

Atmospheric Occasions: Parties, Markets and Games

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The Other Market

Our focus is on one specific research-creation project called The Other Market. Initiated in 2021 and significantly bottlenecked by COVID, The Other Market is a participatory experience created by the Liveness research group at the Technoculture, Art and Games research centre at Concordia University in Montreal. Months of discussion, paper and board game prototyping, technical development and playtesting will culminate in the first public “performance” of the experience on April 22, 2023.

The Other Market is “played” by three teams of three people in the context of live artisanal market brought together for the occasion of the performance. The experience proceeds through a series of rounds in which players in different roles, explore the “object world” of the market around them through audio stories, photographic images and papercraft. Through it all, the players are invited to ponder the storied character of objects and their assembly in the form of collections. The whole experience is a kind of mini-larp locative media treasure hunt exquisite corpse gameshow.

The Other Market is an experience broadly about the material sociality of marketplaces and the ways in which people’s relationship to things exceed and escape their reduction to exchange and consumption. The Other Market is also an experiment in 3-player game dynamics (a very unexplored modality of game and participatory theatre design which we are conducting with our London based theatre partners (Persis Jadé Maravala and Jorge Lopes Ramos of ZU-UK) and in what we call the mechanics of liveness – scaffolding player participation and interaction to carry the weight of experience with minimal or light intervention (which we are working on with Jaakko Stenros amongst others). Ultimately the experience is meant to be playable by anyone anywhere in any market context. That context... the market... is everything though and this is what our paper is about – how might the market context matter for playing The Other Market?

Our design concern focuses on market experiences, this symposium is about parties. The two are pragmatically linked in several ways but to provide some conceptual background for thinking about both contexts we draw on literature in what is called the sociology of social occasions (Goffman 1967, Wynne 2016 and Goffman 2019). Parties and Markets are to be seen as types of social occasions which share some formal and informal properties that are relevant for gamey experience makers such as ourselves. Beyond this we explore a materialist amendment to our sociological considerations drawing on work in human geography and the idea of affective atmospheres for understanding our play space as both a social and material composition with structured but indeterminate affect (Brennan 2004, Anderson 2009, Michels 2015).

This paper comes in two parts... the first, which you are reading, provides a loose conceptual background that informs our design almost after the fact. That is, the design process we will describe

prompted our thinking about social occasions and affective atmospheres not the other way around. And in fact, we did not take the idea of the sociology of occasions so seriously until we saw the prompt for the symposium (Goffman 2019). Because of this, the analysis that follows is less a presentation of research findings than it is part of the ongoing research that can hopefully prompt a conversation across the projects presented at the symposium. The second part of “the paper” will be presented in Tampere to take advantage of insights gleaned from the performance of *The Other Market* on April 22 – too late for that experience to be incorporated into this pre-circulated paper but perfect timing for a more focused presentation in Tampere.

Its my Party

The symposium’s theme of party and our ideas about markets are linked directly via the inimitable sociology of Erving Goffman. And indeed we can not fail note the Goffmanian thread that runs through the call for papers because the very vagueness of the idea of a party is exactly what Goffman’s observational approach to social life would aim to resolve. Goffman did not write about parties as such, but they clearly fall under the category of what he called “social occasions” (Wynne 2016). Goffman usefully defined a social occasion as a,

“wider social affair, undertaking, or event, bounded in regard to place and time and typically facilitated by fixed equipment; a social occasion provides the structuring social context in which many situations and their gatherings are likely to form, dissolve, and re-form, while a pattern of conduct tends to be recognized as the appropriate and (often) official or intended one.” (Goffman 1967:18)

A few points stick out in this definition: Firstly, occasions are different from other kinds of social structures like institutions or communities in the sense that they are limited in time and space – they are discrete social units that come and go. In some cases, occasions are highly ritualized, orderly, and predictable like bar mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals and in other cases less orderly like raves, demonstrations or one-day discount sales. Occasions are generally not spontaneous though – this is not the ‘madness of crowds’ but rather an orchestrated or planned social event with a fixed time horizon.

