

“AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!”: THE IMPLICATIONS OF ASSEMBLING AN EDITION OF
THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE ON TEXTUAL SCHOLARSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In the last couple of decades, the word “social” has become increasingly ubiquitous not just in everyday life with the advent of social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter but also in the field of textual scholarship with the increased attention paid to the construction of “social editions.” Concomitantly, in the film world, the format of the cinematic universe is becoming one of the main modes of storytelling with unprecedented success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). As film critics like Graeme McMillan claim that “whatever lightning Marvel captured in its onscreen bottle is not a trick that’s easily replicable,” tackling the cinematic universe might seem to be a daunting task for screenwriters and filmmakers. For textual scholars who have been struggling to create a truly “social” edition, however, the MCU’s success only presents an opportunity to achieve their goal and exponentially expand the field. Taking the MCU as a case study, this paper explores the implications of approaching a cinematic universe as a subject for textual editing and argues that because of its massively collaborative, transmedial, and inherently commercial nature as a work, the MCU invites reconsiderations of current practices in textual scholarship. In conversation with other attempts at social editing, this paper demonstrates that the collaboration and transmediality behind the MCU not only allows it to fit but also encourages the expansion of current definitions of the text. As well, it argues that attempting to edit the MCU keeps the creation of a truly “social” edition in the realm of possibility exactly because of its commerciality. Ultimately, in theorizing what an edition of the MCU would look like, this paper asserts that editing the MCU would also require a reconsideration of what “scholarly editing” means, both in terms of what constitutes “scholarly” work and what the duties of editors and editions are, and where and when they should look for meaning.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE AND DISCLAIMER.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
“AVENGERS ASSEMBLE!”: THE IMPLICATIONS OF ASSEMBLING AN EDITION OF THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE ON TEXTUAL SCHOLARSHIP	
Introduction.....	1
The MCU as a Social Text.....	2
Constructing and Editing the Text of the MCU: Collaboration as a Challenge.....	4
Constructing and Editing the Text of the MCU: Transmedial Storytelling as a Challenge...	7
Constructing and Editing the Text of the MCU: Commerciality as a Challenge.....	9
The MCU as a Social Editing Opportunity.....	11
The Hypothetical Social Edition of the MCU.....	14
Further Implications on Textual Scholarship.....	16
Conclusion.....	22
WORKS CITED.....	24

“Avengers Assemble!”: The Implications of Assembling an Edition of the Marvel Cinematic Universe on Textual Scholarship

With the release of *Iron Man* in 2008, Marvel began what is now the most massive project in film franchising and transmedial storytelling: the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Much like its comic book source, this cinematic universe features multiple individual character franchises that intersect to build a larger ensemble franchise. Currently, the MCU includes 31 films, with another (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*) set to release shortly after this paper’s writing, four more by the end of 2024, and an almost equally vast selection of “connected” television (TV) shows and short films. During this development, other companies have also been trying to launch their own cinematic universes. Notably, Warner Bros. Pictures, following their success with *Man of Steel* in 2013, has been building the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) based on characters from Marvel Comics’ long-time rival, DC Comics. Currently, this cinematic universe mostly centred around Justice League members such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman stands at 10 films and, much like Marvel, an array of vaguely connected television shows. As well, Warner Bros. Pictures is co-producing another cinematic universe with Legendary Pictures called the MonsterVerse in which franchises led by popular monsters like *Godzilla* (2014, 2019) and *King Kong* (2017) have crossed paths in *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021). This cinematic universe is set to expand soon with two animated TV shows and a yet untitled film.

There are other Hollywood franchises that some may also consider a cinematic universe. For the purposes of this paper, its definition is that of a series of films that draws together multiple individual character franchises into ensemble films. Whatever one’s definition of a cinematic universe may be, though, one thing is clear: this mode of writing and storytelling is becoming ubiquitous and, as such, demanding serious scholarly attention. Taking the MCU as a case study, this paper explores the implications of cinematic universes on the field of textual scholarship and scholarly editing, especially on the concepts of the social text developed by Jerome McGann and D.F. McKenzie. It argues that editing a work such as the MCU presents textual scholars with a unique opportunity to exponentially expand the field in multiple directions. The MCU’s nature as a massively collaborative, transmedial, and commercial work invites the expansion of McKenzie’s definitions of what a “text,” specifically a “non-book text,”

is. Further, it would also push scholars to reconsider the possibility of a social edition that not only edits a “social text” but is completely social and open in its process as it would require any edition made of it to represent its audience’s interpretations and rationales. Ultimately, this would demand the reconsideration of what “scholarly editing” means, both in terms of what constitutes “scholarly” work and what the duties of editors and editions are.

The MCU as Social Text

This paper considers the MCU—or any cinematic universe, for that matter—a “social text.” However, before it can proceed with its argument under this premise, some considerations are necessary, the first of which is the extension of the word “text” to not just films but to a cinematic universe. In his discussion of “Books as an Expressive Form,” McKenzie highlights that while “text” was initially and has been traditionally applied to written and print forms only, what it “also allows... is the extension of present practice to include all forms of texts, not merely books or [Sir Walter] Greg’s signs on pieces of parchment or paper” (12). This, McKenzie claims, is possible because of the word’s etymology. He argues that because its initial sense in Latin was “to weave” (*texere*), the word “text” refers not only to a specific type of material or substance; it “defines a process of material construction” and not the product of that construction (13-14). He further extends its sense to not just “the weaving of textiles” but to “the interlacing or entwining of any kind of material,” citing that “it is only by a metaphoric shift that it applies to language... that the web of words becomes a text” (14). As such, McKenzie “define[s] ‘texts’ to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information” (13). It is difficult to assume solely from his book whether McKenzie was anticipating the advent of cinematic universes like the MCU. Nonetheless, his discussion provides ample reason to consider the MCU a subject of textual scholarship. Indeed, the MCU multiply evokes McKenzie’s definition of texts because it weaves not only words upon pages of script but also multiple films from different character franchises, as well as television shows (both live-action and animated) and short films. The MCU can therefore be considered a “non-book” textual work (13).

