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Masters of Ceremonies. A design approach to participatory video

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Abstract: This paper presents an empirical work carried on by a group of design researchers with a small group of young between 16 and 23 years old based in a suburban area of the city of Milan. Through a process of self-representation using participatory video practices and tools, the project aims at involving social groups who are often at the margins of society as young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), or teenagers who are at risk of dropping out of school. In order to reach these groups, the collaboration with organizations and educators who are already active at a local level has been necessary.
Participatory video is a process of self-reflection and self-narration in which designers act as mediators. We describe our research approach for community-centred design actions, which involve participatory video (PV), collaborative storytelling and practices to foster social innovation and conversational processes.

Keywords: design tools, filmmaking, participatory video, education, social engagement

1. An introduction to participatory video

The term 'Participatory Video' (henceforth PV) refers to a wide range of practices and experiences, and it can be considered as a relatively new field for academic research. This is partly due to the fact that PV practices and approaches have been applied mainly outside the academic and educational context (High, Singh, Petheram & Nemes, 2012) by a wide variety of practitioners and with different communities and participants.

Consequently, a definitive and exhaustive definition of PV is still missing in the academic literature, as researchers and practitioners are defining this practice focusing on different aspects. Johansson et al. (1999) define the process of PV as "A scriptless video process, directed by a group of grassroots people, moving forward in iterative cycles of shooting-reviewing. This process aims at creating video

narratives that communicate what those who participate in the process really want to communicate, in a way they think is appropriate." (Johansson et al., 1999, p.35). More generally, White (2003) focuses, on the scope of PV, which can be seen as "a powerful force for people to see themselves in relation to the community and become aware about personal and community needs. It brings about a critical awareness that forms the foundation for creativity and communication" (White, 2003, p.64). These two definitions encompass the aspects of PV which are common to the many uses and applications; on the one hand, PV processes involve people who are non-experts, such as that do not have any previous training or education in video production or video editing, in the process of making an audio-visual product. On the other hand, PV can be considered as a means for the creative expression of groups and communities, giving them full control about what is communicated and how.

Collizzolli (2010) in his doctoral dissertation about PV attempts a definition which includes the many variations of practice and experience, describing PV as "a group of alternative applications of audio-visual technologies for social development projects or social/political intervention, whose goal is to generate social or individual change." (Collizzolli, 2010, 12, translated from Italian). The use of the term 'alternative' emphasizes the overturning of the traditional hierarchy of audio-visual production, making participants able to narrate and express themselves (Bordiga, 2013). However, PV as a process requires the presence of a mediator, who has the role of guiding participants throughout the process, activating feedback loops and maintaining focus and motivation.

PV is practice-based. For this reason, design can contribute to PV culture linking together the processes and the outputs, providing both further tools coming from co-design practices and visual and representational skills that can improve the perceived quality of the artifacts collaboratively produced and also the creative and expressive skills of the participants. In fact, although digital video can be considered as an affordable and common form of communication even for non-professionals, people lack of audiovisual culture, literacy and aesthetics.

In this paper, then, we introduce a design-oriented approach to PV where designers act as mediators. We describe the activities of the *campUS Social TV* project[1], which involved the use of PV process, collaborative storytelling and practices to foster social innovation and conversational processes. The empirical work was conducted by a group of design researchers with a small group of young between 16 and 23 years old based in a suburban area of the city of Milan.

2. Context. The *campUS* project

campUS. Participatory Actions in Zone 9 in Milan (azioni partecipate in Zona 9 a Milano) is a two years multidisciplinary research project supported by a funding grant provided by Polisocial Award[2]. The project finds its place in the realm of research for social innovation and is based on the principle that university campuses are public spaces and have to be perceived and used as relational spaces, where the world of research and education and the social and urban environment can meet and share experiences and knowledge. *campUS* project considers two main targets, identified into weak categories of citizens: young NEETs (Not engaged in Education, Employment or Training)[3], and the elderly population of over-65. Both these social groups are involved into activities in order to "re-design" their role in society, fostering the intergenerational connection and its return on everyday community life.