Parties certainly fit this model in the sense that most parties are fixed in advance in time and place and usually involve a more or less closed or restricted membership (by invitation or word of mouth). Parties can be formal or informal, ritualistic or radical, intimate or alienating. That parties are generally celebratory, joyful, and happy occasions says less about the form of the occasion than the set of normalized expectations for how one is meant to act at parties. It is possible to define a wake as a party in such terms as well as other occasions which are not obviously parties in the strict sense of any common-sense usage of the term.

Second, occasions are crucially seen by Goffman to be containers for smaller sub-interactions which he termed gatherings (unfocused) or encounters (focused). People come together within the boundaries of occasions in different sorts of interactions and performances that are literally occasioned by the social occasion. A classic model of the encounter for Goffman as most folks at the symposium know are the playing of games (Goffman 1961). Goffman usually invoked card games or word games but party games fit the occasion nicely as discrete encounters situated with the larger frame of the social occasion of a party. The key point here though is the idea of nested interaction – a social occasion is defined as a kind

of container for a myriad of focused and unfocused encounters and this above all makes occasions distinct as a sociological form. It is a social form that has a kind of determined indeterminacy in the sense that a planned event as social occasion presupposes unanticipated interactions within its limits.

Empirically this becomes interesting because by this definition a party where everyone is doing the same thing, or which is governed by a single encounter is barely meeting the criteria of a social occasion in the Goffmanian sense. This means that a student of social occasions must train their eye to look for 'other things going on' aside from the main event as it were. Thus, a dinner party where everyone is solely focused on eating is not much of a social occasion unless the event also serves as a platform for the surfacing of rivalries, loves, workplace gossip as well as side-bar conversations in the kitchen, the living room... or perhaps the interactions on participants cell phones.

Thirdly, even though occasions contain a multitude of interactions, gatherings, and encounters the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and the occasion itself is a kind of meso-sociological unit that sits between micro-interactions on the one hand, and larger stable social structures on the other. That is, occasions tend to be structural enough as to constitute a collective and common sense of what is going on and how to normally (and not normally) conduct oneself. This for Goffman is key – occasions allow participants to “affirm their affiliation and commitment to their collectivities and revive their ultimate beliefs” (1983: 9). The determinate indeterminate status of social occasions makes them not only super important sites of social coordination where norms and conventions are publicly performed but also sites where those norms might be challenged and confronted with potential repercussions beyond the occasion itself. Social occasions can be highly stressful for people because of this and perhaps this is also why they do not happen all the time.

Parties then are crucially, meeting points or crucibles, for participants to work through the conventions and expectations of everyday social life. The birthday party as social structure makes demands on participants to act and feel in specific ways that are more or less ritualized and culturally reinforced, but as a discrete occasion containing indeterminate interactions, it is possible to deviate from norms with varying degrees of openness and plausible deniability. This is where Goffman's ideas meet with Bakhtin's on Carnival as a kind of large-scale social occasion where public performances of social inversion (the peasant is carried on the back of the king) are both possible and encouraged. Not all parties are carnivalesque by nature but all parties as kinds of social occasions may become carnivalesque because of their specificity as a social form.

To finish with this Goffman inspired introduction to parties as social occasions it is worthwhile pointing to the work of the other Goffman... Alice Goffman actually did do extensive ethnographic work on parties. Goffman extends her father's analysis in ways that we think are especially interesting for thinking through the game design or experience design of social occasions... whether they are parties or as we shall argue... market experiences.

Parties as potentially transformational experience

Unlike her father, Alice Goffman pushed less on parties as sites of social reproduction and more as sites of change with respect to individual life course and biography. Goffman looks at parties as “sites of unanticipated turning points in the lives of those attending... rather than sites of mere play, bracketed

off from the serious concerns of life, social occasions are key to how serious life unfolds” (2019: 53-54). Here Goffman is not only extending her father’s analysis but also the line from Simmel through Huizenga which would see parties in terms of ‘magic circle’ like experiences set apart from everyday life. For Goffman, parties can be crucibles for major shifts in the lives of participants. We won’t go into too much detail here but Goffman’s analysis unfolds through interviews with people at various stages of the life-course about important and pivotal moments in their lives. Social occasions like parties are often fingered as occasions where people broke up relationships, started new ones, got offered new job opportunities, had epiphanies with respect to their identities and so on. From all this Goffman begins to conclude, “The claim I make for social occasions-from those marking a status change, like weddings, to that are officially consequential, like doctor’s visits and job interviews, to those with no built in consequentiality whatsoever, like drinks at the pub-is that they possess a comparatively high change of prompting indeterminate occurrences that spill past the occasion’s designated parameters to alter the trajectories of people going forward. In the relatively smooth fabric of everyday life, social occasions are potentially fateful situations.” (2019:54-55).

