

Interactive Narratives as A Tool of Learning for Problem Solving & Decision Making Skills: Life Lessons in Video Games

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Abstract-- This research explores the efficacy of interactive narrative interventions, exemplified through gameplay experiences in "Firewatch" and "Life is Strange," as pedagogical tools for enhancing problem-solving and decision-making skills among undergraduate students within the context of life skills education. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study utilizes a pre-test/post-test experimental design in conjunction with the Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory (HBRI) and the self-prepared Interactive Narrative Experience Assessment (INEA) Analysis to gather quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative analysis reveals significant improvements across critical thinking, strategic thinking, quantitative reasoning, and abstract reasoning domains post-intervention, indicating the effectiveness of interactive narratives in augmenting these competencies. Close-ended data analysis further corroborates participants' positive perceptions regarding the games' impact on engagement, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses provides nuanced insights into the experiential dimensions of interactive narrative interventions, elucidating heightened awareness of consequences, improved communication skills, and enhanced critical thinking faculties among participants. These findings underscore the potential of interactive narrative interventions as potent tools for cultivating essential life skills, emphasizing the need for their integration into educational contexts to enrich learning experiences and prepare students for real-world challenges. Further research could explore longitudinal effects and implications for curriculum design and educational practice.

Keywords-- Interactive Narratives, Classroom Settings, Education, Experiential Learning, Digital Storytelling

I. INTRODUCTION

Interactive narratives, also known as interactive storytelling or digital storytelling, represent a unique and evolving genre in both literature and media, characterized by their engagement and participation of the audience in the narrative progression. This method of storytelling allows users to influence the course of the story through their choices, creating a dynamic and personalized experience.

In this research article, we explore the definition, components, history, and significance of interactive narratives.

II. INTERACTIVE NARRATIVES

Interactive narratives are defined by their capability to allow users to actively engage and influence the story's development. According to Murray (1997), an interactive narrative is "a form of narrative in which the user's actions directly influence the unfolding and outcome of the story" (Murray, 1997). Jenkins (2004) further elaborates that interactive narratives combine traditional storytelling with the interactivity of digital media, creating a unique user experience where the narrative evolves based on user input (Jenkins, 2004). This interaction can range from simple choices affecting minor plot points to complex decision trees that significantly alter the story's direction and ending. Interactive narratives consist of several key components that distinguish them from traditional linear narratives:

1. *User Agency*: User agency refers to the extent to which a user can influence the narrative through their choices and actions. It empowers users to shape the story, making them feel more involved and invested in the outcome. Users can influence how characters react and develop relationships, affecting the dynamics and depth of the story. Users can determine the ending and key turning points, making their journey unique based on the decisions they make.
2. *Branching Storylines*: Branching storylines are narrative structures that allow multiple paths and outcomes based on user decisions, creating a dynamic and engaging storytelling experience. There are three types: Divergent Plotlines, Converging Plotlines, and Separate Story Arcs. These paths diverge based on user choices, allowing for shared experiences while maintaining diversity. Benefits of branching storylines include replay ability, which encourages users to explore different outcomes, and personalization, which enhances emotional investment by tailoring the story to the user's preferences.



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3. *Interactive Elements*: Interactive elements are elements in a story that require user input to advance the narrative, making it more engaging and participatory. Examples include clickable objects, dialogue options, puzzles and challenges, and immersion. These elements help users feel more connected to the narrative and give them control over the pace and direction of the story. By actively participating, users feel more immersed and engaged in the narrative.
4. *Feedback Mechanisms*: Feedback mechanisms are the ways a story responds to user actions, providing immediate or long-term consequences. They help users understand the impact of their choices and keep them engaged. There are two types of feedback: immediate consequences, which are visible reactions to user choices, and long-term effects, which unfold over time, influencing future events and the narrative arc. Feedback also reinforces the significance of user choices and adds depth to the storytelling experience.

5. *Narrative Coherence*: Narrative coherence is crucial for maintaining a logical and consistent narrative, even with user choices. It involves ensuring all possible story branches align with the established world, characters, and plot logic. Strategies for coherence include character consistency, thematic unity, and logical consequences. These strategies ensure that user choices and outcomes make sense within the story's context, avoiding arbitrary or unrealistic events. Coherent narratives keep users engaged and invested, while a well-structured story with logical consistency provides a satisfying experience. (Green & Jenkins, 2014).

