

“New media is not just new digital technology. It is laden with issues of equality, diversity and community that affect aspects of citizenship, democracy and social change.”

## **Encounters with Difference:** Community-Based New Media Programs and Practices

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Community-based new media programs offer a distinct place of arts learning in the larger learning and media ecologies that teens and young adults navigate. As part of a three-year case study of new media programs, the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS) presents pedagogical and curricular insights that are relevant to both out-of- and in-school art programs. We suggest that the roles of the teacher and the learner are rapidly shifting as the curricular potential of new media emerges across educational landscapes. Community-based new media programs provide an occasion to create encounters for both producers and viewers to experience differing ways of knowing. At GIFTS, an emphasis on creativity, critical analysis, identity development, and voice are achieved through an intense immersion into film production. Community-based new media programs prompt encounters with difference, and in this case, we highlight the learning possibilities of time, place, new media, identity development, and teaching and learning. This inquiry suggests that through new media production, agency and empowerment become significant outcomes for both students and teachers.

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**C**ommunity-based new media arts education programs have been one response to the challenges of interpreting, understanding, and participating in an increasingly mediated and complex world (Murray, 2005). Situated between home and school, community-based new media education programs have formed a space that provides pedagogical alternatives in expertise, time, and population of learners and teachers. These programs have offered not only technical education in using the digital tools of new media, but also work to create spaces that become communities of inquiry (Farr-Darling, 2001), teaching communication skills and providing opportunities for agency and empowerment. Although these qualities can be presented in PK-12 public schools, community-based new media arts programs have offered a unique set of learning possibilities. This article brings together research from a nationally funded Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities grant, *The Art of New Media: A Study of Community-based New Media Arts Education*. Over the past 3 years, we have presented and written on the various aspects of this research: the conceptual basis of community-based new media education as highlighted in both rural and urban youth new media centers (Darts, Castro, Sinner, & Grauer, 2010); lessons from our inquiry that might be directed toward public school new media teachers and administrators (Castro & Grauer, 2010, Lin, Castro, Sinner, & Grauer, 2011); the impact of a new media project for teenage mothers (Weber & Levy, 2010); digital sto-

rytelling as art practice (Sinner, 2010); and, the learning outcomes for urban youth in a non-urban environment (Lin, Grauer, Castro, 2011).

This report of the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS) on Galiano Island in British Columbia, Canada highlights how community-based art educators conceptualize, design, and implement learning and teaching within their specific programming structures.

Community-based new media programs have prompted encounters with difference, and in this case, we highlight the learning possibilities of time, place, new media, identity development, and teaching and learning. This inquiry has suggested that through new media production, agency and empowerment become significant outcomes for both students and teachers. The understandings from this study have suggested that formative and foundational learning possibilities existing outside of PK-12 programs have presented valuable curricular and pedagogical implications for in-school programs. We do not, however, advocate that community-based arts programs can ever replace or fill the gap left by increasingly threatened PK-12 art programs. Instead, we advocate a dialogic relationship between in-school and out-of-school art programs that can and should buttress each other dynamically. As new media practice becomes increasingly social, our research presents curricular and pedagogical approaches that are applicable to out-of-school contexts and offer implications for in-school programs.

The varied digitally mediated contexts in which young people learn have been regarded as both compelling modes of entertainment and powerful means of education. These diverse contexts are not separate; rather, they form

media ecologies that support and integrate with each other dynamically, without canceling each other out (McLuhan, 2005). Many community-based new media arts education programs have functioned largely outside of formal school settings and approach media education from a professional production perspective that seeks to foster self-expression, creativity, critical analysis, and the development of identity and voice (Goldfarb, 2002; Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008; Rogers, 2010). Community-based new media art programs, because of their small size, can tailor their curriculum and pedagogy for specific themes, concerns, and populations. Such programs form a vital component to the visual arts education that youth encounter in the larger media *and* educational ecologies they navigate.