What, then, is the text of the work that is the MCU? To answer that, I turn to G. Thomas Tanselle, who claims that “each verbal text, whether spoken or written down, is an attempt to

convey a work” (68). Tanselle uses “work” here to refer to “what was being said” or, in other words, the abstract meaning the text carries (68). The cinematic universe complicates this relation. As above, the MCU connects multiple character franchises such as those of Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Spider-Man, and the Guardians of the Galaxy to name a few. Consequently, no single film or individual character franchise encapsulates the entirety of the MCU. The Captain America films—*The First Avenger* (2011), *The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Civil War* (2016)—are texts only for the work that is the Captain America trilogy. The same applies for the Iron Man and Thor trilogies. As such, the MCU can be seen, on top of being a work itself, as a collection of other works.

One might be tempted to argue that we can consider the latest *Avengers* ensemble film could be the text of the MCU. After all, it is *supposed* to connect all of its characters together. However, its continuing development complicates this. The latest *Avengers* film, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), is already four years old at the time of this paper’s writing. Nine films and seven TV shows have been released since then, most of which feature characters who do not appear or are not referenced in any way in *Endgame*. As such, this paper argues that no single character or ensemble franchise can stand as the text of the MCU; its text would have to be the collection and arrangement of all of its installments to properly convey its entirety.

Currently, this text of the work of the MCU does not exist—at least, not one upon which everyone agrees—and this is due to its nature as a social text. The concept of the social text emerges from the works of McKenzie and McGann. McKenzie approaches “bibliography as the study of the sociology of texts” (13). This approach stems from his claim that “any history of the book which excluded study of the social, economic, and political motivations of publishing, the reasons why texts were written and read as they were, why they were written and designed, or allowed to die, would degenerate into a feebly degressive booklist and never rise to a readable history” (13), implying that these factors influence both the material and narrative construction of the texts. Further, he claims that this approach “directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption” and “alerts us to the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse” (15). He convincingly argues this under the premise that “no part of that series of human and institutional interactions is alien to bibliography as we have,

traditionally, practised it” (12). Indeed, bibliography has always focused on the material conditions of documents, but rarely until McKenzie did it consider the social factors that influence those materials, and thus the meaning that they carry.

McGann provides ample support for McKenzie’s approach in his own discussion of “The Socialization of Texts.” Arguing against Parker, Bowers, And Tanselle, McGann postulates a textual condition that “does not correspond” to either of their approaches that champion authorial intention found either singly by “cut[ting] through those diversions” of publication (Parker) or compromising between variations in an eclectic edition (Bowers and Tanselle) (74). This textual condition, McGann illustrates, is that of the socialized text such as Shakespeare’s, where material conditions—a theatrical setting and responsive audiences—make it so that “multiple versions... is the rule” (74). This allows “heterodox lines of transmission” which make discussions of authorial control about Shakespeare’s texts “simply impossible,” leaving meaning up to debate (75). Ultimately, then, what McKenzie and McGann describe is “the material form of the text and its ability to affect the text’s meaning” (Crompton et al. 135).

As above, the MCU is a vast collection of films, TV shows, and short films written, directed, and produced mostly by different people. This composition makes the text of the MCU a social text. Despite all being under the Marvel name, there is still debate about what exactly from its extensive list is canon to the MCU due to plot conflicts and executive vagueness. This results, mostly, from three aspects of the MCU’s nature as a work: the collaboration of multiple creators across films to build it increases the likelihood of errors in its narrative and prevents easy interpretation; its transmedial storytelling further complicates these issues and adds industrial and corporate challenges such as studio divisions and schedules; and its inherently and primarily commercial nature as a film franchise further disperses authority with the heightened influence it gives its audience. The following sections expand on each of these aspects and how each complicates the endeavour of constructing the text of the MCU.

Constructing and Editing the Text of the MCU: Collaboration as a Challenge

With its generally original stories and “cinematic” branding, the MCU situates films as its primary form (Jeffries 288; Taylor 135). As such, it would be easy for any editor to claim that whatever these films say is canon. In fact, James Taylor conveniently outlines that, as in the comics, the MCU has a “hierarchization of series and installments” (Brinker qtd.) that places

films “atop the MCU’s textual hierarchy,” with all other media right below (134). He demonstrates this hierarchy by emphasizing that ensemble films basically mark the end of every “phase” of the MCU, with the following solo films dealing with the aftermath of each while developing characters (135-36). For example, in *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder resulting from his near-death experience in *The Avengers*, reinforcing the film’s connection to the larger story. Solo films focus on the individual characters in the MCU, but the ensemble films change the MCU in a much larger scale (136) and effectively canonize any project they affect, demonstrating Taylor’s hierarchy. However, the MCU’s nature as a collaborative work makes the endeavour of constructing the text of and editing the project difficult due to its dispersal and multiplication of authorial intention, which sometimes lead to irreconcilable narrative conflicts.

These complications stem from the MCU’s production under the studio system with Marvel Studios. Linda Costanzo Cahir outlines that before the studio system became the norm in Hollywood, “it was not unusual for one person to do most of the principal jobs: write the script, raise the money, direct the film, act in it, and even operate the camera whether [they were] good at each of these areas or not” (73). As such, authorial intention and control could easily be located. The studio system, however, “gave rise to film specialists, people hired to do one thing, to learn it well, and to expand upon the knowledge over time and through repeated practice,” developing a “specialized labour force” (73). Consequently, this shift to the studio system caused another shift: the dispersion of authorial intention. With the MCU, this dispersion only moves towards multiplication, the complications of which manifests, in varying degrees, through its films and how they fit the larger narrative.

