



Made by Fans, For Fans: Behind the Scenes of WWE 2K26

John Powell

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There is nothing that brings a fan more joy than to know that the people creating, designing whatever it is they love, are as big a fans as they are. Only a genuine fan can truly appreciate the small details, the lore and the legacy that goes into everything from *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter* to the WWE as each generation

adds their square to the overall quilt maintaining the history of heritage of those who came before them.

Knowing “Baby Yoda’s” real name is Grogu, Lord Voldemort was conceived under a love potion and that “Stone Cold” Steve Austin name came from him brooding over a cup of hot tea and his wife telling him: “You’d better drink your tea before it gets stone cold.” does make a difference. In the case of the WWE 2K franchise, they are truly games made by fans for fans.

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Slam Wrestling and other games, wrestling media, spoke with Visual Concepts, WWE 2K developers Lynell Jinks (Creative Director), Terrell Carter (Senior Game Designer), Cornell Gunter (Senior Producer), Bryan Williams (Gameplay Producer) to discuss some of the new improvements, additions, changes and why the losers of Inferno Matches aren’t shown being barbecued like Freddy Krueger in WWE 2K26.

John Powell, Slam Wrestling: Are there features or experiences you wanted to include in the game that haven't been able to, whether due to time, technology or other limitations?

Lynell Jinks: Always. You know, we only have less than a year to make this game and so we have a huge "blue sky" list, a huge backlog of things that we want to try. I mean, there's a ton of inspiration out there from just a wrestling standpoint and even from a video game standpoint as the industry is evolving all the time. We're highly aware of all the things that everyone else is doing, or has done in the past, and we're striving to include those things in our game. Hopefully, a lot of them will get in one day.

John Powell, Slam Wrestling: How does collaboration with WWE work during development? Do they review or approve content? And how closely are you involved with them?

Lynell Jinks: Everything we do has to get approved by WWE. We do consult with them. We send over our feature list and sometimes they'll give us some advice like, "Hey, you know, this thing might be coming up. You might want to look into this". I would say 2K25 and the Bloodline Rules was a perfect example of that. So, yeah, I think it's a great partnership. We work with them closely and we love when they have some surprises that they let us get a peek behind the curtain on before it actually debuts in WWE. That's always fun.



John Powell, Slam Wrestling: With a new edition coming out every year, what are the biggest challenges your team faces in keeping up with that schedule?

Lynell Jinks: I think that's the hardest part about what we do. You look at all the content that we provide our users, especially when you look at what we're doing with The Island, and then Terrell and Cornell with the Ringside Pass now and MyFACTION, this game feels like it doesn't end until we're right about to ship the next one,

right? We have to have everyone working on both titles. For the game that's going to come out next year, we're already starting to have discussions about that.

It's tough but I wouldn't want it any other way. I would say, look back at 2K22. That was a great reset for the franchise but the landscape of the WWE was changing so much in those two and a half years it took us to get that game out that it was hard to play catch-up. You're just like, "Oh my God, this person left, and this person came in, and this person changed their look and their whole persona". It made it so challenging to try to stay current.

A year is a short time but you're hoping that no one really changes that much...Kit Wilson is a great example of that, by the way or a certain superstar who likes to wear his hair down now, we try. The thing is, we try to do ourselves a favor by starting earlier, like, "Hey, let's try to get this done so that we can tune and polish and add more characters to the game". But sometimes that does bite us in the butt. So we try our best.

John Powell, Slam Wrestling: So this edition reportedly includes 234 MILLION playable characters. Are there any wrestlers you've always wanted to include but haven't been able to? What have been the hardest characters to develop?

Terrell Carter: Yeah, crazy! MyFACTION is working overtime.

Cornell Gunter: Yeah, always. Always looking for more people to add.