### **New Media and Community-Based Arts Education**

Our shared media landscape may be regarded as a compelling and ubiquitous source of cultural pedagogy (Gillespie, 2003; Miller, 2005). New media arts education programs offer a response to the challenges of interpreting, understanding, and participating in an increasingly mediated and complex world. Existing largely outside of formal school settings, these community-based initiatives have approached media education from creative, artistic, and aesthetic skill sets and have been grounded in curricula that foster self-expression, creativity, critical analysis, and the development of identity and voice (Tyner, 1998). The site on Galiano Island was chosen because of GIFTS' outstanding record of successful awards, the testimony of numerous former and current students, and the excellent reputation it has established with local school districts and teachers. We were interested in observing and analyzing what factors might account for such a positive response to GIFTS programs from students, teachers, and the surrounding community. As there has been a lack of research that addresses how commu-

nity-based new media arts educators conceptualize, implement, and assess teaching new media literacy and arts-based production skills within their particular community programming structures, we intended to find cases to help fill that gap. If media are now at the core of human experience and the principal means of cultural expression and communication within contemporary society, then it is imperative for us to understand the beliefs and practices of community on new media arts teachers and learners, and the impact these arts-based programs have on young people and the communities in which they live.

New media is not just new digital technology. It has been laden with issues of equality, diversity, and community that affect aspects of citizenship, democracy, and social change (Gill, 2002). It has been qualitatively described in its speed, fluidity, and ability to extend knowing bodies (Hansen, 2004). Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) contended that new media creates an interval in time and space for knowing bodies' interpretive framing of their worlds to be reshaped. The speed and fluidity of new media to prompt encounters with representations of knowing across time and space has prompted a rethinking of what it means to learn and teach in the current information age. We suggest the role of the teacher and learner is rapidly shifting, and the curricular potential of new media is only just emerging across educational landscapes (Ellsworth, 2005; Flack, 2004; Kellner, 2000; Levin & Arafah, 2002; Peppler, 2010). One significant challenge then is how to incorporate the range of skills and cultural practices youths acquire and engage in outside formal education (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2007; Manovich, 2001; Sefton-Green, 2001).

Community-based new media arts programs have become increasingly common in recent years and offer pedagogical possibility not readily available in in-school settings (Eger,

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2010; Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Tyner, 1998; Weber & Mitchell, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Many of these programs are located in after-school, nonprofit, or museum settings, or as part of artist-in-residency and artists-in-schools programs (Tyner, 1998). Current research has suggested that engaging young people as active participants in their community through participatory arts projects, community cultural development programs, artist-community collaborations, and community-based arts projects is key to media literacy, youth development, and learning (Darts, 2007; Goodman, 2003; Lopez, 2008; Mills, 2010). Policymakers, practitioners, educators, and community members often see such programs as an effective way to accomplish a variety of objectives including: meeting children's needs for safe environments and supervision from caring adults while their parents are working; boosting academic achievement; supporting overall youth development; and encouraging youth engagement in community development (Goodman, 2003; Poyntz, 2009). These community-based programs have been seen to occupy a 'third arena' between school and family where young people can learn and develop (Kangisser, 1999, Castro & Grauer, 2010). Community-based, after-school programs have also been shown to address the needs of young adults from a variety of backgrounds and learning needs (Goodman, 2005). McLaughlin and Heath (1993) drew attention to the role of community-based organizations in building self-esteem among disenfranchised groups of young people. Many community-based arts programs have carried a dual focus of creating 'learning' experiences with particular media while fostering the development of critical thinking, agency, and self-esteem (Felshin, 1995; Holloway & Krensky, 2001; Lowe, 2001; Mancillas, 1998; Trend, 1997).

Using new media (specifically, digital photography and video) with youth has a rich tradition in community-based arts programs

and with community-based artists. Advances in technology have made it possible to create quality products without many of the frustrations of earlier film and video work. New media are "new" because they are cheaper, require fewer technical skills, and the products can be disseminated to wider audiences, from the local to global, easily and quickly. Community-based new media programs have provided an occasion to create encounters for both producers and viewers to experience each others' differing ways of knowing.

In this article, the Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS), represents a case of what is pedagogically possible in community-based programs. It offers us an opportunity to better understand what pedagogical potential is possible, and what challenges are met through community-based new media art programs, as well as what challenges remain to be addressed within the arts and learning community.