For example, the events of *The Avengers* (2012) were initially presumed by most if not all of its viewers to take place in the year 2012. Then, in 2017, the opening sequence of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, the events of which take place in 2016 right after those of *Captain America: Civil War*, chronologically locates the film “8 Years” after the Battle of New York in *The Avengers* (2012). This would place it in 2020, if the 2012 dating for *Avengers* is to be believed. Neither writers nor directors nor producers for *Homecoming* or *Avengers*, however, have confirmed nor denied this chronology, leaving viewers in a state of mild confusion. An even clearer yet just as irreconcilable case of narrative conflict between films begins in *Guardians of*

the Galaxy (2014). In this film, Gamora's file lists her as the last of her kind, and she claims that the Mad Titan Thanos is responsible for the massacre. However, *Avengers: Endgame* shows that Thanos killed only half of her people, and he claims that the remaining half are still thriving. Some could argue that this could just be Thanos lying, but in the same film, Nebula, now disillusioned from Thanos' goals and working against him, defends Thanos by saying that he is "many things, but a liar is not one of them" (18:50). As well, Thanos killing only half seems to make the most narrative sense, since he declares in *Avengers: Infinity War* that erasing half of all life to avoid overpopulation and the resulting depletion of the universe's resources as his ultimate goal. These points, then, effectively invalidate *Guardians*, or at least part of it. This sort of conflict may be attributed to the fact that these films have separate writers and directors. So far, the 31 films of the MCU have involved 20 directors, with only a handful being directing more than one film—Anthony and Joe Russo have directed the most with four, followed by Jon Watts and Peyton Reed for their bug-themed trilogies: *Spider-Man* and *Ant-Man*, respectively. It also includes about twice the number of screenwriters, with more set to join the fray in the next few years. This multiplicity of authorial figures, who sometimes do not watch the films that precede theirs, could result in "plot holes" in the larger narrative of the MCU.

This multiplicity also makes it difficult to locate a single authorial intention for the project. Again, no one director or writer can answer for the whole narrative of the MCU; at most, Watts and Reed can only answer for their respective character trilogies. This, however, is not for the lack of trying. Disney, after acquiring Marvel Studios, turned to auteur theory to give their universe a "united creative vision and sensibility that holds things together" (Askwith qtd. in Gray 318). Speaking of films, scholars often locate the auteur in directors (Gordon 227; Cahir 86). Disney, however, has never identified any director as auteur of the MCU. Instead, they deployed "corporate auteurism" through Kevin Feige (Kidman 3). Unlike the other prominent pop culture auteurs like Zack Snyder (*Justice League*) and Peter Jackson (*Lord of the Rings*), Feige "does not write, direct, or edit" (12) and "has never held a creative position" (14). "Creative" here, it can be assumed, means the positions of director or screenwriter, because Feige has been the primary producer for most MCU films. This fact carries complications as well, but I shall return to that in a later section. For now, with Feige, Disney seems to have relocated authorial intention from those actively creating the stories of each film to the person managing them (Kidman 8). Ivan Askwith relates how important these figures are now to the

industry when he claims that “you could tell a very good story that the showrunners never knew anything about, but the fact that they knew nothing about it means something to [the audience]” (qtd. in Gray 317). However, there are still valid reservations towards this approach. Cahir criticizes auteurism because it can “tempt the auteurist critic into the determination that a bad film made by a great director must, in some measure, be a great film, worthy of close study” (90). In the same vein, corporate auteurism may tempt MCU fans and would-be editors to imagine narrative order and cohesion even when there is not. After all, Feige was a producer for *The Avengers*, *Homecoming*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Infinity War*, and *Endgame*, but the apparent continuity errors discussed above still have not been resolved.

Constructing and Editing the Text of the MCU: Transmedial Storytelling as a Challenge

The MCU does not stop at films. Since the success of *The Avengers*, Marvel, alongside parent company Disney, has expanded their cinematic universe from silver screens to home screens with television shows, starting with *Agents of SHIELD*. Their addition, though, exacerbates the challenges introduced by collaboration not just through more plot conflicts, but through adding corporate and industrial factors as well.

The canonicity of the Netflix shows *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *Iron Fist*, *Luke Cage*, *The Punisher*, and their ensemble show *Defenders* has been a point of debate since 2019 due to their vague and unstable relationship with the core MCU films. This instability mostly stems from the fact that “the physical and conceptual spaces that the Netflix shows claim intersect directly with one another but only indirectly with the feature films” (Taylor 137). Indeed, these shows all refer to the Battle of New York from *The Avengers*. The films, however, do not refer to them in any capacity despite their relatively big stories set in New York City. Most notably, the events of *The Defenders* (2017) culminate in a showdown between its members and the criminal organization of the Hand, resulting in a skyscraper exploding and collapsing in on itself. No Marvel film has yet to address this, despite a number of them also being set in New York. Additionally, circling briefly back to the *Homecoming* timeline issue, *Daredevil* provides fans with “proof” that *The Avengers* takes place in 2012, since it features a newspaper article about the Battle dated May 5, 2012 (Eisenberg, “Kevin Feige Finally”). If, in fact, *The Avengers* does not take place in 2012 as Feige implies (Eisenberg, “Kevin Feige Finally”), then *Daredevil* loses its tie to the wider MCU. Charlie Cox’s Matt Murdock (*Daredevil*’s civilian identity), however, does appear in *Spider-*

Man: No Way Home (2021), but whether this is the same Matt Murdock from the Netflix shows is still unclear because this film also introduces the concept of the multiverse and *variants* (alternate universe versions of a character). These variants are the reason 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* films are not considered MCU films despite Patrick Stewart starring as Charles Xavier in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022): they are not the same version of Charles.

On other channels, there is also the “Darkhold issue” when considering shows such as Freeform's *Cloak and Dagger* (2018-19), ABC's *Agents of SHIELD* (2013-20), and Hulu's *Runaways* (2017-19), against the Disney+ show *Wandavision* (2021). Unlike the former shows, *Wandavision* is directly linked to *Multiverse of Madness* as they both feature the same Darkhold design. Prominently, it looks different from the Darkhold in the other shows, which some have taken to mean that they have been erased from the MCU (Cloete; Welch). So, if the films are to be considered the authority about the MCU's canon, then many TV properties would be in a delicate position or erased entirely.