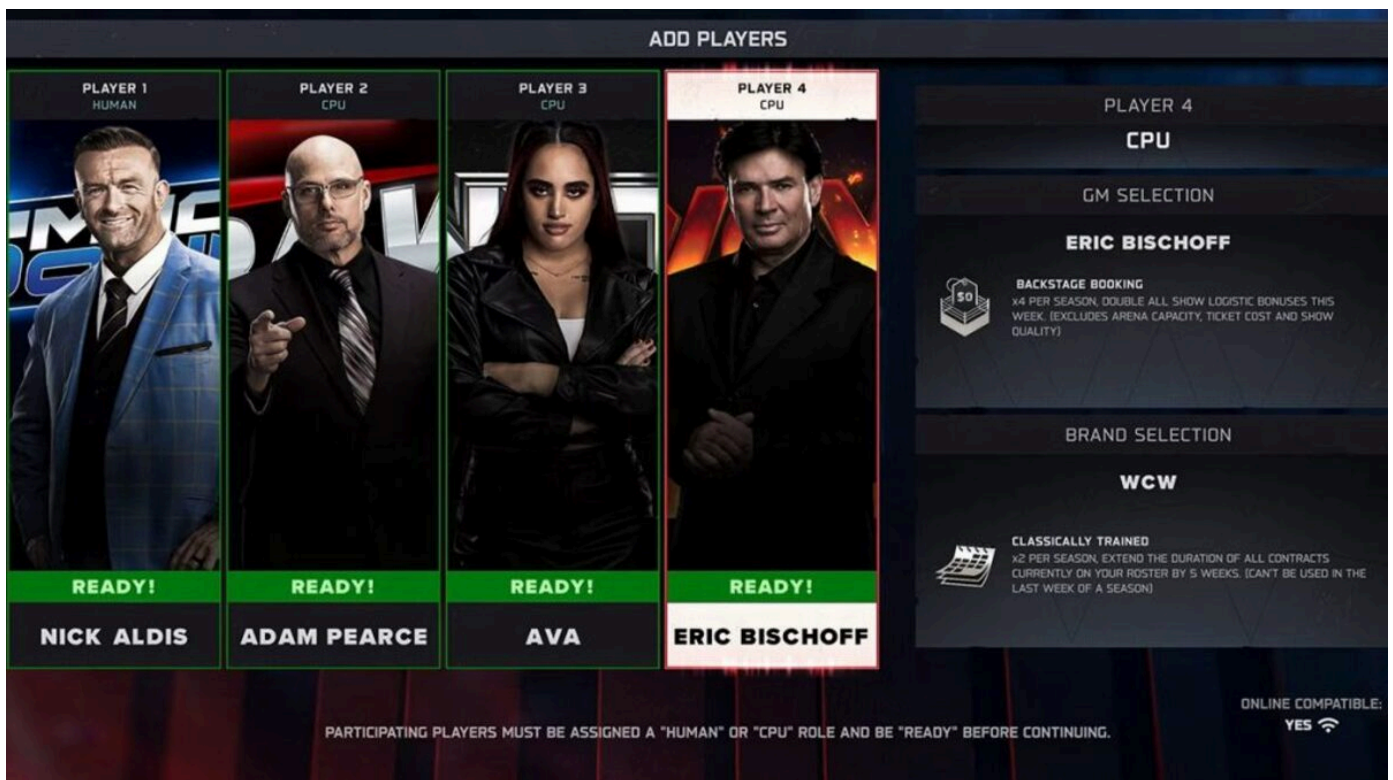
Lynell Jinks: I mean, Cornell is sneaking some characters into the Ringside Pass. (laughs)

Cornell Gunter: Hey, man, I gotta do what I can. I do what I can. (laughs)

Lynell Jinks: We do have over 400 playable characters in the game. That is a huge feat for us. Yeah, it's a lot of data to manage and control, especially when we add new things to the game. There is no guarantee that what used to work last year is going to work this year. So, it puts a lot of stress on the team to make sure they play as every single superstar and every single character in every

instance, in every new match type we're adding and even old match types. We have to make sure that stuff works right, and it's a huge effort on our Quality Assurance department to check all that stuff as well. Making games is hard but I wouldn't want any other profession.

John Powell, Slam Wrestling: What's the reasoning behind replacing traditional paid DLC with a Battle Pass-style Ringside Pass? Can you break down a little bit of how that works and how we can earn rewards?



Lynell Jinks: I'll take the first part and then kick it to Terrell and Cornell. As far as the reason why we changed our DLC model to this, we're just seeing where the industry is going. We felt like our DLC model was getting a little old school, getting a little long in the tooth, I would say. We wanted to try something new, right? So we tapped in Terrell and Cornell and various other people to try to figure out not only how we could drop a Battle Pass into our game

but what our fanbase would resonate with. What is something they feel will drive them to want to earn these unlockables through playing?