### **The Gulf Islands Film and Television School (GIFTS)**

Our study of GIFTS adopted an ethnographic approach where we followed cohorts of learners completing week-long courses and looked at some of the special projects that exist at GIFTS. As embedded researchers, we worked with both collaborative teams of students and individuals as they progressed through their courses, informally sharing conversations over meals and formally interviewing learners, mentors, interns, and staff (Sinner, 2010). Through audio and video, photography, field notes, and analysis of films, websites, student evaluations, and film school documents, we developed an integrated media-based understanding of GIFTS as a site of learning. As Freebody (2003) asserted, "ethnographic research, with its emphasis on context and 'thick description,' has been seen as offering a range of procedures that give it applicability and flexibility in educational settings" (p. 76). By using an ethnographic approach that

articulates the culture of this dynamic learning community, we were able to identify pedagogic and curricular approaches within their situated environment. Among the most significant outcomes were: a) the significance of place in learning; b) how the medium of filmmaking teaches collaboration and communication; c) the constraint of time; and d) teaching as pointing toward possibility.

### **The Place of GIFTS**

The most popular courses offered at GIFTS are single-week Youth Media Intensive Programs:

Each week, students work with other creatively motivated students and accomplished filmmakers to produce a short form video or animation. The small size of the production teams (three or four people) ensures that each person participates in every facet of the production process, and has a chance to work on the professional equipment available at the school. The students are involved in everything from the initial brainstorming session to the final edit and sound mix. They're in the driver's seat and make all the major decisions required at every stage of the process. ([www.giftsfilms.com/courses/](http://www.giftsfilms.com/courses/))

The curriculum is simple. Over 6 1/2 days, working in teams of three or four, participants brainstorm ideas, write scripts, develop shoot diagrams, shoot video, perform, do sound mix, and edit video to create short, 2- to 5-minute films or animations that are then shown to family and friends, and uploaded onto the Internet.

Participants arrived on Sunday evening on the last ferry of the weekend from Vancouver, British Columbia. It was a 40-minute ferry ride across the Strait of Georgia, a scenic landscape of mountains, ocean, and the Southern Gulf Islands in the distance. As we waited at the Gulf Islands ferry with the GIFTS bus, it was easy to spot the new film school students. Usually alone, they stumbled up the ferry dock clutching pillows and baggage, a cross section of young

people bravely setting off on a new adventure. Then, there was a 20-minute drive, crammed together in the van through winding roads that ended at the top of a dirt road deep within a rainforest. Students described it as a scene out of the fantasy world of Harry Potter. They were whisked across a large body of water in a ferry, and arrived on a strange island in the dark to be taken by bus into the middle of the woods.

The place of GIFTS is significant. Massey (1994) stated, "Within this dynamic simultaneity which is space, phenomena may be placed in relationship to one another in such a way that new social effects are provoked" (p. 4). We define place as an intersection of specific social relations. At GIFTS, participants have an opportunity to create new working relationships and to advance their evolving self-identities. Participants commented on the ability to 'reinvent' themselves outside of the social expectations of school and family as enabling them to take on the role of cameraperson, director, actor, sound-mixer, or film editor. The setting of GIFTS acts as an interval in time and space where learning identities can shift, reshape, and transform. "When you take people from different socio-economic statuses, abilities, ethnicities, ages, backgrounds, and sexual orientations and bring them to a place where they are forced to create their own community—magic results," stated Angela Brown, Vancouver School Board's Anti-racism & Diversity Consultant. She is referring to the mutual respect and trust that resulted between the teens involved in Youth-MADE (Media Arts and Diversity Education and Empowerment), one of the special initiatives at GIFTS. It is also a place where identities can be pushed and expanded. In 2007, for example, 10 Israeli, 10 Palestinian, and nine Canadian youth came together to produce films about peace, titled, "Peacing it together," an example of the type of work that GIFTS is famous for producing. The making of the film was situated within the

larger arena of issues of social justice education and identity development.

