, I have cautioned that there are possible reterritorializations associated with affects and emotions that we may think of as potentially transformative. While this remains important to consider, this section considers how the videogames articulate with Muñoz’s (2019: 35) assertions that “our remembrances and their ritualized tellings... [have] world-making possibilities.” I argue that the videogame play about sexual discovery and exploration in *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?* is one such “ritualized telling” with the potential to create sexual deterritorializations.

To be more explicit, here I want to extend Stockton’s (2009) conceptualization of growing sideways and connect it with Muñoz’s (2019) conceptualization of queer futurity and Paasonen’s (2018) insistence on theorizing sex and play together to theorize the figure of the “playful child.” As represented in the two videogames discussed here, the playful child is a generative symbol with which to resist the normative power of “the child” as a symbol of reproductive futurism and the heteronormative preoccupation with linear time and the manifestation of normative sexual scripts (Edelman 2004). While any reclamation of the child-

as-symbol is necessarily partial and risks reifying the child in new and unhelpful ways, I suggest that the figure of the playful child, as found in the two videogames discussed here, is theoretically generative and has the potential to subvert and resist the normative power of the child and the surveillance that shapes them through an emphasis on becoming and contingency while recapturing the political potential of play. Finally, linking this with the idea of “becoming” emphasizes how the playful child represents the possibility of deterritorialization. While Grosz (1994: 165) has summarized the important feminist critiques of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) conceptualization of becoming (and especially becoming-woman), she emphasizes that these conceptualizations and their “rare and affirming understanding of the body” are useful for feminist (and queer) scholars.

The videogames offer us two generative ideas related to this. First, by centring the child as the playable character, they remind us that play is an integral part of sexual development (and sex more generally), is *inherently* vulnerable if not risky, and that this is part of its value. The focus on the child also emphasizes that playfulness can be productively defined as “curiosity toward possible ways of being and acting out in the world,” including in relation to sex and sexuality (Paasonen 2018: 36). Despite—or perhaps because of—the enormous surveillance apparatus focused on young people’s sexual expression, it is imperative to recognize the connection between sex and play. While sexual play is often disciplined, the playful child reminds us that we can foster play as a form of becoming and queer futuring.

Second, by inviting players to approach sex with playful childishness, the videogames allow their adult audiences to buck the strictures of the heteronormative timeline and play in queer time. As Karaian and Van Meyl (2015: 27) argue, “contemporary politics of normalization are anchored in a particular normative temporal disposition” oriented always and unflinchingly toward the future. Surveillance and discipline—and, increasingly, data extraction and modes of positive, consumerist control—play a role in ushering us from playfulness to propriety. At the same time, unwillingness to interrogate normative temporality “renders us docile” (Karaian and Van Meyl 2015: 27). But by focusing on playfulness and childishness, the videogames allow one to resist this—however fleetingly. Paasonen (2018: 36) argues that while sexual play may be “generic and tied to repeatable patterns,” it also always holds the potential for “variation, improvisation, and change.” That is, playing sexual videogames—especially as combined with the temporal queerness of playing as a child—is a process of becoming and growing sideways and thus represents a possible threat to normative sexual scripts and sexuality. For adults, replaying youthful sexual exploration can help reveal the “self-naturalizing” present where the disciplining of sexual expression is accepted and often unchallenged and point to new possibilities for the future (Muñoz 2019: 28).

Becoming a playful child creates a bridge between the playful sideways growth of the child and the sexual maturity of the adult. Bruhm and Hurley (2004: 21) argue, “If there is anything ‘natural’ about children, it is their curiosity about bodies and pleasure, their desire to make stories that are not the colonizing narratives of heteronormativity.” Nonetheless, as Paasonen (2018: 73) argues, play scholars have historically done considerable boundary work to separate “childhood play from adult work and childhood asexuality—or innocence—from adult sexuality” in rigid ways. Conversely, *how do you Do It?* and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* use sexual play to open space for lateral movement and sideways growth, and, in doing so, re-connect childhood with sexuality and adulthood with play. I see playing these videogames where we become playful children as a sort of “rich remembrance” of sexual potentiality and exploration, which in turn “fee[ds] into a transformative queer politics” (Muñoz 2019: 36).