[1] www.progettocampus.polimi.it; www.facebook.com/campUS.polimi
[2] The social responsability programme @Politecnico di Milano, www.polisocial.polimi.it
[3] In 2013, in Italy the amount of NEET people were growing and represented the 26% of young people between 15 and 29 (source: ISTAT, Rapporto annuale 2014. La situazione del Paese: http://www.istat.it/it/files/2014/05/Rapporto-annuale-

This experience started in February 2015 in collaboration with Fondazione Aquilone and its C.A.G. (Centro di Aggregazione Giovanile) Abelia[4], a non-profit organization that looks after young people dropping out of school or with mild relational disabilities. Educators identified a group of teenagers with different personal stories who are facing social or economic hardship. Over the two years of activities eleven young (16-22 years old) and three educators were involved in the project. At the beginning of our collaboration, educators were already leading a music workshop by providing the children who attend C.A.G. a rehearsal room in which they could record their own songs. A YouTube channel (Abelia Music Records) was also already available, on which they publish songs through slideshows and amateur video clips. Gabriele is the responsible educator of these activities and, having specific skills as a musician, helps guys and composes for them the musical backgrounds. Cristina, instead, who is passionate about hip hop and rap music, helps the boys in the composition of texts and free style, organizes concerts in different locations in the city, involving young people from different C.A.G. Many guys are rap music fans, and we have focused our activities on this genre, in particular.

This paper focuses on the activities related to the participatory process of designing, writing and producing audiovisual contents which involved the young group of NEETs. The first year focused on the production of the video for one of their song *Classe '98* and the second year concentrated on designing the format for a Web TV channel on YouTube and Facebook, and on producing the pilot episode. Over the two years of the project, participants had an active role being at the same time, in front of the camera performing their music and behind the camera shooting directly. The main goal of the project was to give the participants an additional opportunity for self-expression.

3. Activities

3.1 *Classe '98*. The videoclip

PV Outputs: videoclip, backstage.
Other outputs: presentation and projection with all the participants at the local bar Jodok.
Participants: 2 educators from the CAG Abelia + 8 teenagers and young adults (from 16 to 22 years old) + 4 researchers from the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano.
When: Feb 2015-Sept 2015.
Where: Fondazione Aquilone & CAG Abelia; Lab Immagine, Politecnico di Milano.

After a series of preliminary meetings between us researchers and the educators of CAG Abelia we decided to build a first workshop of several months with a small number of participants. We wanted to know each other and assess what would work and what not. Educators themselves proposed to build a mixed lab, welcoming people from different programs: on one hand teenagers at risk of leaving school with the passion for rap, on the other young people with disabilities[5]. The proposal for

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[4] It is one of the 21 youth centres in Milan, which work at local level each one within its area of reference. The educators also meet each other once per month in order to discuss and share experiences and knowledge about educational issues and developing new collective projects for the young at the urban level. In fact, each educator can work in more than one C.A.G. in Milan, developing transversal projects and practices dealing with the same topic or specific competences (music or dance, for example). Then, some projects can involve young from different areas of the city, breaking down the perceived boundaries between neighbourhoods and spreading a sentiment of welcoming and acceptance of diversities.
[5] The young people with disabilities were attending a structured project of several years with the objective of employment integration and independence.

a joint workshop was an intuition gained by the experience on the field, and the hope was that the encounter of two different worlds could be fruitful. The educators were in fact dealing every day with the loneliness of each teenager:

> "As long as they do not experience that being with others means not being impoverished but enriched, until they don't do this concrete experience, the others will always remain a problem, those who take away something."[6]

We decided to alternate the workplace: the rehearsal-recording room of Abelia, the instrumental audiovisual laboratories at the Fondazione Aquilone and moments of exploration in the city of Milan. The educational goal was to give the opportunity to the participants to get out from their usual places to know new ones;[7] we also decided to work with what we had, to avoid the idea that to make a video we need to have professional expensive tools, an idea that could become an excuse to not to keep on doing video after this first experience. For this reason, we used smartphones and computers that we all had, alternating them with professional equipment, but only in the spirit of trying to learn how to use more complex materials.

