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Interrogating creativity theories through an AVPhD in documentary practice.

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The primary aim of my practice-led research PhD was to investigate creativity theories as they applied to documentary film-making practice. This practice-led research took a reflective and empirical approach, using a Practitioner Based Enquiry methodology (PBE) (Murray & Lawrence, 2000). A reflective journal, combined with the documentary production paperwork, as well as the production artefacts themselves, formed the ‘data’ that was collected across the four years of production. Two completed documentaries were created. The first was a low-budget 53-minute documentary, ‘Using Fort Scratchley’ commissioned by Local Government, using oral history interviews to capture the military, maritime, coal mining and Awabakal usages of the Fort Scratchley site situated in Newcastle, NSW, Australia. A second data-based documentary, ‘Fort Scratchley a Living History’ (www.fortscratchley.org), was created using the same content and was re-worked as an interactive online documentary.

Using the Fort Scratchley documentary production context, the research was designed to interrogate the effectiveness and appropriateness of a particular creativity confluence model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999), a group creativity model (Paulus, 2003) and some staged creative process theories (Bastick, 1982; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Wallas, 1976). While it can be assumed, because of the word ‘creativity’, that these models can be easily applied to documentary production practice, in fact, the data analysis reveals layers of complexity within these creativity theories that account for collaborative practices as well as a practitioner’s internalized and tacit knowledge. This paper will discuss how theories about creativity helped to demystify my creative process and how I mediated internal and external skills and knowledge through out the Fort Scratchley documentary production context specifically in relation to the development of the CGI animation component of it.

Introduction:

The documentary project that formed the basis of this practitioner-led research began in April 2004, through an industry/academic research initiative called '*The Living History of Fort Scratchley*'. Initiated by Newcastle City Council, [NCC] in NSW Australia, the pitch targeted academics from University of Newcastle's [UoN] History and Communication disciplines. This collaborative research proposal aimed to produce an historical thesis and two short video documentaries on Fort Scratchley, Newcastle, with financial assistance from NCC as the industry partner. I was invited to create the video's, which became my PhD research project. The research project grew in size and scope and two documentaries, a video and an online documentary were created over four years. Both were launched at the re-opening of Fort Scratchley in June 2008, which celebrated the end of the \$10 million site refurbishment. The linear fifty-three minute documentary, '*Using Fort Scratchley*', was packaged on a DVD with thirty-three minutes of DVD extras. One thousand copies of the DVD were duplicated and put on sale at \$15 each through the Fort Scratchley Historical Society. Two hundred and fifteen DVD's have been sold in twelve months all profits from these sales go directly to the upkeep of the Fort.

Also created in 2007, and updated in 2008, was an online, documentary titled '*Fort Scratchley a Living History*'. Created out of the need to boost local and international understandings and awareness of the historical significance of the site, the data-base contains over 300 media files which can be accessed through a dated timeline. To streamline user's interactions, the dates have been grouped into prescribed 'tours', developed around the various communities who knew the site by different names and used the site. The communities are the Awabakal (the local indigenous tribe), Maritime, Military, Coal Mining and Theatrical communities. A sixth prescribed tour containing historical highlights of the Fort is also on offer. Website users statistic's show between 100 to 200 users per month, averaging twenty minutes online and a total of 4,840 users over two years.

While these statistics and the DVD sales provide one way to verify the communities' reactions to the documentaries, the research imperative driving this study was to investigate creative documentary practice, in line with socio-cultural approaches to creativity, for a low-budget documentary context. Since the final cash budget for both the online and the DVD production came in at \$39,000¹ Australian dollars these financial constraints meant that I undertook many roles, multi-skilling, multi-tasking and in some cases learning craft practices to service the production requirements. This specific production context constraint provides the basis for one of the aims of the PhD research, which was to discover the limits of creative documentary practice, and if indeed the final production quality was altered by the collapsing of editorial and production crew roles. These findings can only be discussed in terms of my practitioner understandings of a 'quality production' as the methodology did not encompass any audience research.