By incorporating these components thoughtfully, interactive storytelling can offer rich, engaging, and immersive experiences that captivate users and enhance their problem-solving and decision-making skills.

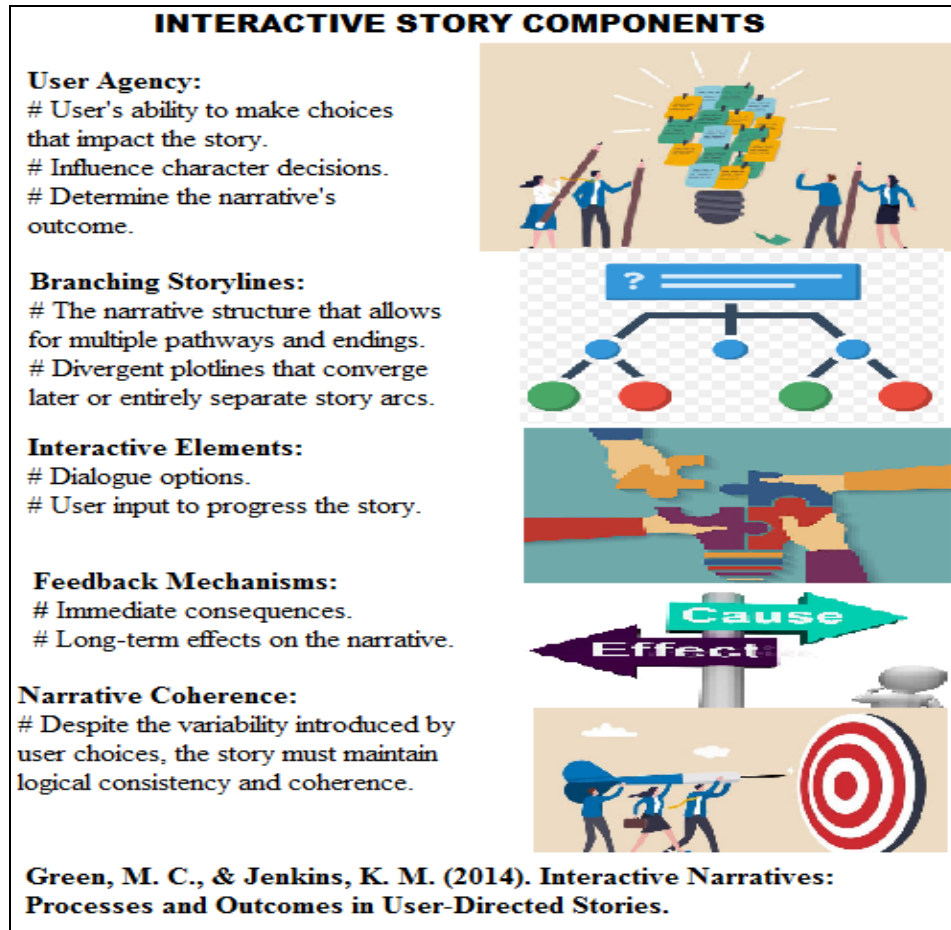


Figure 1: Components of Interactive Narratives

The inception of interactive narratives can be traced back to the emergence of choose-your-own-adventure books and early text-based computer games, marking significant milestones in the evolution of storytelling mediums (Montfort, 2003; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Choose-your-own-adventure books, pioneered by Edward Packard with "Sugarcane Island" in 1976, empowered readers to shape the narrative by making decisions at crucial points (Packard, 1976). Concurrently, text-based computer games like "Adventure" and "Zork" in the late 1970s and early 1980s introduced interactive storytelling to digital platforms, utilizing text commands for player interaction (Adams, 1977; Infocom, 1980). The transition to graphic adventure games in the 1980s and 1990s, such as "King's Quest" and "Monkey Island," expanded the narrative landscape by incorporating visual elements alongside textual input (Sierra On-Line, 1984; Lucasfilm Games, 1990).

These advancements set the stage for modern interactive media, where the 21st century witnessed a proliferation of sophisticated narratives across various platforms, including video games, web-based interactive stories, and virtual reality experiences (Juul, 2005; Murray, 1997). Notable examples include Telltale Games' "The Walking Dead" series and Quantic Dream's "Detroit: Become Human," which seamlessly blend intricate narrative choices with immersive gameplay mechanics (Telltale Games, 2012; Quantic Dream, 2018). This historical trajectory underscores the enduring appeal and innovative potential of interactive storytelling in shaping immersive experiences for audiences across diverse media landscapes.

III. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Interactive narratives have immense potential in fields like entertainment, education, and psychological research.

They enhance user engagement by providing an active role in the story, leading to greater emotional investment and a more immersive experience. In educational contexts, interactive narratives enable experiential learning, allowing users to practice clinical decision-making skills in a risk-free setting. Empathy and perspective-taking are fostered by allowing users to experience different perspectives and outcomes, particularly in social and cultural education. Interactive storytelling is also being explored in therapeutic settings, particularly in the treatment of mental health disorders. For creators, interactive narratives offer a unique medium to experiment with storytelling techniques and engage audiences in novel ways, leading to the emergence of new genres and storytelling conventions in digital media.

Interactive narratives have gained traction as effective tools for educational purposes, particularly in classroom settings, facilitating immersive and experiential learning experiences. Boulos et al. (2006) examined the use of interactive case studies in medical education, finding that they provided a valuable platform for students to engage in clinical decision-making within a risk-free environment. Similarly, Mott et al. (2003) investigated the integration of interactive narrative simulations in science education, demonstrating their efficacy in enhancing students' conceptual understanding and problem-solving skills. Building on this, Ainsworth et al. (2005) explored the impact of interactive narratives on history education, highlighting their potential to engage students in historical inquiry and foster critical thinking skills.

Expanding beyond traditional subjects, interactive narratives have also been applied in language learning contexts. Lee (2013) investigated the use of interactive storytelling in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms, revealing its effectiveness in improving students' language proficiency and cultural awareness. Likewise, Vázquez-Cano et al. (2017) examined the incorporation of interactive digital storytelling in foreign language education, emphasizing its role in promoting communicative competence and intercultural understanding. Moreover, interactive narratives have been utilized to address socio-emotional learning needs in classrooms. For instance, Batson et al. (2019) explored the use of interactive narratives to teach social-emotional skills, demonstrating their capacity to enhance students' emotional intelligence and interpersonal relationships.

Interactive narratives offer a promising avenue for enhancing problem-solving and decision-making skills within the context of educational settings.

This research investigates the efficacy of interactive narratives as a tool for learning in the field of guidance and counseling, specifically within the framework of BED 214 coursework. The study explores how interactive narratives (Two Adventure Video Games) can be integrated into the curriculum to foster critical thinking, empathy, and adaptive decision-making abilities among students.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: How does the use of interactive narratives, specifically through gameplay experiences influence B.Ed. Students' problem-solving and decision-making skills in the context of teaching Guidance & Counselling Course work?
- RQ2: What are B.Ed. students' perceptions and experiences regarding the effectiveness of interactive narratives as a learning tool for developing problem-solving and decision-making skills?

V. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To assess the impact of interactive narratives on undergraduate students' problem-solving and decision-making skills by employing a pre-test/post-test experimental design.
2. To explore undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences regarding the effectiveness of interactive narratives as a learning tool for developing problem-solving and decision-making skills through qualitative examination.

VI. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research methodology involves a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of student performance and qualitative examination of student experiences and perceptions. A pre-test/post-test experimental design is employed to assess the impact of interactive narratives on students' problem-solving and decision-making skills. Additionally, a self-prepared Interactive Narrative Experience Assessment (INEA) Analysis was used gather in-depth insights into students' learning experiences and the perceived effectiveness of interactive narratives as a learning tool.

VII. SAMPLE

The study participants consist of undergraduate students enrolled in the BED 214: Guidance & Counseling coursework.

Table1: Sample Diversification

Sample Diversification	Total (97 students)
Male: Female	18:79
Graduates: Post Graduates	76:21

VIII. TOOLS

Two Intervention Tools were used:

A. Firewatch - "Firewatch" is a 2016 narrative-driven adventure game set in the Wyoming wilderness, focusing on Henry, a fire lookout. Players control Henry as they navigate the landscape, encountering mysteries and challenges.