Another aspect developed with educators was that the workshop had to be done on a regular basis. Every Wednesday afternoon, from March to June 2015, our workshop took place. The agreement with the participants was to build together a music video of one of their songs, and we were all co-authors. We researchers and video makers would not do the practical job, everything had to be made together. The work of four months was developed into three main parts, built ad hoc every time, adapting the workshops to the actual experience in the field:

1. *Introduction to audiovisual language.* In order to give the opportunity to the participants to experience the artificial nature of making videos, we used different experiences from animation, including pixilation and animated drawn sequences (Figure 1). Part of the participants had a strong relation with words, but less familiarity with images: we then explored the relationship between image, text and audio. In this stage we have built, step by step, a system to guide the participants from the words of their song to the construction of a storyboard. (Figure 2)
2. *Invention and development of music video.* We translated the storyboards into the video (Figure 3) and made several explorations in the city with cameras (Figure 4), having external shooting.
3. *Implementation and finalization of the video.* We defined the creative choices and expressive solutions, finalized the video, by editing and post-producing it. Because of the technical complexity of this part, the researchers were involved in helping out, always having the participants' supervision.

One evening in late June, in the concert hall of the bar Jodok,[8] we finally presented and screened the final video, along with a backstage video done by the participants too, who later offered us a rap concert and dancing with their songs (Figure 5).

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[6] Interview with Beppe, educator of CAG Abelia, led by Fabio Sisto & Elisa Bertolotti, 24.09.2015 (translated from Italian by the Authors).

[7] Educators told us that many of the teenagers they were working with were almost all the time in the neighbourhood, so from an educative point of view it was important to enlarge the experience of the world.

[8] Bar Jodok is one of the places of Olinda, based in the former mental asylum of Milan. Olinda works with mental disadvantages through job inclusion and cultural activities. Since ten years, Olinda welcomes teenagers to a free one-year theatre workshop, led by some of the most important contemporary theatre figures in Italy.

Figure 1. February 2015 - Introduction to moving images

Figure 2. March 2015 - Exploring the possible relationships between texts and images

Figure 3. March 2015 - Making intuitive storyboards and starting to visualize how images can move
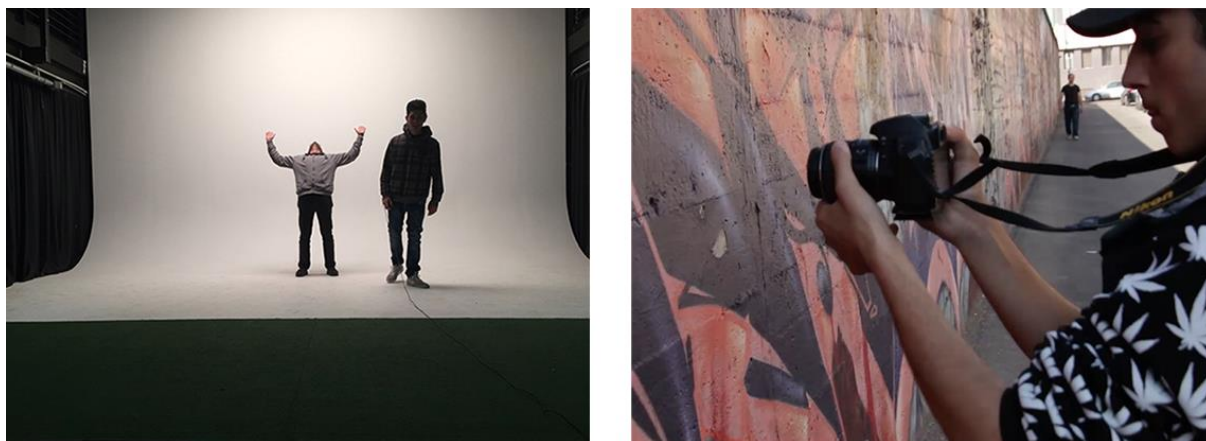
Figure 4. February - June 2015 - Experiencing how is shooting in professional environments and shooting in the city of Milan

Figure 5. End of June 2015 - At Jodok (Olinda, Milan) presenting the Videoclip, a backstage of the making of the film and playing with music, words and dance