Methodology:

A Practitioner Base Enquiry Methodology [PBE] (Murray, 2000) was employed for

¹ These funds were raised through a number of University of Newcastle small research grants and direct support from the Newcastle City Council. There were two attempts to secure Australian Research Council Linkage Grants but unfortunately these were unsuccessful.

the research. Successfully used in other practitioner-led research environments like teaching (Burton, 2005) and nursing (Johns, 2006), PBE has a similar methodological approach to action research, participant observation² and auto-ethnography. While PBE could be seen as being a very subjective form of research, what it aims to do in this case is provide an insider perspective on the experience of creative documentary practice in a low-budget environment. The methodology permits the gathering of evidence or 'data' from the point of view of the documentary practitioner and their context of production. In this case the 'data' was collected through a reflective learning journal, which spanned four and a half years³. Also used for analysis were documentary production paperwork, email correspondences and material drawn from the work itself. As Bell argues research methodologies that elicits evidence of an individual's process is often used by

creative professionals who wish to advance their understanding of their professional field ... [they] might seek to interrogate craft practices and professional conventions to arrive at a reconfigured art activity (Bell, 2008, 176).

This approach allowed the creative practice and the research to be framed by the statement/question which itself determined the focus of the self reflective and reflexive study (Milech, 2004, 7). This subjective and self-reflective approach to research can be problematic when viewed from some of the more traditional areas of scientific research however, it can be claimed that individual creative research contributions need to be gathered by insiders as well as other researchers to complete the body of knowledge in a given domain. As McIntyre argues:

without an insider/practitioner perspective on creative activity being added to the stock of knowledge available to all then that accumulated knowledge cannot be considered to be complete (McIntyre, 2006, 1).

The original knowledge to be provided to the documentary canon through this paper is twofold. Firstly, the application of current creativity theories to documentary practice is original and unique and my research in this area can be traced through conference presentations (S. Kerrigan, 2006, 2008, 2009) and one journal publication (S. Kerrigan, & McIntyre, P., Forthcoming). The second area of contribution to original knowledge can be identified through the methodological approach where a documentary practitioner interrogates their own creative engagement. While documentary theorists and practitioner's cite the 'creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson, 1933, 8) as the seminal definition of documentary (Ellis, 2005, 4) in fact what has been found in my research is that documentary scholars rigorously discuss the interpretations of 'treatment' and 'actuality' but discussions on the definitions of 'creativity' and 'creative process' are not fully addressed⁴, except for Winston's well critiqued opinion. Winston articulates an extensive debate explaining how

² Previous research, by Roger Silverstone, used a participant observation research methodology, on the production of a BBC Science program, published in 1985.

³ The first entry was on May 7th, 2004, and the last entry was 31st December, 2008 with a total page count of 149 typed pages.

⁴ The texts reviewed were Ayres et al. 1990; Austin, 2009; Bruzzi, 2006; Cohen, 2009; Compesi, 2007; Dannbaum, Hodge, & Mayer, 2003; Dancyger 2003; Mollison, 2003; Nicholas, 2001; Proferes, 2005; Rabigar, 2004; Renov, 1993; Rosenthal, 2002; Wayne, 1997;

documentary film's understanding of 'creative' can be underpinned by the 'broader debate about the creative nature of photography' (1995, 17) which has led to a more theoretical consideration of 'film as art' and 'film as reproduction'. What has emerged in the literature since Winston articulated these arguments is an assumption that 'creativity' implies a clever manipulation of the truth. Bruzzi summarises this argument,

the fundamental preoccupation is with 'creativity' being ascribed to 'documentary', but only because creativity is taken, very rigidly, to denote anything that detracts from the document, the truth, the evidence at the heart of the non-fiction film (2006, 76)

Keeping this creative misunderstanding in relation to documentary in mind, the purpose of my PhD and this conference paper is to present evidence from my practice-led research that explores psychological and social cultural research definitions of creativity and creative process. The purpose is to broaden the understanding of creativity in relation to documentary practice research and move beyond its limited and often commonsense use.

Staged Creative Process Theories:

The creativity theories applied here have helped to demystify my creative process, specifically how I mediated internal and external skills and knowledge through out the Fort Scratchley documentary production context. While there are many theories on creativity, the specific theories drawn on in this section help explain where a practitioner's intuition comes from.