"I learned as much about myself as I did about filmmaking," a former student stated. The setting of GIFTS essentially may dislodge a participant from a familiar context, bringing into relief an individual's way of knowing in relation to a diversity of other ways of knowing. By having a place that resets habituated relations and social structures around a shared interest, participants may be enabled to, in a sense, reinvent themselves in relation to each other as filmmakers. Peter, a GIFTS mentor and original founder, reflected that,

They don't have to deal with their regular friends. They don't have to deal with their regular teachers and their regular parents... it's kind of a blank slate and they can be who they want to be and... start from scratch.

### **The Medium of Film**

GIFTS provides learners an opportunity to mentor with media professionals to learn the craft of film. It is a model of hands-on collaborative practice where participants are guided through all aspects of production, emphasizing quality in sound design, camera work, and theme. As professionals who are active in the film industry, the mentors and staff at GIFTS are on the leading edge of shifts in new media production, which includes desktop video editing, sound mixing, and animation. However, even though the actual equipment at GIFTS is not state-of-the-art, it is stressed that having the latest equipment does not make for cutting-edge, professional know-how. More significant than equipment are the tools for good communication in filmmaking. Workshop participants are taught the vocabulary and procedures found on professional film sets. The vocabulary of production that, in the beginning of the week feels like role-playing, quickly transforms into the language of filmmakers. In formal and informal interviews with teen participants, many

noted that being treated like professionals who were taught not only the technique, but the language of film production, enabled them to work nearly autonomously by the end of a week-long workshop. With an interactive website as well as a strong presence on YouTube and Facebook, GIFTS keeps up with teen culture and social networking, building confidence with teens that their work is getting out to the audience they seek.

Richards (1998) pointed to the more flexible and democratic styles of teaching and learning that might apply in the context of community-based settings. At GIFTS, we found this to be the case. As a program founded on social justice and democratic values, mentors and staff advocate that technological ability is not enough. The mentors and staff at GIFTS see themselves as creating a place for both personal and collective inquiry through developing skills of communication and collaboration. For example, Warren, a GIFTS mentor, reflected on the difference of filmmaking as:

A collaborative medium. So that would be the difference. Like teaching them how to work together to commit to their own ideas in a collective. To be individuals in a collective is the big thing.

The mentors and staff tacitly use this feature of filmmaking to teach communication skills and collaboration. Storyboards and shot lists are seen not only as ways to plan a film, but also as tools for collaboration and preventing breakdowns in communication. For the mentors, much of the teaching in the first few days involves teaching methods of collaboration specific to the medium of film. Not only did we find that the tools of collaboration and communication essential to conceptualizing, designing, and producing a film were taught, but that new media literacy was taught as well. The students readily sit and analyze films, or attend intently to the mentors' sessions, as they can see the

direct relevance to their own competence as filmmakers.

Participants learn not only the technicalities of filmmaking, but also the nonlinear and “cultural layer” of new media (Manovich, 2001). They learn through the conceptualization and production that all new media artifacts are culturally layered (Hayles, 2006). Particularly, the non-linearity and looping montage stylization enabled by digital film editing enables and prompts a fine-grained control over the narrative and message. Anna, a participant in a documentary focused Youth Media Intensive workshop, commented that,

The experience just shows you... in film and in real life, how you can bend truths... to your opinion and your views. It's really cool to see that come up on film... and a finished project of your idea and your vision. In documentary... your idea is not your imagination, but your actual thoughts and beliefs coming up on film and it's just an amazing sight to see.

Anna's team won several awards for their documentary on online gaming. They were a cast of unlikely partners but grew to understand the strengths that each team member brought to the film. Anna was an advanced placement student heading for a university education in film studies; Blake, a budding musician; and, Daniel, an aboriginal high school drop out. The intensity and forthright insight that Anna brought to explaining the collaboration between the three, especially her support of Daniel's camera skills, spoke volumes about the need to have diverse groups of students work together to discover their own talents as well as appreciate the uniqueness of others.

The collaborative process of working together in a team is not always a seamless process. Participants have to work through arguments, conflict, and having each other's voice heard. It is a process of ongoing negotiation and communication. Additionally, participants also learn

the process of filmmaking, or how new media not only works, but functions in society, because they ultimately are responsible for screening their film at the end of the weeklong workshop and distributing it online. The constraint of time, making a film in a week, is also significant to the kinds of learning relationships that emerge during a workshop.