Playing, I am caught up in the rebellious enjoyment of skirting surveillance and discipline. As such, the game affords me a moment of queer temporality—a wrinkle in time by which I might gain some perspective on the normalizing power of “safety” and orient my desire toward making a future with less surveillance and more sexual freedom. We can read these videogames as producing not only a nostalgia for youthful sexual discovery (a multifaceted affect whose effects we should not assume, as discussed above) but also a desire for risky sexual play and a rejection of the regulatory regimes that aim to create “safe” public space at the expense of capacious sexual expression. The embodied sexual meaning of these videogames is also wrapped up in a desire for sex *beyond* safety because safety has come to mean a reduction in playful

experimentation and risk-taking, a territorialization of desire, increased surveillance and data extraction, and the narrowing of acceptable sexual expression.

The playful child represents the potential for becoming otherwise through play. They are a figure who plays in queer time—even us adults can become the playful child. Playing as a playful child is likely to give us the experience of being “‘shocked’ by the prison [of] heteronormativity” (Muñoz 2019: 39). As a becoming, the playful child visibilizes straight time: the surveillance, the discipline and control, the sex-exceptionalism and -negativity, and the antirelationality that texture our present lives. In doing so, they allow us to imagine otherwise. They symbolize capaciousness, infinite emergent possibilities (albeit always constrained by structural power, violence, etc.), and sexual potential. The playful child resists rhetoric about risk and the tendency to cleave sex from play. Critically, this does not mean that play is always positive and affirming. While infinite emergent possibilities may exist, they are not all good or healthy. As Paasonen (2018: 11) argues, “play—be it sexual or other—need not be understood as fully free, voluntary, equalitarian and exclusively connected to positive affect.” Equally, I do not want to suggest that this is necessarily transformative on a broad scale. Scholars have demonstrated how increased choice (and, analogously, playfulness) on the user end is often used by platforms to support greater surveillance and more specific forms of categorization (Schram 2019; Bivens 2017). In an era of rampant data extraction, platformed play contributes to this process.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed two games, *how do you Do It?* (Freeman et al. 2014) and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* (Seemingly Pointless 2017), and presented three readings of the affects and intensities the videogames produce. I have argued that the videogames reveal the perils of surveillance and its pleasures. Both videogames mobilize surveillance to augment and amplify sexual intensity and create other affects, such as nostalgia and the thrill of discovery. It is possible that these affects, particularly nostalgia, are reterritorialized in ways that reproduce ideas about harm and risk and the importance of disciplining sexual exploration. Perhaps most importantly, these two videogames allow us to become the playful child—to temporarily shake free from the constraints of heteronormative time, experiment beyond safety, and dwell in immature exploration. In doing so, they highlight the importance of theorizing play/sex and surveillance/pleasure together.

For me, this has been a somewhat unexpected but hopeful conclusion. While working as a sexual health educator, I saw firsthand the negative impacts of everyday instantiations of adult surveillance and discipline on young people’s agency and bodily autonomy. Playing *how do you Do It?* and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* was a good reminder that sexual desire has always been resilient and generative in even the most constrained regulatory and legislative environments. Increasingly, the internet is one such deeply surveilled and disciplined space. Platforms have responded to their growing role as “infrastructures of intimacy” by paradoxically engaging in aggressive deplatforming of sex (Paasonen 2021). While anyone who values the political potential that sexual expression holds should be concerned about the growing surveillance and deplatforming of sexual content in general and in videogames specifically, videogames like *how do you Do It?* and *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* helpfully remind us of the tremendous capacity of sexual desire to shape novel assemblages, bring bodies in machinic connection with other bodies, and generate lines of flight through play.

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