Bastick argues the creative process is made up of two stages *intuition*, *verification*, where intuition is defined as 'non-linear parallel processing of global multi-categorised information' (1982, 215). He convincingly argues that it is a mistake to see intuition in a metaphysical or mystical way. Bastick believes intuition is rationally explicable. Another theorist Wallas, had previously seen the creative process as a four staged process of preparation, incubation, illumination and verification (1976, 69-73). Bastick's asserts that 'intuition' results when the first three stages of preparation, incubation and illumination proposed by Wallas are collapsed into one phase (1982, 310-311). He argues that in order for skills to become automatically processed, or intuitive, they need to be learnt and subsumed into the way a practitioner acts without thinking. It can also be argued that condensing three phases into the single phase of intuition may only be possible for highly skilled practitioners, however, it also has to be noted that sometimes the intuitive phase is so implicit and internalised that the practitioner is not actually able to explain why they are acting in a certain way.

Bastick and Wallas are not the only theorist to see creativity in this rational way or propose staged creative process theories. Others, such as Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 83-86), Dacey (1998) and Nemiro (2004) are further examples. Regardless of who outlines the stages or how they are put together, the staged creative process models demonstrate a logical progression whereby a practitioner follows a predictable staged process which emphasises the learning of skills and knowledge that occur through sustained practice. These creative staged process theories are laid out in a linear order, making them appear as a set of discrete linear structures. But in reality, as this and other research confirms, the stages are non-linear and their overlapping, non-

sequential progression confirms that the creative process is highly iterative and recursive (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 83). The documentary production process of project development, pre-production, production, post-production and distribution can be seen in a similar vein. Further more it is theoretically possible to overlay the five staged screen-based production process with Csikszentmihalyi's five-staged creative process⁵ (1996, 83-86) thus providing a creative structure against which documentary practitioners can organise their work.

Creative Documentary Practice Analysis:

My practitioner intuition, built up through years of experience in television production, initially made me reject the invitation to be included in this project. I saw it as being too large for one person to undertake alone and documentary was not my area of professional practice. Previously I had worked in drama and children's television at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. However, a telephone call from an Associate Professor in our Faculty prompted me to change my mind when he mentioned that an Historian from the UoN, Dr Erik Eklund, took a 'Living History' approach to research which involves a methodological approach that incorporated dramatic re-enactments. Using dramatic re-enactments to tell Fort Scratchley's historical stories from the very locations where they occurred was a very interesting proposition for the basis of a documentary and scripted doco-drama was more in line with my professional practice. So I got excited about this project and agreed to speak with both the Historian and the NCC about their ideas in more detail.

The first meeting with the NCC's representative, Grant Halvorsen, took place seven weeks later where I proposed to make two videos that could act as trigger's encouraging site visitor's to go and explore the site. My journal entry for this period stated that:

On reflection I feel that I had met the council's intended expectations of the content of these videos. Hence Grant's enthusiasm completely reassures me that even at such an early stage of negotiations, we are essentially working on the same "films". I had been able to come to this idea about a video which "triggered" site visitors during my first reading of Grant's email where he laid out the councils intended requirements/expectations (S. Kerrigan, Reflective Journal, 7 May, 2004).

In collaboration with Historian, Dr Eklund, it was agreed that a collaborative approach would be taken whereby a research assistant from history would undertake the oral history interviewing, that would be videoed, providing a recorded account of site memories. These would form the basis of the re-enactments to be scripted and shot. However, even without oral history interviews it was certain that the most significant historical event in the Fort's history had to be included in the documentary. During World War 2 a Japanese Submarine shelled Newcastle, Fort Scratchley's six-inch guns returned fire on the I-21 submarine. There were no deaths from the 34 Japanese shells that were fired but there was one causality.

⁵ Csikszentmihalyi's five staged process is preparation, incubation, insight, evaluation, elaboration, it uses similar language to Wallas's processes and is verified by psychological research.

The Fort Scratchley Historical Society celebrates this incident, because Fort Scratchley is the only mainland military installation in Australia to have fired on an enemy vessel during war. The interview with an elderly Jim Cannon, who manned one of the two guns that fired on the Japanese Submarine, was recorded on June 29, 2005. Jim has since passed away, but his recollections of the attack significantly contribute to the documentary's claim to accurately recount the events of that night.