These conflicts could be attributed to industrial and corporate conflicts within Disney. TV and film production schedules are difficult to synchronize. Films take months or even years in between them, while television episodes release weekly, barring schedule changes within the shows themselves as well. Additionally, corporate auteur Feige has not always had complete control over all Marvel properties. He was president of Marvel Studios since 2007, but that division was responsible only for films, not TV shows. Even then, he still reported to then CEO of Marvel Entertainment Isaac Perlmutter, who was reportedly “stymying Feige's push” for *Captain Marvel* and *Black Panther* films earlier in their slate (Knoop), suggesting that the release order of these films was not Feige's vision. This led Disney CEO Bob Iger to restructure Marvel in 2015 so that Marvel Studios no longer reported to Perlmutter, but that meant Feige completely disconnecting from Marvel TV. This changed only recently when, in 2019, Feige was made Chief Creative Officer, giving him control over TV shows, films, and comics (Yehl). So, if one were to consider whatever Feige has had control or influence over as MCU canon, then that excludes all pre-Disney+ shows, except *Agent Carter* for which Feige was an executive producer.

This corporate shift is why there is no debate surrounding the canonicity of the 2021 Disney+ shows: Feige can be and is clearer about their connection to the MCU than the others he

did not have control over (Eisenberg, “Kevin Feige Promises”). The past couple of years confirm this: In 2021, the post-credit scene of the season finale of the TV show *Wandavision* show Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch, using her newly acquired Darkhold to search the multiverse for her children. This scene ties directly into *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) as the titular hero faces a Darkhold-corrupted Wanda attempting to steal America Chavez’s power (which would kill Chavez) to reunite with her children in another universe. As well, the Marvel villain Kang the Conqueror made his first appearance in the 2021 TV show *Loki*’s season finale where, after killing a variant of Kang, Loki returns to the Time Variance Authority, only to find it seemingly taken over by another Kang variant. Kang and his variants recently made their film debut as the MCU’s newest overall villain in *Ant-Man: Quantumania* (2023), which in turn features a post-credit scene that points towards the upcoming second season of *Loki*. This marks *Quantumania* as the first MCU film to feature a post-credit scene that points not to another film, but to a TV show, better cementing the canonicity of these recent shows to the MCU compared to the pre-Disney+ ones. Ultimately, despite (or perhaps supported by) this recent turn to order, the transmedial storytelling of the MCU creates even more narrative conflicts and complicates the aspect of collaboration, further making the construction and edition of the text of the MCU a difficult task.

Constructing and Editing the Text of the MCU: Commerciality as a Challenge

The commercial nature of the MCU as a film franchise and its ties to comic book tradition further complicate its edition as these also give the audience some authorial power. The initial impulse to create blockbuster films based on Marvel Comics was mainly financially driven as in 1995, “Marvel was on the brink of bankruptcy,” and “[Ike] Perlmutter and [Avi] Arad offered to [Ron] Perelman what they thought would be the solution to Marvel’s problems: make movies” (Brookey 66). Further, because films in general are made for ticket sales, audience consumption determines what is made and how it is made. If a film fails to make returns on its budget, then sequels may not be made, a characteristic Brinker calls “recursivity” (214). The format of the cinematic universe only emphasizes this recursivity because if one film centered on a certain character fails, Marvel must re-evaluate its necessity to the overall narrative. Bart Beaty observes that this is the root of the modular format of the MCU’s narrative which allows the films to be “understood as distinct entities” (321). Beaty argues that this is most

pronounced with the production of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* film. Before its release, the Guardians were at most an obscure group with a niche comic readership and adapting them for film posed significant risk for Disney. As such, its story was written only “tangentially related to the core [MCU],” making it a “film that could potentially be left behind had it not proved so popular” (323). *Guardians*, however, did prove popular. The character Groot became a household name and sold much merchandise soon after the film’s release. Additionally, the film itself earned 772.7 million dollars against its 170-million-dollar budget, proving it not just popular but, more importantly, profitable. The third *Guardians* film is set to come out May 2023, to the joy of all *Guardians* fans. The vagueness about the canonicity of the Netflix shows could also be attributed to audience preservation, as Marvel and Disney are wary of alienating fans by telling them these shows are no longer canon (Proctor 337). As well, we see this recursivity still at work with the new Disney+ shows and short films based on lesser-known characters such as *Moon Knight* (2022) and *Werewolf by Night* (2022) which reference no known MCU properties, making their omission from or revision in the universe much easier should the need arise.

Heightened audience influence is not new to Marvel. As Brookey argues, “Marvel was successful at building a fan culture from the top down” (70). Indeed, Marvel’s use of comic book sections such as “Bullpen Bulletin” to directly communicate with fans through promotions and “Stan Lee’s Soapbox” through direct commentary from the man himself encouraged fan interaction (70). Further, their publication process also included audience input as represented by the “No-Prize,” a prize sent out by Marvel to fans who could spot continuity errors and send letters with their possible corrections to the publishers (Proctor 336). These tactics established a “two-way dialogue between producers and readers” that filtered “what worked and what did not” (336-7). This practice is more prevalent now due to streaming services like Netflix and Disney+ which allow viewers to pause and dissect scenes frame-by-frame for mistakes, leading to some interviews where producers like Feige are confronted with and forced to avoid explaining these mistakes (Eisenberg, “Kevin Feige Finally”). Perhaps the most notable display of fan power over narrative occurred in 1996 when fans led by Bob Kunz, then a student of Duke University, hosted a boycott to protest “changes in the Marvel characters (specifically, changing Spider-Man’s secret identity from Peter Parker to Ben Reilly)” (71). The boycott lasted a year, and by the end of it, Peter Parker was Spider-Man once more (71), proving the power of fans and, perhaps more importantly, their money.

Lastly, in a similar effect to the 1996 boycott, it has been proven that appointed authorial figures such as Feige only remain in power at Disney as long as audiences express trust in their vision. Without such trust, corporations like Disney have shown that they are more than willing to replace their corporate auteurs. For example, Kathleen Kennedy, another auteur figure established by Disney for their new *Star Wars* trilogy after acquiring Lucasfilm, was marketed to fans much like Feige. However, due to the mostly negative fan responses towards the new *Star Wars* films, Disney replaced Kennedy with Feige and J.J. Abrams (Kidman 10-11). As such, Feige's "united vision" only holds value as long as most of the MCU's fanbase receives him well. As a result of its commercial nature, the MCU's audience have more influence over its narrative, giving their interpretations more weight than in traditional author-reader relations and editing situations where readers are no more than receivers of information, thus further complicating the location of authorial intention.