The key focus was making sure they feel rewarded for playing the game. We feel like our game has so much to offer and there are a lot of modes that people just don't even check out because they're like, "Oh, I'm not really a Universe person" or "I'm not really a MyRISE person". So, the challenge to those guys was to incentivize people to play the whole game. I'm going to quick-swap into Terrell and Cornell.

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Terrell Carter: So, to piggyback off Lynell, how does it work? Essentially, the biggest thing is that we don't want players to change their style of play. We want them to know they can also dip into other modes and potentially earn rewards. So, like Lynell talked about, if you go into MyRISE to complete the story, you get a good, significant boos and what players will see is that we have two tracks: a free one and a premium one. We offer over 100-plus rewards per season and we're doing six seasons for this lifecycle.

The bigger thing is for players to be able to have content to take through the entire game. Oftentimes, we've seen that after players receive the DLC results from our previous model, the gaming experience kind of got short. What we want to do is give them more things to chase and more content to run after.

Cornell Gunter: What I would add to that is that we always look for ways to connect the entire game. If you look at our game, as Lynell said, it has grown so big over the years that it's almost like several different games within one and so we've been looking for this connective tissue to bring them all together and the Ringside Pass is that. It is that connective tissue where you can play across any mode and get these rewards. You guys will see year-over-year that we start to bring the modes closer and closer together via the Ringside Pass and other features. This is the start of that.

John Powell, Slam Wrestling: How do you determine ratings for superstars in the game?

Bryan Williams: We have what you would call a little committee: myself, Cornell, and even you, Lynell—you chime in, you're part of the group too. Largely, we base our ratings off of where the superstars are in the hierarchy of the WWE. For example, comparing Rhea Ripley, who is sitting on top of the women's division, with, and I say this with all respect, Candice LeRae, who is a great performer in her own right but just isn't pushed at that same level. So, we look at where the characters are placed on the card, and we do our best to assign our OVR ratings accordingly.



We watch the programs week to week so that when someone goes into the game, they aren't put off—it would be crazy to have characters ranked ahead of Seth Rollins, right? It's all based on the wonderful fiction that is the WWE; it's almost like superheroes. Spider-Man is my favorite superhero but to rate him higher, at least in terms of strength, he's not stronger than Thor, right? That's a nice analogous balance to how we treat the OVRs. And again, at the end of the day, this is just us being fans of the WWE doing our best to assign attributes to these larger-than-life characters. I look back at our NBA team, our brethren on that side, and I'm like, "Man, I wish we had real-life stats to back everything up". That's a godsend to them, and even they still get hit up by people upset about their OVRs. But that's largely how we go about doing it.

Terrell Carter: To piggyback off of you, I think the biggest thing you hit on is the committee. It's a group of us. We come together, we watch every single WWE product on a week-in, week-out basis,

and we talk among each other. I like that there's always camaraderie and different perspectives. Our community doesn't know this, but we have long, respectful conversations back and forth. It's not just clicking a button; it's a good group of individuals who just love WWE.

Bryan Williams: That's a real point about the committee. Having the people involved that we do allows us to fill in certain gaps in our viewing. I'm a "sicko," though, so I do my best to watch everything, including Triple A. Because our roster now includes AAA, it helps that I've been keeping up with them. What do we feel about these characters who are in our first Ringside Pass? We're all able to come together and say, "I've been keeping up with that. What does everybody think about Vikingo? Where should he be ranked compared to Psycho Clown?" So, yeah, we have those discussions. The committee approach definitely works best because it would be terrible for one sole person to be responsible for describing attributes to the enormous amount of characters on the roster. It takes a village.

John Powell, Slam Wrestling: What's it like to see the game take on a life of its own when it gets into the hands of players?

Lynell Jinks: Exciting and also scary...The first time it gets into people's hands, something we've been working on for the whole year and you're like, Okay, this is the moment of truth, right? It's like, we're excited about it, but you don't know how it's going to hold up and if people are actually going to enjoy it.

Terrell Carter: It's definitely equal parts excitement and nervousness especially at the start when everybody gets to their

stations and they sit down, they got the sticks in their hands.