### **Time Constraints**

According to complexity theory, constraints both restrict and enable. Time is a constraint that is both restrictive and ultimately enabling for the curriculum and pedagogy of GIFTS. Liam, a veteran mentor, commented that, “Some constraints can create some amazing things.” Coupled with the setting of GIFTS, the compressed timeline builds into the curriculum a sense of urgency and consequence, as the participants' films are screened at a public event at the end of each workshop. This is where authentic assessment takes place. The students work on their projects almost round the clock in the last few days to produce the best film they can, because they know it will be watched by family, friends, and peers both at the screening and when it goes online. There is no need for grades or due dates at GIFTS. The compressed timeline, without formal assessment measures, is a constraint that is different than most students are used to experiencing in their schooling. In complexity theory, constraints of difference—those constraints that are unlike former learning conditions—are powerful incentives for students to adapt and learn. In this way, these constraints of difference enable participants to engage in structured conditions that help determine the balance between sources of coherence that allow a focus of purpose/identity and sources of disruption and randomness that compel the group to constantly adjust and adapt (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Observing mentors working with participants, time is always pointed to as a reason to work through problems, tensions, and even fatigue. Peter reflected:



Figure 1. The Timeline Clock. Photograph by Kit Grauer.

They live it and they're here 24-7. And so it's that concentrated energy and the time for critical and creative expansion, I think, that really is the key. I think that you can quickly cut to the chase and facilitate magic that does, in fact, happen here. But I think it's that intensity. It's one week and, you know, one of my favorite visuals—and I'm sure you've filmed that visual—is the clock.

Outside the main classroom is a large wooden clock with the timeline of the GIFTS curriculum painted on its face (Figure 1). It serves as a visible reminder of the urgency needed to complete a film in a week. There is a responsibility assumed by the openness of the curriculum and place to meet the challenge of making a film in such a short amount of time. The intensity of the short workshops serves to motivate participants to work together because of the responsibility and freedom prompted by the mentors. It is a notable pedagogical strategy that allows the mentors to shift their power responsibility as co-participants in the creative process. The vast majority of students we interviewed spoke about being treated as professional filmmakers, and that responsibility extended beyond the actual making of the film to include taking responsibility for all their behavior at GIFTS.

### **Teaching as Pointing Toward Possibility**

Through the constraints of time and the culture of filmmaking at GIFTS, we questioned if participants gain a sense of agency through their learning experiences. Agency in this study is defined as an individual freedom to act from an understanding that they are depended on, which can have an effect not only on their peers, but also on the working environment, the mentors, and the final product. It is a sense that what they do matters, not only to them, but to each other. Participants discussed at length how mentors' openness to their ideas and working styles pointed them to possibilities they were able to capitalize on in their filmmaking. Also,

there was the realization that the constraint of time created a place where they had a sense of "ownership" and "control" over their collaborative creative productions. Many of the students also commented that the term "mentor," rather than "teacher," fit well with the sense of a collaborative learning environment.

In interviews with mentors, they collectively described coming into a workshop without their own predetermined themes or concepts. Instead, they focused on how they could respond to the ideas initiated and developed through dialog and planning, rather than what they could do to prepare for specific issues and ideas in advance. As Allison, a mentor, described:

I try to get my hands off, and just let [students] take the reins and take control of their production. I just need to be there to facilitate, so they know what's possible and what's available for them, to their advantage of making their film... ultimately, they're in control of their own film.

Mentors draw from their professional experience as filmmakers to ask media-specific questions, to articulate the conditions they are working under, and to point out the possibilities and pitfalls of how students might bring their ideas to the screen. The pedagogical practice of the mentors at GIFTS can be best described as an improvisation to meet needs of the individual and the collective, striking a delicate balance between making sure ideas are heard and valued while ensuring there is movement toward the group's goals. Mentors are aware that there needs to be a level of self-criticality; they need to be checking their own interpretations of what is heard.