The MCU as a Social Editing Opportunity

Why, then, with all of these challenges, try to edit a cinematic universe like the MCU? The answer to this is two-fold: firstly, its collaborative and transmedial nature as a work, while challenging, also allows it to fit the rationale behind recent attempts at creating a social edition such as *A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript* (ASEDM) by Dr. Ray Siemens, Dr. Constance Crompton, and their collaborators. In an article discussing the multiple applications of the word "social" in textual scholarship, Dr. Peter Robinson emphasizes that no other "editors since McGann have declared that they have made or are making a 'social text edition'" (np.). ASEDM seems to be the only exception to this as, by its name, it "claims to be an instance of a 'social edition'" (Robinson). In fact, aside from the edition's name, in an article explaining ASEDM's rationale, Dr. Crompton and collaborators highlight that through ASEDM, they "attempted to model the *social scholarly edition*" (132, emphasis in original). As such, this paper uses it as a starting point for exploring the process of social editing to create a social edition.

To start, Crompton et al. call the text of the Devonshire Manuscript "multivalent" (134) and argues that this very nature demands a social edition as only a social edition can adequately represent such as text. The Devonshire manuscript is multivalent as it is comprised of a variety of "installments" by different authors: "approximately two hundred items (including complete lyrics, verse fragments, excerpts from longer works, anagrams, and other ephemeral jottings) on

198 pages (including endpapers) bound in a handwritten volume and inscribed in over a dozen hands by a coterie of men and women” (Crompton et al. 134). This is much like the diverse make-up of the MCU. As well, this diversity in the manuscript gives it a “density of textual voices” that, much like in the MCU, leads to “often-uncertain authorship and attribution” (143).

Furthermore, they emphasize that while there was definitely scholarly interest surrounding the manuscript, “no critical edition existed” for it. Instead, most editions that take from the manuscript focus mainly on Sir Thomas Wyatt’s poetry “as he composed 129 of the 200 items in the manuscript” (134). However, Crompton et al. argue alongside Arthur F. Marotti that “the author-centred focus of these editions ‘distorts [the] character’ of the Devonshire manuscript” because it is “much more than an important witness in the Wyatt canon” (135). The manuscript, they push, is also a “snapshot of the scribal practices of male and female lyricists, scribes, and compilers in the Henrician court, as well as the first example of men and women writing together in sustained fashion in English” (135). This description should sound familiar at this point as this, too, is the MCU. It is so much more than a witness to, say, the Captain America or Avengers canon, or the work of beloved directors like the Russo brothers. It is also, to borrow from Crompton and colleagues, a snapshot of the immense collaborative practice between multiple directors, writers, designers, animators, and others to produce a cinematic universe. Despite not being the only cinematic universe in existence, nor being the first franchise to involve men and women working together in film, the MCU is the first cinematic universe of its scale—one which closely intertwines storytelling between feature and short films and TV shows across throughout what is now a decade and a half. This multivalent and collaborative nature of the Devonshire Manuscript is what Crompton and colleagues argue to be the reason behind the need for *A Social Edition of the Devonshire Manuscript*. They assert that through a social edition, ASEDM can “preserve the socially mediated textual and extra-textual elements of the manuscript that have been elided or ignored in previous transcriptions” (136). This paper takes after this claim, as it also insists that only through a social edition can the MCU be properly represented.

There have been, however, expressions of doubt as to the ASEDM being truly “social” in its editing process and existence as an edition. Most notably, Dr. Robinson has claimed that “there is no sense in which this edition... is a ‘social edition.’” This, Robinson asserts, is because

despite its claims of being “social” in its editing process, ASEDM’s “plans and policies..., their expression in the transcription and annotation principles, and the final execution of the edition were the products of a small group of scholars led by Ray Siemens.” Indeed, in another article wherein they define what makes an edition “social,” Siemens and his collaborators insist that “the ‘social’ edition privileges a new kind of scholarly discourse network that eschews traditional, institutionally reinforced, hierarchical, structures,” referring to the image of the single editor or editorial group. In addition, they also pose that a social edition “relies, instead, upon [structures] that are community-generated” (Siemens et al. 453). However, as Robinson claims, all editorial decisions for ASEDM are made by a small editorial group. He has also criticized in another project that claims to employ “social editing,” Transcribe Bentham, wherein users are invited to contribute by producing “full-marked up transcripts.” What prevents it from being “social,” Robinson argues, is the way in which the “role of the contributors will be, indeed to contribute” according to editorial practices determined by an editorial team and not make any editorial decisions themselves as well. As such, he likens them more to “‘crowd-sourcing’ projects, in which editors determine exactly what work is to be done and how it is to be done” because editors, to Robinson, are those involved in determining the “aims, strategy, and details of the edition, or in affecting the complex processes entailed by these decisions.”

It is here that I return to the twofold answer to the question: Why try to edit the MCU? In fact, why try to create a social edition of the MCU if, as its similarity to the Devonshire Manuscript would imply, it may be based on a false sociality? In addition to being an attractive subject for a social edition due to the collaboration and transmediality involved in it, the MCU’s commercial nature allows (and, indeed, requires) it to circumvent the criticism towards these earlier attempts at social editing and a social edition. The unspoken caveat for building a cinematic universe is that before it is a storytelling endeavour, it is first and foremost a commercial product. An installment’s level of success could always affect the next. As proven, its initially and still occasionally modular storytelling format when tackling less popular characters like the Guardians of the Galaxy, Moon Knight, and Werewolf by Night supports this. As such, the MCU, as a condition of its existence as a cinematic universe, privileges audience interpretation more than classical texts do. In fact, this again confirms the authorial and editorial power of its audience, as their watching habits and preferences decide which characters and which films get sequels.