Cornell Gunter: I think for me, it's like coming from being as people like to cause me a sweat, like a hardcore, super duper hardcore, and being able to be on the side and work with the amazing guys and girls that I get to work with, it's always like, super rewarding. I still have the same feeling playing our game for the first time as I do as a consumer. So nothing changes. And then being in the room and creative press, it becomes contagious, right? You start to hear the oohs and aisles on one side and get the oohs and I was on the other. And you want to walk around the tea with the Ooh and aisle and about. So, like, for me, this picture like Brian Lionel and Terrell, like, the feeling never changes. It's like, it's literally like going lately, like going to school for the first time. You know, you got your first aid fit every single year non stop, so the assignment would never die.

Media: What has it been like expanding the roster to include AAA stars?

Lynell Jinks: I think it's a great addition. As Brian said, we're all fans of wrestling. Even though it's hard work, we love seeing new additions to the roster because we want to make sure every year feels different. If that means adding AAA this year and something else next year, it's a great landmark for us. It gives us a new energy.

I remember in '25 when we added Penta, Brian, you were like, "You guys have to check out his moves". When you looked at the performance, you were like, "Oh my God, it looks real". It sounds silly, but that's the stuff in development that gets us hyped, and we can't wait for people to check it out.

Bryan Williams: Yeah, absolutely. I think you guys probably had the same reaction when I was watching WrestleMania last year and they announced who purchased majority ownership of AAA. The very first thing in my head was, "What can we get for the game?" Can we get titles? Arenas? Characters? It adds a lot more work to the plate, but you set yourself up for work that you enjoy doing. For all of us developers here, it's a lot of work, but we've set ourselves up for work that we enjoy because we know the end result is going to please the fanbase and us, because we play this game too. I love the infusion of AAA, and I'm glad we have them in our first Ringside Pass. I'm hoping we can get even more in the years to come. It's a shot of energy into the roster.



Media: Can we expect to see more physics interactions coming back into the game in the future, as it currently feels it is mostly focused on how wrestlers interact with weapons?

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Lynell Jinks: We absolutely want to expand this.. I'm not going to say it's our first stab at it because I think we stabbed and we hit our target but it is the beginning of what players can expect moving forward. For 2K26, we specifically focused on two things:

improving our fall reactions and trying to eliminate those invisible barriers that anybody can feel in the game.

At any time you're near the ropes or a ledge and you go to do a throw or a move, there would be this invisible wall of collision that would prevent that character from going over the side. So, those are the two main areas of emphasis. We plan to continue to improve upon this moving forward.

You mentioned weapons; I think weapons were a small part this year. It's definitely there. For example, we have unique reactions to when a character is dropped on a chair or the ring steps. So, yeah, this is just a beautiful start of what's to come between now and next year.

Cornell Gunter: I would say the Scrap Yard was kind of like the place where we were like, "Hey, where can we showcase all of these new dynamic interactions that we included into the game this year?" We look at the Scrap Yard and climbing across that beam or falling off ledges onto those jump pads, there's just a ton of stuff in there that lends itself to seeing a lot of the new moments, I would say.

Media: One of my favorite parts of the WWE games is the story mode. Sounds like this year we're going to get plenty of replayability and stories similar, perhaps, to WWE SmackDown! Shut Your Mouth." That's an old-school one. What can players look forward to in terms of branching storylines, multiple endings, and replay value?

Lynell Jinks: I'd say the replay value for us was the focus on the MyRISE matches. We wanted to make sure that once you beat the full story and reach the climax, there is still progression. There are still ways you can lose a championship and try to earn it back. A lot of people invest so much time and effort into their superstars that to just have it end and ask "what else is there?"—well, go play those MyRISE matches and try to earn more RXP. It all works together; it's the circle of life.

Media: If I complete one of the Ringside Passes on a season with time to go—say I get to level 40—can I still earn and store RXP for a different season, or do I have to wait until the new season starts?

Terrell Carter: Currently, you do have to wait for the new season. Ringside Pass RXP does not carry over from season to season. But as AI said, the passes don't expire, so you can freely switch between them as long as you have more RXP to earn.

Media: In the Inferno Match, when you lose, the superstar is shown being sprayed with a fire extinguisher, but their body is not actually on fire. Is this a deliberate design choice?