Let us cut to chase quickly - this conclusion of Goffman’s raises the stakes considerably for thinking about parties, and social occasions in general, in terms of game design. Consider this a design prompt; to create a social occasion which leverages the probability that participation might have meaning and impact beyond the boundaries of the occasion itself. The holy grail for designers everywhere may lie in exploring the affordances inherent in a sociological understanding of parties as social occasions (and thus make good on co-author, Bart Simon’s dream of game studies taking a serious sociological turn 😊)

Hopefully the reader may begin to see the relevance of the sociology of occasions for game studies. Goffman helps us a bit more by identifying what she thinks are five features of social occasions that “prompt bursts of change” as seen in the data she obtained from her informants.

First – there is a definite sense that social occasions either intentionally (by design) or unintentionally pull people out of mundane social life into a special world of sociability. This much we can keep from Simmel (and less from Huizenga) and its evidenced for instance by the degree of physical and mental preparation entailed in many kinds of occasions. That ‘party dress’ differs from everyday dress is a testament to this separation of worlds as folks literally and metaphorically don costumes for the occasion. This is also consistent with Bakhtin in the sense that carnival as a special world apart grants permission for unconventional behaviour that would not normally be allowed. Goffman’s argument is that the more this separation and sense of specialness can be achieved the greater the potential for significant impact in someone’s life.

Second – as a form of gathering, social occasions like parties evince a kind of collective effervescence – a concept that comes from Durkheim to describe the almost electrical energy and sense of communion or togetherness that comes when people assemble. In sociology this is an important threshold concept as it characterizes a kind of phase shift in a social situation when a collection of individuals becomes a collectivity and as a result people may perceive and act differently than when they are on their own.

Third – occasions may bring together people who are normally separate from one another. Goffman calls this a possible “collision of worlds.” The idea can be extrapolated to suggest that social occasions are kinds of social structures where difference may be encountered, and transformation may occur. This is not necessarily so but the possibility is enabled by the fluid and permeable structure of occasions

verses other kinds of social structures for instance. For Goffman, transformation very much depends on the unpredictability of interactions in social occasions and these occasions are not simply the places where transformations happen as much as they make possible transformations that might otherwise not occur.

Fourth – occasions entail a kind of necessary public performance which may involve what Goffman calls “forced public rankings.” By this she means that occasions often entail processes of inclusion and exclusion (who gets invited), status demonstrations (who is cool, who is smart, who is successful), and relative value allocations (who gets talked to, who is ignored). Depending on the situation this can be more or less public but it is always “in public” in principle. People can feel terror, shame, pride, guilt, etc.. at social occasions whether others are attending them or not (like when you feel everyone is staring at you). It might be interesting to note that in many if not most public games the idea of “forced public rankings” is leveraged in the most literal fashion possible by building interaction around competition. Imagine a party with a scoreboard...

Fifth – social occasions entail a more complex social choreography than is normally the case. All social interaction requires participants to manage and comport themselves in “appropriate” ways but given the myriad sub-interactions of occasions this can make usual performances of self complex and difficult (even more so if there is alcohol involved). There is some skill to navigating occasions like parties... what topics to talk about, what to say and how to say it... appropriate actions, inappropriate ones. The fact of this is evinced in that feeling of relief one might have upon going home after a big family gathering (for instance) and just flopping on the couch.

All these features of social occasions help to us to understand how participants might be primed for experiences and interactions that break with their normal ways of going on and which for Goffman might lead to serious changes in one’s life-course. Our research team is somewhat less interested in pivotal life changes than we are in the ability of social occasions to prime participants to engage and commit to collective playful experiences which might be transformative or at least reflexive in some unanticipated but interesting ways.