Another instance involving the fan-favorite Spider-Man also proves that audiences already have editorial power over the MCU. *Iron Man 2* (2010) features a scene where a child wearing an Iron Man costume at a convention stands up to one of the drones hunting the real Iron Man. This was meant, initially, to only be a scene showing how Tony Stark's Iron Man has inspired children to be heroes. However, as a result of Tom Holland's addition to the MCU as a Spider-Man/Peter Parker who draws inspiration from Iron Man, fans immediately started forming "headcanons"—fan-developed character information not explicitly confirmed by the text—that the child from *Iron Man 2* was Holland's Peter Parker in disguise. There was no plausible way for this to be the case as, in 2010, Sony Pictures had exclusive film rights to Spider-Man, and Marvel did not have enough social or economic capital to leverage for a Spider-Man film deal with Sony just yet. Marvel, along with parent company Disney, made this deal with Sony only in 2015, five years after Peter Parker's alleged first appearance in *Iron Man 2*. However, the headcanon gained enough popularity that in a 2018 interview, to please fans who had come to love Holland's portrayal, Feige allowed Holland to confirm that that child was indeed Peter Parker (Davis). This instance of retroactive continuity (retcon) only came about due to the fans' collective power, effectively proving their authorial and editorial control over the MCU's storytelling. This heightened influence, then, requires an edition of the MCU to represent not just the interpretation of a select few from Marvel/Disney but its users'—the audience's—as well, which inevitably resolves Robinson's criticisms of ASEDM and Transcribe Bentham. Ultimately, this suggests that the MCU may allow textual scholars to create a truly social edition that not only edits a "social text" but is completely open and "social" in its process.

The Hypothetical Social Edition of the MCU

This edition could take the form of a website wherein all Marvel properties since 2008 would be catalogued and have their own page along with descriptions of their production—writers, directors and producers and the studios involved, for example—much like in the Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki. Further, though, to be a *social* edition, it should allow users to construct their own MCU by classifying each entry using a set vocabulary in a digital fill-out form. To start, it could have vocabulary such as canon and non-canon (for content definitively in or not in the MCU). Additionally, it could include vocabulary that would allow users to "weigh" the entries' connections with each other. Here, it could borrow Graves' concept of unidirectional

and omnidirectional flow. Unidirectional flow has the narrative progress only outward from a core, with “paratexts as ancillary to one’s understanding of the franchise” (238); An example of this would be the Netflix shows which are affected by the core films but have no effect on and are not referenced by the core films themselves. Omnidirectional flow proceeds both outward and inward, making them integral to the franchise (238), exemplified by Disney+ shows like *Wandavision*. It would also need to account for shows such as *Moon Knight* which are currently disconnected from the films yet confirmed to be set in the MCU, possibly with vocabulary like “TBD.” Once users determine these connections, the website could include a function that would visualize them on a timeline, much like the release timelines used by Marvel at conventions.

To be completely open and social in its editing process, this set catalogue and vocabulary will only be an initial catalogue and vocabulary, completely open to change at any point. This can be facilitated through a forum page on the website where all users can discuss and justify changes or additions. The vocabulary, of course, will need more attention for consistency, as any changes proposed and applied to the vocabulary would affect most if not all entries, so users will have significant influence on the details and strategy of the project. This would allow the edition to avoid the criticism of them only being contributors. The catalogue of films, however, can be added onto at any point.

Almost inevitably, due to the MCU’s collaborative and transmedial storytelling that disperses authority, this edition would be akin to a variorum as different sections of the MCU fanbase define canonicity in unique ways. Some defer to corporations and consider the arrangement on Disney+ as the definitive MCU. However, Disney+ does not have a few MCU films such as *The Incredible Hulk* and Jon Watts’ *Spider-Man* trilogy due to distribution rights being held by Universal and Sony Pictures, respectively. This is why many pay close attention to the corporate relations when deciding MCU canon as well, because while *Hulk* has been “retconned out of existence” (Beaty 323), Watts’ *Spider-Man* trilogy is vital to MCU canon. Some may consider *Hulk* then, as non-canon, while some who call themselves “completionists” would require any edition of the MCU to include it. Many also defer to Feige’s word, but he has proven vague about Netflix shows as well. As a result, there are multiple MCUs existing cotermporally. These studio relations and Feige’s reluctance to lay down a definitive MCU, possibly to not alienate fans and preserve potentially useful properties, allow for this multiplicity,

and this is what this edition aims to represent: The Marvel Cinematic Multiverse. With something collaborative, transmedial, and commercial such as the MCU, only something like the variorum can account for all its interpretations.

I say “akin to” and “something like” a variorum because there is a slight issue in the use of “variorum” to describe this edition, as a variorum only contains a single text but with commentary from different editors. I use the term variorum here as it is the closest one can get to representing something that would contain multiple interpretations of a single text. Users of this edition, though, will not only be commenting on one text. In fact, as stated above, a full text of the MCU does not yet exist, so potential editors of the MCU would be simultaneously constructing and editing their texts of the MCU. It would, then, contain multiple and potentially vastly different texts of the MCU as they may or may not be identical in their components. Perhaps describing it as an “archive” would be more accurate, being a collection of documents and texts for a specific topic, but the sense of the variorum must also be incorporated, as it will also involve commentary and rationales from different editors.

Finally, with a commercial project such as the MCU, which could be considered as an “unfolding text” (Parkin qtd. in Proctor 325) because parts of it are still being developed, this edition can only be digital as it allows for constant change. In its early years, the MCU grew about 2 films a year. Its slate from 2021 to 2023, though, shows that it will now be adding four films a year, along with an equal number of directly linked shows. The MCU has also proven it can take years to finally connect things. They can appear unidirectional for years like the kidnapping of Trevor Slattery by the real Mandarin in the short film *All Hail the King* in 2014 (Graves 242). Only seven years later did this status change with Shang-Chi showing Trevor in the Mandarin’s dungeons. Print editions will always be lacking for the MCU, especially with its growing rate of production. As Proctor notes, “even the latest edition of The Marvel Encyclopedia is out of date; indeed, it will always be out of date as soon as new editions are released” (325). This edition must be able to update instantly and constantly, and a digital form will allow for that.