Filming a re-enactment of a Japanese Submarine shelling Newcastle Steel works, of course would be extremely difficult on a low budget. I did not know how I was going to achieve this. However, what became more of a problem was gaining access to the Fort Scratchley site in order to film re-enactment's of the six-inch gun's firing on the submarine. Fort Scratchley was closed for restoration in August 2004 but the funding short fall stalled those restorations. The site was closed to public access for two and a half years, lack of site activity meant that some of the already decaying historical buildings and military tunnels were being further destroyed by vandalism and neglect. So site access became a significant issue for the production, slowly I realized that it would be impossible to film any scripted dramatizations without safe site access. Even though this project was a joint Communication/History research project I felt very disconnected throughout the documentary production from the Historians who had persuaded me to work along side them. Here is a journal entry that illustrates, Historian Dr Eklund's disappointment at my decision to not film the re-enactments:

Today I had a meeting with Erik Eklund and I realised that he didn't know that I'd pretty much dropped the dramatisation angle because I haven't been able to get access to the site. He seemed almost disappointed about this and of course I felt that I should have kept him more informed about the project. But without site access it's very difficult to dramatise oral histories that are so connected with the site (S. Kerrigan, Reflective Journal, 14 November, 2006).

While Erik was disappointed by my decision I had long since moved on from my own disappointment. Instead, I became pre-occupied with finding an acceptable way to effectively draw an audience into Jim Cannon's memory of that night without the use of dramatic re-constructions. After some thought, I realized that animation was the answer. In 2005, a colleague of mine, Dr Brian Regan, asked me to prepare some Computer Generated Imagery [CGI], brief's for a third year Cinema 4D class. I prepared three brief based on Fort Scratchley's history, one of these was the I-21 submarine shelling the port of Newcastle. Unfortunately, most of the work was unusable because the CGI's did not geographically represent Newcastle Harbour.

When it became clearer that site access would restrict the filming of the dramatizations, the documentary editor and myself looked over these CGI files. We found one file that provided a recognizable geographical match to Newcastle Harbour. The student Matt Brown had been able to, through his personal contacts, access the geometric data of Newcastle. This data was easily read by the software, and the landforms that were created in Cinema 4D were an exact geographic replica of Newcastle Harbour (S. Kerrigan, Reflective Journal, 29 November, 2006). The problem that then arose was that neither the editor nor myself could use Cinema 4D. So I approached a Design colleague who recommended Geoffrey Hookham, and his friend Bill Farmakis to work on Brown's CGI files. An entry in my reflective journal from this time discusses my main concern at employing Hookham and Farmarkis

while they both had limited working knowledge of Cinema 4D software they were motivated to learn. Given the Fort Scratchley site access production constraint, I had no other option but to agree and see what sort of animation these student's could deliver.

From a creative process perspective Hookham and Farmakis were working through their own staged creative process in tandem with the CGI production. However what started to emerge for me was evidence of the social and collaborative nature of the creative documentary process and how important it is for a practitioner to be open to opportunities that are provided through group diversity and group environments. In this case both the diverse make up of the group and the documentary production environment were being constrained and enabled by the tertiary education structure that I was immersed in. Group creativity identifies three main aspects of group functioning: group members, group processes, and group context (Paulus, 2003, 332). The group creativity model developed by Paul Paulus (2003) is useful for justifying the collaborative nature of the group creative processes and was important in illustrating this for the CGI process for the documentary.

Group creativity research is drawn from 'diverse traditions of cognition, groups, creativity, information systems, and organisational psychology' (Paulus, 2003, 5) Creative group performance is evaluated through four themes: group diversity and creative potential, obstacles to the realization of creative potential, group climate and group environment. The actions of these factors and themes can be represented diagrammatically.