Players Look Up

In this way we see a relatively unexplored domain for game design and game studies research which considers not just the game or play encounter (in papa Goffman’s terms) but the larger socio-cultural context or situation in which the encounter is situated. A board game with friends is different when played in a quiet dining room at home, in the Tampere game lab, a large tournament or in the middle of giant house party. This is not simply a matter of having an audience or not (or perceiving that there is an audience) – the idea of playing to/with the audience which is the subject of so much research on streaming – but rather because the game as such is not the only thing going on and indeed the world does not revolve around the game or its players.

Note the shift in focus here – rather than designing to shrink the world to some microcosm of players and their capacity to be immersed or set apart from the world. The design prompt here is to ask players look up and around beyond the confines of the game and its rules (however loose). To see the world in which their play is situated and to draw on that expanded sense (and sensation) of the social and

material world as a resource for their play. The moves us from being game designers to being situation designers in which games are played. In short – we are party planners.

This is partly why our research group has become interested in immersive and participatory theatre, LARP and to some extent sandbox video games. We are looking for ways to tweak the occasions in which games are played. The obvious corollary here is game curation. When we curate an exhibition of games (which often involves some sort of occasion like a vernissage if not a party) we are essentially designing the context in which the discrete games in the exhibition are encountered. But such situations are highly (even in the case of games) coded in terms of what can and should happen in the context of a gallery exhibition as well as how the games can be played. One can certainly toy with this as the co-authors have done but there are limits.

More interesting for us is LARP and immersive participatory theatre as designed social occasions that allow for complex interactions and patterns of play that are perhaps closer to the spirit of what Goffman and Goffman describe. LARP especially becomes interesting in how certain designs can afford a level of unanticipated interactional complexity that rival the craziest sorts of parties. Here one acknowledges that one can somewhat structure the occasion and prime participants, but one cannot determine the forms and outcomes of interactions, gatherings, and encounters within that occasion. This gray zone is a kind of sweet spot of transformational possibility, and also social risk.

This is not at all dissimilar from the idea of a host planning a party and then once everyone arrives potentially losing control of the proceedings and going on to their great joy or great dismay (an experience shared by LARP organizers everywhere). This is the very definition of a social occasion in all its transformational potential. Of course, the good and skilled host attempts to hedge their bets and mitigate social (and of course physical) risk to participants and so it goes with LARP designers and immersive theatre makers.

Our feeling though is that designers maybe lean too much on rules and contracts and direct intervention to manage participants when they could be leaning more on the form of the occasions themselves. This is part of the rationale behind the Liveness project at Concordia. We wondered whether we could devise ways of reducing the requirement for staff management of social play which typically necessitates higher budgets (which are less and less accessible), skilled staff (often difficult to find) and which sometimes impedes player experience as staff may be forced to police rather than scaffold the unfolding experience and participants can find themselves on rails moving through the façade of a social occasion rather than a participatory experience (we are thinking of critiques of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* here for instance).

In our case, we are not working with parties as a social occasion but rather markets. This may seem like a deviation from the main theme of this symposium, but it is not since we have already been describing parties as exemplary examples of social occasions the idea is to adapt what we might see in parties via Goffman and Goffman to our design of a market as party-like social occasion which in turn becomes the site for playing our game called The Other Market. In this project The Other Market works as a kind of focused game encounter within a market in which myriad other interactions are occurring (as befits any normal market experience).

Making a Social Occasion: From Parties to Markets

The twist here is that our market is designed specifically for the purpose of the game, and this can be compared to our original and perhaps better idea of playing our game at a normal “real” market. This idea was completely impossible to pursue during COVID and then became too difficult to orchestrate in terms how we might locate and scaffold gameplay in a real-world setting. While this is our ultimate goal in some respects it is instructive to think about the effort and design choices that went into designing a market experience just for the sake of our game. In effect we are investing a huge amount of time and resources into creating a social occasion that may or may not matter. Our question is basically, how can our market matter for the players of our game?

Its complicated but here is the scenario in a nutshell. The Other Market is a nine player game played out in three teams of three people who may be strangers or friends. Each team member has a role we define as the eyes, the ears and the hands of the other market. The whole game takes place in three rounds over about two hours on the site of live artisanal or art market which we call the “Loot Market” inside a kind of well-known warehouse/studio complex amongst the artsy scene in Montreal. The market is composed of about 15-20 stalls selling a variety of artisanal and art objects, this is accompanied by access to light refreshments, music, and even a DJ’d afterparty. All of this can be experienced without playing the game and indeed most people in attendance will not be playing the game but instead pursuing the market, buying and selling, and otherwise doing what normally happens in market events of this nature (which are not at all uncommon in Montreal).