Later in that Summer and in September, we researchers and the educators from CAG Abelia met again, to analyse the work done and understand how to develop further the collaboration. Overall, the educators were happy about the experience, particularly they could sense that, even though the teenagers were not expressing it directly, the workshop was a good social experience:

> "This is also positive from the perspective of integration between the young people with disabilities. [The young rappers] have done many things with them, without even thinking of the difference between them, because they have made a mental shift. They were just meeting each other, they have become friends and in parties they were singing together. All this thanks to the workshop. They broke the barriers with the 'different'. But even if they did this path in group, they continue to say that that song is mine, that work is mine; or that they don't recognise this group's path because they were not in the spotlight, because for them it counts only if you are inside the camera. Who is out from the camera does not exist. This is not true; it is a necessary experience also to those who are out of focus of the camera. And it has been very necessary one."[9]

How to work together was still a complicated and sensible matter after the first experience, something we had to insist further. Video making was a great educational opportunity for everyone:

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[9] Interview with Beppe, educator of CAG Abelia, led by Fabio Sisto & Elisa Bertolotti, 24.09.2015 (translated from Italian by the Authors).

it was the chance to be part of a system where everybody was essential.

> "They can not live on a normal level, where they do not have to be the smartest in the class. Instead there is a normality where all of us we are not geniuses neither duffers. They are struggling to see it this thing, as from their point of view there are Those Who make it (the super cool) and Those Who Cannot make it (the mediocres) [..] We have to demolish this belief through aggregation, where the small richness of each, together, become a great richness."[10]

By doing the workshop, we realised how was challenging for the young participants to manage the frustration of learning new things. We observed their tendency of creating dynamics of dependence with us researchers in the matter of creative choices and technicalities. We tried to observe and avoid this logic of dependence as much as we could, having in mind that this issue had to be at the centre of our next efforts. For that reason, we decided to do a second year of experimentation, aiming to accompany the participants on a path for independence. We wanted to create the basis of a system that could be kept in life after us researchers were gone.

3.2 Combo Connecta Project. The Web format

PV Outputs: pilot episode (20') (Web format), paper format (web series).
Other outputs: Facebook fanpage /ComboConnecta.
Participants: 3 educators from the CAG Abelia + 8 teenagers and young adults (from 16 to 22 years old) + 2 researcher from the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano + the famous Italian rapper Mastino.
When: Dec 2015-Oct 2016.
Where: Fondazione Aquilone & CAG Abelia, Bruzzano, Milan

The collaboration continued with the creation of a mixed editorial staff for editing the sections and content for the Social TV, according to the peer education model. The natural tendency of adolescence to have influence on the others has been harnessed as a function of an educational goal: in peer education projects, as happens in everyday life, young people learn from each other (Shiner, 1999), they learn from someone who puts their own questions and is facing the same problems, with whom they share interests and language, rituals and values. In this context, it fits the opportunity to exploit the educational potential of hip hop culture (Fant, 2015): no matter being dropout or good-for-nothing, what matters is the struggle for the "style", creating sophisticated rhymes in a growth path based on the limited means available, where the right balance between the rules and the freedom to break them allows young to bring into play the most of their resources. The creative process is an experience of transformation that helps to get out of the logic of getting everything at once: at first, the guys struggle to feel the good side of being part of the group and to interact with different people, because of a narcissistic approach, but after a while they tend to go out of isolation and to confront their skills thanks to the relationship with others and cultivating their passion. The music also becomes a means to differentiate themselves and find their place in society. Within hip hop culture is given a meritocratic hierarchy linked to experience and ability. There is a hip hop ethic so that the experts have the responsibility to teach the so-called street-knowledge, the set of basic skills for surviving in the street.

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[10] Interview with Beppe, educator of CAG Abelia, led by Fabio Sisto & Elisa Bertolotti, 24.09.2015 (translated from Italian by the Authors).