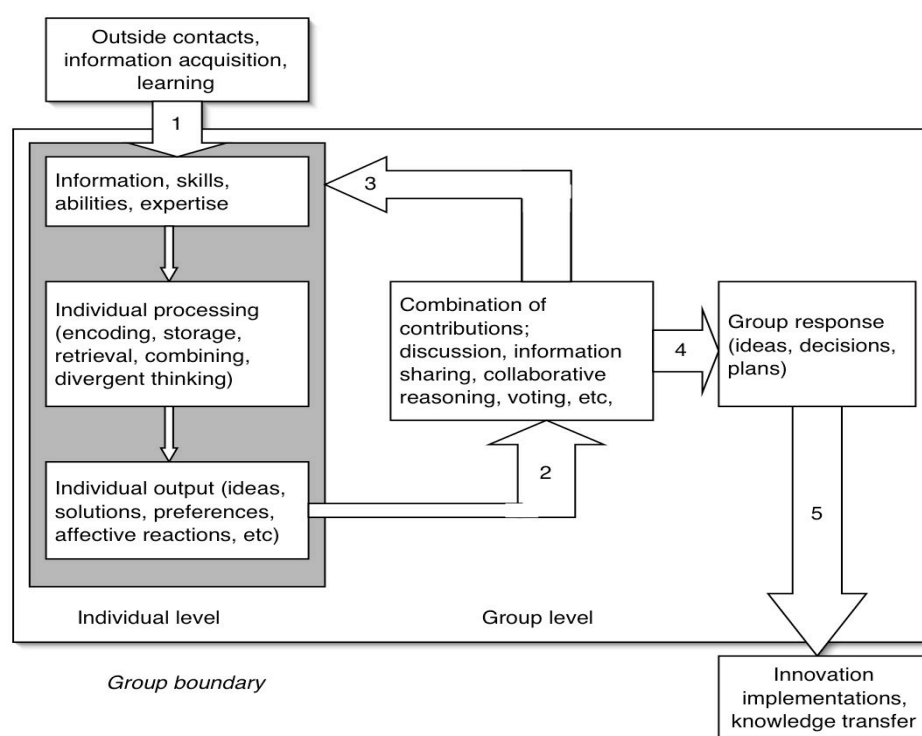


Figure 1: A Generic Model of Group Creativity (Paulus, 2003, 334)

In the model (see figure 1) the grayed rectangle represents the individual's creative process. For inexperienced practitioners this may be best paralleled with Wallas four staged creative process, and for experienced practitioner's through Bastick's two

staged process. Needless to say each of us working on the CGI production had our own, inter-related individual creative process that we were undertaking in order to contribute to production of the CGI animation.

My contribution to the CGI production entailed having to script narratives from the transcripts of the oral history interviews verified by documented personal accounts and Australian Military War Diaries. As previously mentioned, the student animator's had their own individual creative processes as well. Just as their knowledge of the animating software and documentary process grew so too did my knowledge and enjoyment of working within CGI worlds. For example, the collaborative CGI work that we undertook, taught me that complex camera moves, that would cost significant dollars to execute on a location based set, could be easily created in a 3D world.

So this generic group creativity model helps illustrate how each of us, though working on elements of the same inter-related process were in fact dealing with quite different individual creative processes. One of our main obstacles in the groups performance was lack of knowledge. Group motivation for acquiring knowledge was strong, but the time that it took to acquire the knowledge was one of the main production constraints. So on some levels we were all experiencing the extended stage creative process set out by Wallas. Slowly our 'group intuition' developed, through a dedication to the process of CGI production. Work was repeatedly passed from the student animator's represented by arrow 2 in the model, for feedback and discussion from the editor and myself. More work on the animations was then required, represented by arrow 3.

Finally, when we were happy with what had been done in draft quality, we had to output the CGI's as full resolution movie files. Which could be seen as arrow 4 in the model, but another obstacle was identified during the rendering of the full quality version of the 'Japanese Submarine Attack'. The 27 seat render farm, exported all but two animated frames. Later, this error was traced back to some technical key framing parameters of the underwater explosions caused by light diffractions through the water. However, at that time these two un-rendered frames prevented the 1567 framed sequence from being exported, effectively sending the group back to the individual problem solving level of arrow 3, and another individual was brought onto the team to help solve this technical problem.

A Design colleague Roger Quinn, had the skill and knowledge of Cinema 4D to identify the problem with the file and provide a solution. In terms of the creative group process this could also be seen as the creative process phase of illumination, that is, a moment where a breakthrough occurs. My journal entry during this time reflected this:

Roger thought that the network render would tile the final frames, but it didn't in this case. So when Roger got in about 3.30pm he suggested that we duplicate the frame before the frames that were still being rendered, and save them in the list of rendered frames (December 13, 2006).