In this model of teaching-as-improvisation (Sawyer, 2004), mentors seek to build communication skills and techniques of collaboration, and to delimit self-imposed creative restrictions of participants. Mentors describe what they do as amplifying participants' experiences so they

equal their own expectations and standards of practice—that is, mentors improvise, drawing from their professional experience to create the conditions for participants to create both individual and collective representations of their ideas. Warren continued, noting that,

I guess another way of thinking about the relationship I strike with students is... this is more like I'm a "service" kind of role... I'm there to give them what they need and I try to reiterate that... as many times as possible. It's a matter of... amplifying what they bring with experience and amplifying it in a way that equals their own ambitions so they can... just really feel what they can do in as full a way as possible.

### Reflection

In our analysis, we have come to understand that, in a group of young filmmakers, the collaborative nature of community is significant in affirming and cultivating alternate ways of knowing. This is not to suggest that community-based arts programs are somehow superior to in-school arts education; rather, they form a vital part of the learning ecology in young people's lives. Nor are community-based arts programs, as Heath (2001) warned, "the source of one more 'to-do' mandate for... classrooms" (p. 15). Rather, the value of such community-based art programs is that they offer a time and place of *difference* in the larger media and educational ecology. One seventh-grade class we witnessed used their experience in filmmaking as an alternative to the usual outdoor education program. Their film, "GIFTS is AWESOME," points to the many learning and community-building aspects of the film school that were part of this experience.

Veteran mentor, Liam, also commented on this phenomenon:

The reason why these kids come back is because they have a good time here... there are no grades [at GIFTS]. Some kids care about the product, but some are

more interested in socializing and that experience.

Difference creates event potentials (Massumi, 2002) in which habituated, patterned ways of knowing are interrupted, creating the space for new ways of knowing. Community-based arts programs like GIFTS have the potential of offering a time and space for encounters with difference. Whether providing a time to share experiences, or living and working intensely in an uncommon environment of a forested island, this site points to the pedagogical power of difference. These programs can focus on a specific population (e.g. aboriginal youth), those with a shared interest (e.g. filmmaking), or in a specific geographical location (e.g. in a rainforest on an island). In our study, we observed that not only having a personal connection to curriculum, but also to each other, was significant in participants' learning. At GIFTS, participants came from all over North America, drawn by an interest in some aspect of filmmaking. Even those who had no financial means, but were supported with government and privately funded scholarships to serve urban and aboriginal youth, were given the time and space to connect with the shared interest around filmmaking.

Marshall McLuhan (1962) stated that media, "by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world" (p. 41). And with new media, speed and fluidity enables new ways, places, and intervals of knowing between knowers (Hansen, 2004). At GIFTS, the technology of non-linear digital video and desktop editing enabled participants to collaborate to produce a short film in a short time span without the details of the technology becoming the totality of the experience. Participants are able to come to know themselves in relation to each other differently through an opportunity in the collaborative process of filmmaking. Ellsworth (2005) stated that media "are

imbued with the potential for catalyzing new forms of corporeality, new embodiments, new ways of knowing and being human" (p. 126). Community-based programs such as GIFTS offer encounters with not only different ways of knowing, but also new ways of knowing and of sharing those understandings in new kinds of representations.

Community-based new media arts programs form a vital part of the larger media and learning ecology of youth. There can be a tendency to compare, in an either-or manner, in-school versus out-of-school arts programming. We suggest that, because of the location, flexibility, and ability to offer responsive curriculum to the unique requirements of a particular cohort or a specific discipline, community-based, new media arts programs are part of the larger curriculum and pedagogy, complementing and extending quality in-school arts programs. However, they do raise the question of how in-school programs address the issue of difference

in ideation, media, place, and time. This expands the notion of difference from simply a cultural condition to one that seeks to reframe habitual and patterned interaction through time and space. The common pattern that emerged from our analysis posits that community-based arts may serve as an interval or interruption in the pedagogical and curricular flow of learning by presenting occasions for difference. We assume that all programs want more than just an education in new media skills. In any program, where the underlying motivators are an emphasis on creativity, critical analysis, identity development, and voice achieved through an intense immersion into film production, agency and empowerment will occur for teachers and students. It is in these encounters with difference that in-school programs can draw for programmatic design, and also connect, support, and resonate with quality out-of-school visual arts programs. [AQ: This statement is not quite clear. Could it be said another way?]

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