Further Implications on Textual Scholarship

In addition to expanding our definitions of even non-book texts and potentially leading to a truly *social* edition, the MCU has further implications on textual scholarship, beginning on

what could be considered a *scholarly edition*. Indeed, another possible critique toward a *social* mode of editing is quality control. For example, Robinson asks regarding ASEDM if “all opinions are equal,” then are the “views of an editor who has spent a lifetime studying a particular text... worth no more than that of a casual reader”? Here, I read “spent a lifetime” as both a claim not just to the amount of time one has given to studying, but also the amount of money/funding. I argue, though, that editing the MCU would not have the same issue for two reasons. Firstly, the MCU does not have as long of a history as the Devonshire Manuscript, Dante, Shakespeare, or any classical text, and as such, would not require the same kind of “lifetime” dedication and expertise for someone to begin studying it. At the time of writing, if one begins counting from the release of *Iron Man*, the MCU is still only 15 years old. Some may argue that this goes further back because of the comics, but the MCU films are not continuations of comic book stories; they are adaptations, some of which have also deviated significantly from their comic book sources.

As well, the resources to study the MCU are not locked behind the same financial barriers that come with entering and learning in academia. Indeed, the base requirement to study the MCU is to have access to the films and shows that compose it, most of which are available now on streaming through Disney+, the subscription for which is currently priced at \$12 per month. Movie tickets are still expensive, especially for those who want to watch a film more than once, but recent MCU installments have gone to streaming just some months after their theatrical releases. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, for example, became available on Disney+ just three months after its theatrical premiere. Information and resources that could help someone “read” the MCU such as planned release dates and corporate relations are also publicly available as Marvel/Disney usually show release slates at the biennial D23 Expo when necessary and they are often vocal about their dealings with other studios to acquire other beloved characters, most probably to stoke and measure fan interest. In 2019, for example, they announced the end of their negotiations with 21st Century Fox to acquire the film rights to the X-Men and the Fantastic Four. They have since announced that the Fantastic Four would soon be joining the MCU during the 2020 Investor Day webcast.

The only area where classical texts and the MCU may demand the same thing is in time investment, as altogether, its content spans hundreds of hours, and the more one watches them,

the better they can interpret the whole. The average Marvel fan, however, already participates in this kind of devoted watching. Personally, I have watched every MCU film at least five times since its release, excluding *Quantumania* which I have only seen twice since it is still only available in theatres. As soon as it becomes available on streaming, though, that number will most likely go up. Other than these, one need not learn another language, know of different scribal or printing practices, or read hundreds of research articles locked behind journal paywalls about the MCU to begin “reading” and interpreting it. As such, it is easier to get to “equal” status in experience with the MCU.

This convenience may suggest to some that the work of editing the MCU would not be scholarly after all. This would be the wrong conclusion as secondly, most of the MCU’s audience already, knowingly or not, perform the kind of bibliographical work that textual scholars do when creating editions. David Greetham, in *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction*, conveniently outlines the steps that a would-be editor needs to follow to create an edition, and Marvel fans also conveniently already perform the same tasks. The first two stages, Greetham puts forth, are that the editors “must have developed a system for checking they have access to *all* appropriate documents (enumerative bibliography)” and that “they must have a methodology for listing and adequately describing these documents (descriptive bibliography)” (4). This is the sort of work anyone interested in the Marvel canon performs with every release as they must evaluate if it connects to or invalidates a previous installment or sets up an upcoming one. I have already demonstrated this with the issue about Gamora’s background. More notably and recently, though, fans have started to interpret Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002-2007) as MCU canon despite being released before *Iron Man* (2008) because its characters like Tobey Maguire’s Peter Parker, Willem Dafoe’s Norman Osborn, and Alfred Molina’s Otto Octavius appear in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021). The same can also be said for Marc Webb’s duology with Andrew Garfield’s Peter Parker, Jamie Foxx’s Electro, and Rhys Ifans’ Curtis Connors appearing in the same film. Fans interpret it so because not only do the same actors play the same characters from the original films, but they also reference specific plot points from those films such as the existence of the Venom symbiote from Raimi’s trilogy and the Rhino battle from *Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), confirming that they are the same characters and not further multiversal variants. With each installment, the audience of the MCU re-evaluate what they hold as “canon” to the MCU.

The next step for Greetham is that editors must then be “familiar with the technical processes by which the documents were created, whether they be manuscript or printed (codicology and analytical bibliography respectively)” (4). Here, the MCU may push this definition, but it is still essentially the same work: its audience have long been aware of the scheduling conflicts between TV and film production and corporate dealings affecting those productions, and they have since been incorporating these pieces of information in their decisions. For example, despite having direct links to MCU films, the show *Inhumans* (2017) is considered by many fans as non-canon. This is because it is accepted among the fandom that the Inhumans were Ike Perlmutter’s “pet project” (u/Vin13ish) and replacements for the X-Men and Fantastic Four, whose rights were with 20th Century Fox while he oversaw Marvel Entertainment. This was never explicitly confirmed, but this is the conclusion that many drew because of how the Inhumans were supposed to get a film but were then pushed to a TV show after Disney CEO Bob Iger restructured Marvel (Knoop). Nonetheless, it has been confirmed that Perlmutter interfered with Feige’s plans for the MCU, which involved releases for the Black Panther and Captain Marvel films as early as Phase 1 and 2 (Knoop). This is why many fans were happy to discard the *Inhumans* (2017) show along with its “terrible” costumes, “bland and boring” sets, and “bad special effect[s]” that resulted from a rushed production along with Perlmutter (Tassi), showing that they keep track of the production details and factor it into their decisions.

The next step in textual scholarship for Greetham is establishing “a theoretical system for transcribing texts and an acute eye in accurately representing a transcript of a document (paleography and diplomatics)” (4). For this, the Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki, with its detailed pages on MCU films, characters, and shows and the connections between them, is a good example. There is some contradiction to their claim to an “MCU Timeline,” which suggests it to be definitive, while also acknowledging that there are continuity issues between the TV shows and films that it includes. Nonetheless, this community-generated site proves that Marvel fans do have a system for transcribing the MCU’s components as this wiki contains not just detailed plot summaries but also lists of locations, characters, items, and organizations that either appear or are mentioned in the installment, whether they be films or single episodes of a TV show.