The Other Market game is played as focused encounter inside the social occasion of the Loot Market which has been organized to take place on a single day. Markets like this fit the definition of social occasions because they are limited in time and space. Market days are historically special occasions that cross many cultures and locales and while they are more open in structure than many parties (anyone in principle can go to the market) they still meet many of the hallmarks that define occasions as important and potentially transformation social structures. Bakhtin notoriously pointed to village market days as an origin for carnival since within the framework governed by exchange and commerce many other kinds of social interactions become possible in the environment the market defines. Thus, markets became sites for clowning and carnivalesque performances, as well as more overt political speeches, rallies and the like. Markets are also famously seen as spaces of social mixing where individuals from different social groups and strata may encounter one another. And no one can ignore the “buzz” of a market in full swing as one of the most robust experiences of collective effervescence normal life has to offer. All of Alice Goffman’s factors are in play here – and we will not belabour how market experiences, like parties, may be sites of significant transformation through a chance meeting or encounter.

However – we want to draw attention to the fact that markets differ from other social occasions in one critical way that so many sociologists usually miss entirely. Markets are about the interaction of objects or things as much as they are about people. Of course, the primary interaction with objects is in terms of consumption. Objects in most markets are experienced as commodities (literally things for sale) but to see only this is horribly near sighted. Markets are spaces for the buying and selling of things of course but there is more going on in the experience of markets as spaces for the interaction of people and things. Think of window shopping, browsing, sightseeing; think of conversations about objects and their relative value or function or aesthetics; think of the exchange of information about objects; think of

collections, mementos, heirlooms and other classes of objects which defy commodification. The market can be a place for all this... social occasions in general can be about all this.

What is needed of course is a materialist amendment to the sociology of occasions and it is this what we are after in our design of the Loot Market for our Other Market game. So, let us return to the game mechanics. There are three teams of three and each team has three roles which are the eyes, ears and hands of the market. The goal of the game is for each team to assemble a collection of objects gleaned from their mediated experience of the Loot Market in a kind of collection on a table. The game ends with each team creating a story which justifies the choices of objects for their collection and how they might fit together.

Now rather than allow the players to actually take or buy objects from the Loot Market, they are tasked with experiencing the Loot Market objects otherwise. The player who is the Ears will walk around the market and has a device that will allow them to hear audio clips of stories about objects. These stories are not about specific market objects but rather vague and suggestive idea about emotional, aesthetic, metaphysical, and social properties of objects that players might then seek out in the real market. The player who is the Eyes has a polaroid camera and their job is to take pictures of objects in the Loot Market inspired by hints from the Ears – in this way the Eyes does not take an actual object from the market so much as a representation of an object which will be affected by how the picture is taken (it is an image-object). Finally, the player who is the Hands has access to a variety of paper craft materials and taking inspiration from the Ears and the Eyes is tasked with fashioning a papercraft object which might represent the essence or feeling of a thing and can be as abstract or as concrete as the player is able to produce. The players are collectors, creators, artists (and ultimately story-makers).

So, with these mechanics the players wander and in and around the Loot Market in a series of rounds – slowly accumulating an experience of audio-objects, image-objects and idea-objects (expressed in paper). None of these are real objects from the market but all are ideally influenced or inflected by the real objects the market has to offer. In this way the players glide through the Loot Market without interacting in the market in any of the usual ways (other than the idea of casually walking through a market and looking at things). From a design perspective there are two reasons for this. The first is logistical – it allows our game to played in principle in any kind of market anywhere in the world – since there is no direct interaction or dependence on the market as such other than an environment in which to play the game. This makes our game somewhat mini-LARP like since anyone could in principle download our rule set, and even use our locative audio files and play the game themselves. The second reason is to push on the idea that the market environment matters for the game experience and that the structure of the occasion might be doing some heavy lifting in terms of the experience. This would be more difficult to see for instance if we had players interacting directly with market sellers (which would seem an obvious way to tie players to the market) but for us this elides the purpose of the research. Players can interact with sellers, but they don't have to, the game does not require it but the fact that it's a possibility should influence how players play. This is how we approach the idea of the determined indeterminability of the socio-material occasion.