As a result of the experience of the first year on the *campUS Social TV* project, and on the basis of the dialogue with the research team, educators of CAG Abelia have therefore set up a permanent laboratory which stands in the rehearsal room and the music workshop, in order to produce formats and contents for the Abelia Music Records YouTube channel and the Facebook fanpages[11]. In agreement with the educators of CAG Abelia, NEET and young people with mild disabilities came up beside young people studying, who have less problematic personal stories, attending Abelia to advance their music. The latter may represent motivators for NEET and can introduce them better in the growth process. It has therefore formed a mixed team, with differentiated roles: "non-experts" young are involved in creative practices; "experts" young play the role of mentors and motivators, launching challenges and dictating the rules; educators and researchers play the role of facilitators, observe, develop and provide the appropriate tools to carry out creative activities, in order to feed and nurture the skills and stimulate the process (tutored peer education).

The Web format *Combo Connecta Project* develops as a path that, episode after episode, accompanies the "emerging" young from Abelia Music Records to a live concert (Asaro, 2016). Each episode starts with one of his songs and makes him meet an established rapper ("Big") from the Italian scene. The format of the project was designed through a series of co-design sessions, for which ad hoc tools were developed. The participatory process has therefore mixed different tools, some of which are derived from the co-design practices, others from the participatory video practices. The first meeting (Figure 6), for example, was focused on the definition of the goals of the format and its target audience. The participants immediately oriented the project toward the encounter between emerging and established artists, and on the importance of a final concert as the last stage of a process of collective growth, in which members of the audience are invited too. Participants defined their target audience using personas. Afterwards, based on the model of some case studies which were taken as reference, the structure of each episode of the show was defined, dividing it in three blocks, each of them referring to one of three macro-themes: interviews, entertainment, and audience interaction. Eventually, the different sections of the format were organized in chronological order building the treatment, and defining the duration for each part, the role of hosts and guests, the keywords and the questions to be asked to the guests. This part of the work was conducted using specific designed tools (Figure 7).

Figure 6. The first meeting focused on the definition of the goals of the format and its target audience.

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[11] www.facebook.com/ComboConnecta/; www.facebook.com/plugsocialtv/

Figure 7. Organising the different sections of the format using specific design tools.

The paper format, such as the document which defines all the creative and productive elements of the format itself, represents, on the one hand, the result of the co-design activities with the participants of the project (young rappers and educators), and, on the other hand, it can be considered as a form of prototype, including the writing and the pre-production phase which are necessary for producing episodic audiovisual contents. The paper format represents, in fact, the basis for defining characters, roles, timing, duration, location, and specific objects which are necessary for producing and post-producing each episode. It represents the first development of an idea and it verifies its feasibility.

Centauro & Omega Storie, a rap crew who started right in the youth centre (CAG) of Abelia, are the hosts for the episodes of *Combo Connecta Project* and they lead the emergent rap artists in meeting "Bigs". The first emergent protagonist is La Haine (Lorenzo, aka Lollo, one of the participants of the videoclip for Classe '98), who was selected by the educators and by Samuele Centauro and Samuele Omega Storie because he demonstrated the courage to perform live. The first "Big" to be interviewed is Mastino, who is involved in hip hop culture and education himself, and founder of Street Arts Academy[12](Figure 8). Each episode is structured in three fundamental blocks. The first block includes the interaction with the citizens of Bruzzano: the emergent artist walks in the streets of the neighbourhood and let people listen to his songs, asking questions about what people think and inviting citizens to the final concert. The format is published on the Youtube channel Combo Connecta Project and it is distributed on the Facebook fanpages of Abelia Music Records, CAG Abelia, ComboConnecta. Having involved established rappers allows for a wider circulation of the online episodes (Figure 9).

At present time, Fondazione Aquilone is continuing the activities, integrating them with the educational activities which are currently ongoing. The model developed with the *campUS Social TV* project is aimed at the horizontal conveyance of competences among educators, using the toolkit provided. The final goal is to support the CAG Abelia in the role of promoter for a network of CAG in the city of Milan, which could co-produce the format episodes, sharing competences and equipments. Moreover, the research team has the role of promoting more partnerships with secondary professional schools which could be interested in providing its students for experiencing audiovisual production and post-production. In this way, teenagers of the same age, but with

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[12] www.streetartsacademy.it

different educational backgrounds, can collaborate for a common project, working on the production of videos and on the management of the contents online (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) (Figure 10).