Finally, at the “textual criticism or textual editing” stage, Greetham asks editors to put forward a “rationale for types and levels of emendation” (4). At this stage, it should be clear how the audience of the MCU’s audience fits this category. All of their observations from the enumerative bibliography stage up until this one all lead to their own unique rationales for forming their concept of what is canon and what is not to the MCU. One only needs to go to any social media site and search under the Marvel Studios or MCU topic to see this at work. For example, in the subreddit r/marvelstudios, one can find threads upon threads discussing the connections between either individual films or each phase of the MCU. A recent thread posted on March 11, 2023 claims that “Phase I and II didn’t connect the way people remember them connecting” (u/Zdvj), sparking discussions about the changing levels of connectivity between the films since the end of the Infinity Saga. As well, in the same subreddit, news of the recasting of Ayelet Zurer’s Vanessa Fisk from *Daredevil* (2015-2018) once again started discussions about the canonicity of the Netflix shows (u/Tuffcooke). Textual criticism and edition occur almost daily within the Marvel fandom as fans share their rationales for what they consider as part of the MCU in these public forums. As such, I argue that editing the MCU extends what could be considered *scholarly* work beyond the confines of academia exactly because of its commerciality. Because the resources required for its viewing and constant consumption need to be easily accessible to facilitate this continued engagement, its audience can perform the same type of work expected of textual scholars.

Given everything so far, editing the MCU would also mean some changes as to what an editor’s duties are and what editions do. Regarding editors, compilation has usually been considered as separate from authorship, but as argued with the MCU’s commerciality, editors who would participate in compiling what they consider falls under the MCU would also be performing authorial duties. To further this point, Crompton et al. cite that with the Devonshire Manuscript, “compilation and copying of the predominantly male-authored contents of the anthology” was a role reserved for women, excluding them from authorship (142). They claim instead that “compilation is inarguably an act of mediation” because “the selection of verses to be recorded, the manner in which they are entered, and their relative position to one another all contribute to the total meaning of the texts, individually and as a collection” (142). Just from here, I argue that compilation is already an act of authorship, perhaps not for the individual texts, but definitely for the entire collection as its meaning, as they claim, depends entirely on the

women's arrangement of its components. They are not simply uncovering a "historical meaning" (McKenzie 23) as an editor is often limited to doing; Greetham alludes to this tendency of the many fields under textual scholarship when he mentions their "historical bias" (2). Compilers are actively creating that meaning, and this only becomes clearer with the MCU. As established, the fully constructed text of the MCU does not yet exist and, as such, its edition requires its audience to first form a sort of initial text to work with by compiling what they know to definitively be in the MCU. The would-be editors of the MCU, then, would also be authors of their own unique texts of the MCU since, collectively, they hold the power to push its narrative one way or another.

As for the edition and what it does, I return to what Greetham calls the "historical bias" of textual scholarship (2), as editing the MCU would also require an expansion of the editor's currently past-oriented vision. Indeed, other prominent textual scholars hold this historical bias. Tanselle calls textual scholarship as an "activity" that is "necessarily a historical enterprise, for the very concept of a 'work' implies something pre-existing," going so far as saying that a work is "a creation formed... at a particular time in the past" (69-70). Further, he poses that an issue with (re)constructing the text of works is that "we would have no way of knowing, with any likelihood of certainty, that the emendation[s were] a mistake" because they were made so far back in time that we have no record of them—at least, not reliable ones. He also highlights that one question that a textual scholar might consider about a work is "what point is the most significant in its history," clearly setting the textual scholar's vision towards only the past. Similarly, McKenzie posits that among "the most obvious concerns of textual criticism" is "on the relation between the past meanings and present uses of verbal texts" (21) and that "bibliography as a sociology of texts has an unrivalled power to resurrect authors in their own time" (27).

For the most part, these points also apply to the MCU. As above, fans constantly canonize and discard earlier films attached to the Marvel name depending on what the latest installment suggests—even going further back than 2008, when the MCU officially started with *Iron Man* in Phase 1. In that statement, however, is embedded the impetus to look at the present and the future due to the unfolding nature of the MCU. Each installment, from its development to its marketing and move to streaming services, provides its audience with information to

incorporate in their decisions. For example, the place of the TV show *Loki* (2021) in the MCU timeline has been a point of contention since its release since its initiating incident is featured in *Avengers: Endgame*'s time travel sequence. That sequence, however, is set during the first *Avengers* film from 2012. With the theatrical introduction of Kang in *Quantumania* (2023) and the film's post-credit scene that ties directly into the upcoming second season of *Loki*, fans now have a clearer sense of where to put not just its first season but also its second, which has not yet been released. Announcements of future Disney+ installments such as *Daredevil: Born Again* (2024) also sparked discussions of the canonicity of Netflix's *Daredevil*, splitting the fandom into two major camps: one that predicts it will invalidate Netflix's run and another that predicts that it would solidify the canonicity of its predecessor. As such, an edition of the MCU which would incorporate its audience's input would mean constant investigation of current trends as well as prediction for upcoming installments. This endeavour would not necessarily relieve textual scholars of the field's historical bias, but it would demand an expansion of their field of vision by looking at the past, present, and future of the timeline.

Conclusion

Critics have pointed out that Hollywood has developed an "obsession" with cinematic universes due to the success of the MCU (Mendelson). Some, due to the many recent failed and failing attempts at constructing new ones, have also begun to ask if it is "Time to Say Goodbye to the Shared Universe?" (McMillan). This content fatigue is valid, and moviegoers are allowed to ask and answer this question however they may wish. For textual scholars, however, cinematic universes like the MCU provide a unique opportunity to expand their field, and as such demand their attention. Its collaborative, transmedial, and commercial nature as a work makes it a valuable subject for textual scholarship and edition because it not only expands current definitions of a text—the very subject of the field; it also keeps creating a truly social edition—one that edits a "social text" and is completely "social" in its process and something that McGann, McKenzie, and Siemens have all been building up to—in the realm of possibility as its commerciality requires the dispersal of editorial and authorial power to properly represent the work. Finally, it also demands the extension of what counts as scholarly work from the financial and spatial limits of academia as well as the reconfiguration of where or when an edition and editor should look for meaning. Graeme McMillan claims that "whatever lightning Marvel

captured in its onscreen bottle is not a trick that's easily replicable." This may be a daunting statement for filmmakers and screenwriters who wish for the same level of fame and success that the MCU has given anyone involved with it. For a textual scholar, though, this very fact should only make it all the more interesting and worthy of study.

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