So then, how does the Loot Market matter for playing the Other Market? There are several ways to approach this but here we want to be consistent with the theme of the symposium and offer an approach that will simultaneously advance our understanding of parties as social occasions, contribute to a more materialist sociology of occasions and offer some novel directions for thinking about occasion

planning and game design for occasions. To do this we turn from interactionist sociology to human geography and the concept of “affective atmospheres.”

Its all about the Vibe

To paraphrase Teresa Brennan’s opening line in *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a party and ‘felt the atmosphere’”? It’s a wonderfully meteorological metaphor that refers to the affective valence of a space with a kind of material weight. The atmosphere of a party is akin to a concept like a “feeling” or a “vibe” and crucially the concept contains more than just an emotional signal. One can go to a party and feel joy, or fear or shame but these are properties of party goer – the subject. The atmosphere belongs to the party itself as an affective assemblage of both social and material space; bounded socio-material collectivities or assemblages are what compose and constitute atmospheres. Thus, a party can have a creepy atmosphere that can make one feel scared, but this is not a determinate relation. The atmosphere is present, and it matters but it does not direct or determine any specific subjectivity. In this way, we also talk about designing affect without designing emotion. That is, we want players to experience a feeling; to sense a vibe but the emotional resonance of that feeling is indeterminate and subjective.

Ben Anderson (2009) most usefully expands Brennan’s ideas in his concept of “affective atmospheres” which has now become a stable concept in what is known as “non-representational theory” in human and cultural geography. This can be linked with the general post-humanistic and material turn in cultural studies in general but for us it helps to identify an aspect of our design practice that has been difficult to get a handle on. In Anderson’s view, “atmospheres are spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with. As such, to attend to affective atmospheres is to learn to be affected by the ambiguity of affect/emotion, by that which is determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague.”

Dare we say it, you cannot use quantitative methods, surveys and most other tricks in the user experience toolkit to make sense of atmospheres. Yet, in as much as actors can feel it and point to it designers should be able to work with it to concoct atmospheres or the conditions for atmospheres from the elements that make up their occasions like parties and markets. This is simple and also not so simple – decorations and other representational elements can change the atmosphere of a party, the density of participants, the variety of activities, the sights, the sounds and the smells. All of this can contribute to the particular affective atmosphere of a space. More complex are the signifying chains that belong to spaces – that old armchair in the corner of the living room at the party marks a history/memory that might be guessed at. That photo over there, what’s going on? Why are they playing disco? These elements are simultaneously discrete, a reference to some individual by some individual but they also compose a unity for the occasion, this is the sense of taking it all in. At moments we attend carefully, at other moments we don’t bother but the atmosphere is there, nonetheless.

With the concept of affective atmosphere we can move beyond people on the one hand and objects on the other to refer to their co-composition in an experience. From our point of view the amendment is consistent with the discussion of the sociology of occasions where we started, and we are essentially adding affective atmosphere to the list of features of a party that might prime participants for a transformational experience at some level.

In our case, we want our players to feel like they are in a market that has a meaning that extends beyond exchange acts and consumption. We want to suggest that there is something else that matters and its in the air so to speak. Our market should be like and not like other typical artisanal art markets but to set up this tension we need the game on the one hand (which automatically tells participants they are not in a usual market) and the market on the other hand (which automatically tells participants they are in a usual market). We can't, as designers, do this by reminding the players what's going on with narrative signposts, directives and whatnot, we have to try to let the space do this work for us.

An Experience with Traces of Atmosphere?

In part two of this paper, in Tampere, we will try to unpack our practical experience with designing an atmosphere for The Other Market. To what extent is our market comparable and not comparable to normal artisanal markets? To what extent is it advantageous or disadvantageous to bother designing our market? Did we success in creating an atmosphere or perhaps what we are looking for is not atmosphere so much as traces of atmosphere... intimations of being in a market without being in a market. Does this enhance or detract from our desire for players to imagine market objects otherwise?

We look forward to discussing our experience with the rest of the symposium participants and thank you all for taking the time to read our offering thus far.

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