Lynell Jinks: A lot of reasons. One is, what would showing someone catching on fire do to our ESRB rating? Also, figuring out the tech to get that to work is a huge investment for the graphics team, animation team, tech art, and engineers. In this first generation, let's just be fine with showing someone getting sprayed with the fire extinguisher. It's not that we haven't thought about it, but for this first iteration, let's not cross that bridge yet.

We don't know if it would change our rating to "Mature" instead of "Teen" if we went "full Freddy Krueger".

Media: What's the most difficult part about bringing more 'gimmicky' elements into gameplay?



Lynell Jinks: Man, Brian has to deal with a lot of that because it touches so many areas. Someone comes up with a crazy idea, like in '25 we had storylines where someone was floating in the air and disappearing, and Brian has to go and mocap that. Then, there's the gameplay part of it, like the Final Boss from the Rings in The Island last year. Brian and the gameplay team have to work with engineers, artists, and animators. It's not as simple as just adding one thing. Brian, how difficult was it to get the shopping carts in the game this year?

Bryan Williams: You know, as you said, making games isn't easy. Shopping carts are a great example. "Oh, a shopping cart, yeah, I can push it, I can use it as a weapon"—all those things have to be taken into smaller pieces. There was a crazy amount of mocap that went into supporting the basics of the shopping cart before you even made contact with an opponent. It was something new for the franchise, the ability to have a vehicle to scoop up an opponent. It took a lot of time, body, and energy, making sure everything felt right and that the physics worked. It's a testament to the team and our amazing engineers that we were able to get that stood up in the time we did.

As Lynell mentioned, we have less than a year to develop these games, and building a shopping cart alongside everything else we've added is amazing.

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Lynell Jinks: And thumbtacks, or even something as simple as the ref pulling a microphone out of their back pocket for the "I Quit" match. There's just so many facets where it's not just on one person; it touches gameplay, animation, character, everything. We have to make sure it's fun. I remember playing with the shopping cart and the pace felt slow and clunky. That's how it would feel

with a human being in a shopping cart in real life, but it's not fun. We had to ramp up the speed and interactions, which meant going back to mocap to shoot new things.

WWE 2K26 features four editions of the game: Standard Edition, King of Kings Edition, Attitude Era Edition, and Monday Night War Edition:

The Standard Edition will be available for \$69.99

Pre-Order Bonus Offer: Players who pre-order the WWE 2K26 Standard Edition will receive the Joe Hendry Pack, a bonus pack of content containing playable Superstar Joe Hendry, a Joe Hendry shirt cosmetic item, Joe Hendry MyFACTION EVO card, and Joe Hendry Spin Island Emote.

Players who pre-order any edition of WWE 2K26 for PS5, Xbox Series X|S, or PC will also receive the WWE 2K25 base game (digital).

Players who pre-order Attitude Era Edition or Monday Night War Edition on PlayStation or Xbox between January 29 and February 23 at 8AM PT will receive 15,000 VC in WWE 2K26 and 67,500 VC in WWE 2K25

King of Kings Edition will be available for \$99.99. King of Kings Edition includes the Standard Edition, Joe Hendry Pack, Ringside Pass Premium Season 1, and 32,500 VC, plus the King of Kings Pack which includes playable Superstars Triple H '98 and Stephanie McMahon '00, and a "Triple H Signature Taunt" Emote for The

Island. King of Kings Edition will be available from March 6, 2026 – seven days ahead of Standard Edition

Attitude Era Edition will be available for \$129.99. In addition to all content included in the King of Kings Edition, Attitude Era Edition includes access to Ringside Pass Premium Seasons 1-4, plus the Attitude Era Edition Pack, which features playable Superstars The Rock '99, Kane '98, and Chyna '97, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin "Rattlesnake" and The Rock "People's Champ" MyFACTION EVO cards, the Raw is War '98 Arena, and Undertaker "Thumb Across the Neck" and Shawn Michaels "DX Crotch Chop" Emotes for The Island.