Roger's suggestion worked, by duplicating the two troublesome frames and renumbering them as part of the sequence. The Cinema 4D Net Render was tricked into thinking that all the frames required for the sequence were now completed.

Hence allowing the exported file to be created. Creative verification of the animation was achieved after a five day render for a fifty second sequence. Roger felt that his moment of illumination, which solved the rendering problem, highlights one of the key lessons learned from the CGI process; that is, to *only* be concerned with what the viewer will see, not what the virtual world contains.

What is important about this detailed description of the CGI production context is that it identifies the occurrence of discrete individual yet collective staged creative process cycles while also demonstrating the iterative and recursive nature of the group creative process. In essence, validating the existence of the creative process within the group creativity model confirms that the CGI documentary production process verifies Paulus's group creative theory but it has to be stated that it also demonstrates its relationship to the systems model of creativity.

The systems model of creativity is a sophisticated theory that explains the convergence of social, cultural and individual creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The model is comprised of three components, Domain, Field and Individual and it is argued that:

For creativity to occur, a set of rules and practices must be transmitted from the domain to the individual. The individual must then produce a novel variation in the content of the domain, the variation then must be selected by the field for inclusion in the domain (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, 315)

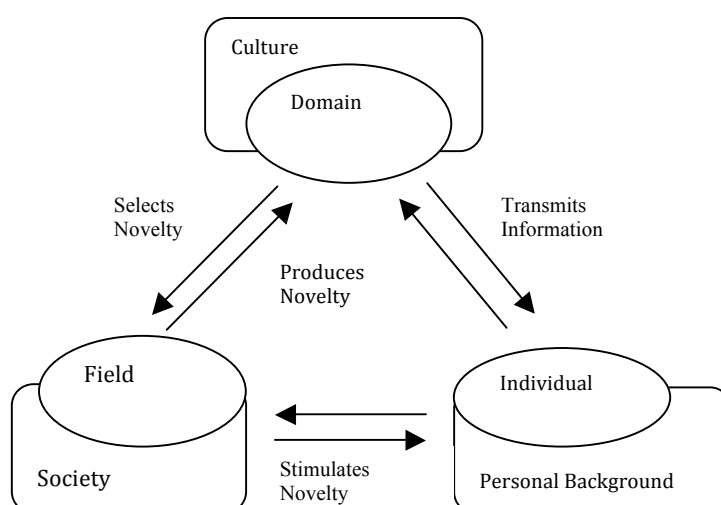


Figure 2, The Systems Model of Creativity

In terms of this project, the domain is identified as being two broad areas of knowledge, which are the history of the Fort Scratchley site, which I had to research and absorb in order to construct the documentary narrative and also my understanding of documentary production and consumption. In terms of the system the individual is me, which includes my personal and professional background. My professional practice is a component of this and that practice requires me to draw on my intuition and tacit knowledge as I engage in familiar tasks and learn to do new ones until they also become automatic. The Field is the social organisation that has some understanding of the knowledge being used. In the case of the Fort Scratchley

documentary it is primarily made up of the field of experts who contributed to and collaborated on the production:

These are nineteen technical crew, twenty interviewees, and twelve institutions. Institutions in this case are Museums and Cultural bodies that house archival material as well as the Local Council who commissioned the work (S. Kerrigan, 2008, 266).

My creative documentary practice is generated through the intersection of these broad categories. Csikszentmihalyi argues that 'creative individuals are those who are able to internalise this system' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1995: online). So, while the systems model can be applied, in a more pedestrian way to explain the external interactions of the three components of any creative activity like documentary production, it can also be applied to the individual's internalised creative processes. Just as intuition has been explained as being the multi-categorised processing of information which is exemplified in the example used to illustrate the group creativity model above, the system's model is able to extrapolate and name what these categories of information are and how they are determined by the domain and the creative activity. Thus the knowledge exchange that occurs between these identified categories can be internalized and used in a regenerative and iterative way by an individual engaged in a creative activity. In this case it can be claimed that the documentary analysis presented above reveals layers of complexity in the creative process that account not only for a documentary practitioner's internalized and tacit knowledge but also for collaborative practices located within particular social and cultural settings.

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