Figure 8. Interview to Mastino, one of the "Big" in the rap scene, founder of Streets Art Academy.

Figure 9. The emergent artist La Haine walking around the neighbourhood letting people listen to his songs while being filmed and recorded from the other participants.

Figure 10. The model developed with the campUS Social TV being used for other educational activities with secondary school students.

4. Results and Reflections

The described project considers as goal the social inclusion of a young group of NEET, a urgent topic which is brought to attention, at the international level, by the research programs Horizon 2020 (Europe in a changing world - Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies; The Young Generation in an Innovative, Inclusive and Sustainable Europe). From the spontaneous practices which are being developed in CAG (Youth Centres), a range of practices and solutions are emerging, introducing enormous possibilities in terms of social innovation. The activities conducted by CAG operators represent an example of diffused community creativity (Meroni, 2007) by the "non experts" (Manzini, 2015), according to which solutions to problems are not only a prerogative of designers, but they become collective approaches and tools which can be used by the community. Design as a discipline is able to bring an original contribution, orienting its activities to the experimentation of situated collaborative interventions and prototyping dedicated processes and tools.

As usually happens within PV processes, the highest quality of the resulted videos does not represent the fundamental goal. In the case of the *campUS Social TV* project, the resulted audiovisual outputs can potentially reach a wider audience thanks to the publication on social media. However, we can assume that the experience conducted gains more value as a process of innovation: on the one hand, some of the spontaneous educational practices which were already activated by the CAG operators, have been systematized; on the other hand, these practices have been integrated with PV processes, using a design approach and design tools. In particular, the results of the collaboration between design research and educational practices can be discussed and synthesized using the following key concepts:

1. *Belonging/Engagement*. The project had contributed to the fight against the growing tendency to isolation and alienation of young teenagers, involving NEETs into a set of activities which generate engagement and sense of belonging. Peer education, intended as the reciprocal exchange of skills and competences among young adolescents with different potentialities, has been developed conferring key roles to the different members of the team; according to a collaborative model, the continuous proposal of new challenges have contributed to the development of peer education. Moreover, practices of design and audiovisual production, based on the collaboration among team members with specific competences and the distribution of key roles, have provided an additional ground for comparison and group construction. In an active and inclusive *tutored peer education* process, young teenagers obtain further awareness of their own "role" and of the relational dynamics with the other members of the team, and develop new expressive potentialities.

2. *Empowerment*. The project has promoted a series of activities which were able to put into play individual competences and to increase awareness of the individual skills of each participant. Through narrative techniques and using a visual language, able to integrate positive and negative aspects of the experience, tools for comprehending reality were provided to the young teenagers (Antonacci, 2012). Lastly, the project activities which involved the participants in a process of personal and collective growth, have contributed to the identification of personal goals and objectives.

3. *Literacy*. The project has increased the basic skills which can be utilized in everyday life, especially for educators. These latter, have learnt specific competences in the

realm of visual culture; they have been provided tools for facilitating creative and productive processes which could include young NEETs. Moreover, the design of audiovisual content included a discussion about ways for its distribution and publishing, fostering a conscious access and use of media (social media in particular) and digital tools.

4. *Network*. The project allowed the creation of a network of actors which could be involved in the development, on the local area, of new educational models, based on socialization and collective activities. Through the sharing of competences and practices, the project has contributed to the creation of virtuous circles able to generate and maintain educational process, developing the relations between adolescents with different backgrounds, and educators: the designed tools used during the experimental phase, are, in fact, able to facilitate the collaboration among educators of different youth centres and between educators and school teachers.

In conclusion, the most significant contribution of the *campUS Social TV* project was the ability to educate the educators to go further with their educational approach. In fact, even if young teenagers were considered explicitly the main participants of the project, those who gained more benefit were the educators, who gained basic design competences and co-design tools which they could integrate in their activities, and which they could use in order to collaborate with other educators. The project represents the opportunity to extend the activities in a continuous process with the goal of developing a framework which could be made available for the community with which it was developed. Given the role of cultural intermediaries in connecting new and established roles and action, offering venues, equipment and training opportunities, the project represented a weakening system supporting educational practices with the integration of design-led participatory video.

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