The Superstar Mega-Boost is also included, which grants 200 MySUPERSTAR attribute points for MyRISE plus 100,000 VC. Attitude Era Edition will be available from March 6, 2026 – seven days ahead of Standard Edition

Monday Night War Edition will be available for \$149.99. In addition to all content included in the Attitude Era Edition, Monday Night War Edition includes access to Ringside Pass Premium Seasons 1-6, plus the Monday Night War Edition Pack, which features playable Superstars Shawn Michaels DX, Macho Man Randy Savage '98, Rowdy Roddy Piper '98, the WCW Thunder '98 Arena, and a Diamond Dallas Page "Bang!" Emote for The Island.

Monday Night War Edition also grants entitlement for the WrestleMania 42 Pack, which includes the WrestleMania 42 Arena and three WrestleMania 42 Superstar Persona Cards to be automatically entitled post-launch. Monday Night War Edition will

be available from March 6, 2026 – seven days ahead of Standard Edition.

Complete WWE 2K26 Details Revealed

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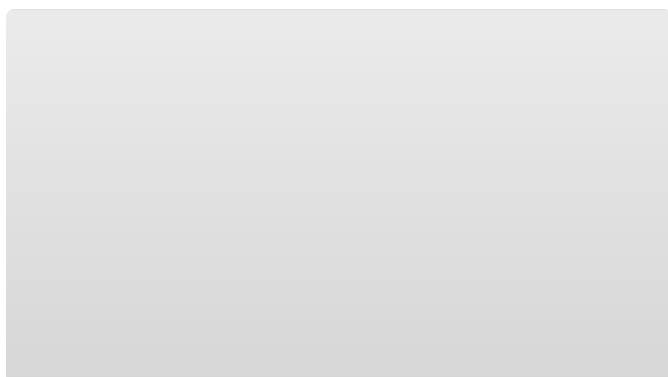
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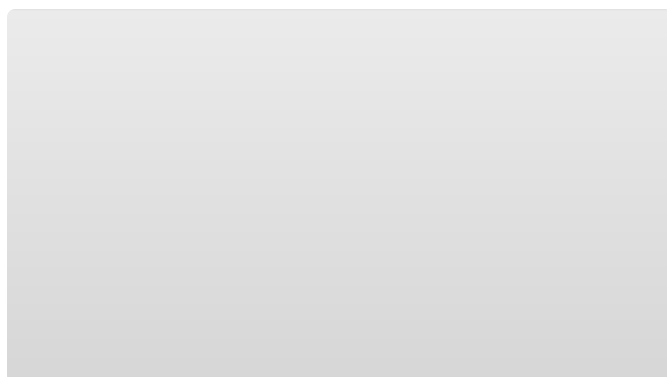
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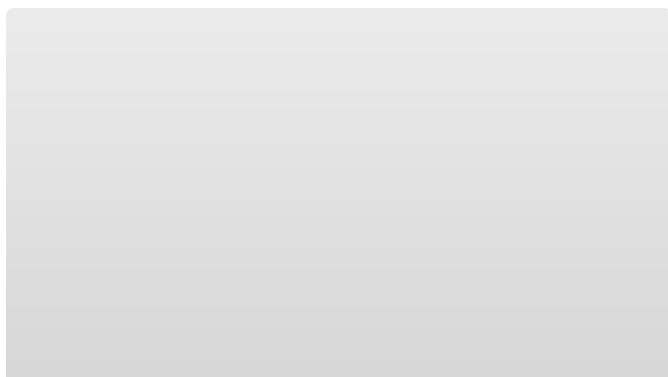
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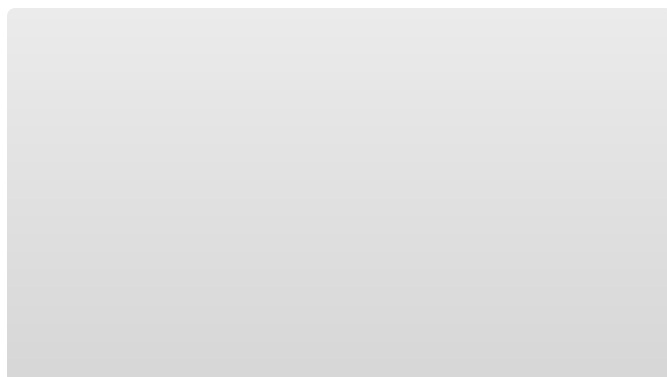
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