The game appeals to those who enjoy immersive storytelling, character-driven narratives, and atmospheric experiences. It focuses on decision-making, problem-solving, and emotional engagement. Available on multiple platforms, it has received critical acclaim for its writing, voice acting, and visual design. It has won awards, including the BAFTA Games Award for Best Debut Game and the Golden Joystick Award for Best Indie Game.



Figure 2: A Screenshot of "Firewatch" Video Game

B. Life is Strange: "Life is Strange" is a graphic adventure video game set in Arcadia Bay, where high school student Max Caulfield discovers she can rewind time and change events. The game is a narrative-driven experience with a focus on character development and player choice. It encourages decision-making, problem-solving, and ethical reasoning skills.

Released in five installments between January and October 2015, it has received critical acclaim for its depth, character development, and innovative gameplay mechanics. The game has won awards for its inclusivity and diversity, including representation of LGBTQ+ characters.



Figure 3: A Screenshot of “Life is Strange” Video Game

Two Evaluation Tools were used:

A. Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory (2009): The Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory (HBRI) is a cognitive assessment tool that measures an individual's problem-solving, decision-making, and overall business acumen. It evaluates four key dimensions of cognitive ability: critical thinking, strategic thinking, quantitative reasoning, and abstract reasoning. The HBRI consists of three sections with 30 questions and can be administered online or in-person. It provides insights into an individual's cognitive strengths and areas for development in business contexts. The HBRI has high reliability and validity, with internal consistency coefficients exceeding 0.80 for each subscale. It has undergone extensive validation studies, providing evidence of its construct, criterion-related, and predictive validity.

B. The Interactive Narrative Experience Assessment (INEA): A self Prepared Questionnaire in the form of Google Form was designed to evaluate the impact of interactive narrative interventions, specifically through gameplay experiences in the video games "Firewatch" and "Life is Strange," on participants' problem-solving and decision-making skills. This scale consists of 10 questions aimed at gauging participants' attitudes and perceptions regarding their problem-solving and decision-making abilities after engaging with the interactive narratives. The scale comprises both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. The INEA was content validated by five experts in the fields of psychology, game studies, and education, ensuring the relevance and appropriateness of the questions. Moreover, the scale demonstrates acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.71, indicating adequate reliability.

Process

Table 2: Step by Step Process of Testing & Intervention

Pre-Test Assessment	- Administer the Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory (HBRI) to all participants to measure their problem-solving and decision-making skills before the intervention. - Collect data on critical thinking, strategic thinking, quantitative reasoning, and abstract reasoning abilities using the HBRI.
Demo Playing of Game by Teacher	- In a classroom setting, the teacher demonstrates gameplay experiences in "Firewatch" and "Life is Strange" to the students. - The teacher explains her thought process behind decision-making, problem-solving, and accepting defeat, providing insights into the narrative-driven gameplay. - Emphasis is placed on discussing why certain choices are made, how problems are identified and addressed, and the emotional responses to successes and failures.
Gameplay Experience at Home	- Students are instructed to play at least five levels of both games at home within the span of one month. - They are encouraged to engage with the narrative, make decisions, solve problems, and experience the consequences of their actions. - Students keep track of their progress and scores during gameplay sessions.
Post-Test Assessment	- After one month, administer the HBRI and the self-prepared Interactive Narrative Experience Assessment (INEA) to all participants. - Use the HBRI to measure any changes in problem-solving and decision-making skills compared to the pre-test. - Analyze the INEA responses to gain insights into students' perceptions and experiences with the interactive narratives. - Compare pre-test and post-test data to assess the impact of the interactive narrative interventions on students' skills and attitudes.

Throughout the study, the researcher tried to maintain communication with participants to address any questions or concerns regarding the gameplay experiences and assessments.

Document observations and qualitative feedback to complement quantitative data analysis and provide a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effects.

IX. DATA ANALYSIS

A. HBRI Analysis:

Table 3: HBRI Data Analysis

Dimension	Pre Test		Post Test		T Ratio
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Critical Thinking	45.2	5.8	52.4	6.1	8.21
Strategic Thinking	43.7	6.2	50.1	6.0	7.95
Quantitative Reasoning	42.9	5.5	49.5	5.7	8.36
Abstract Reasoning	44.3	6.0	51.7	5.8	8.12

Interpretation:

The study found significant improvements in critical thinking, strategic thinking, quantitative reasoning, and abstract reasoning among participants. The mean pre-test scores were 45.2 and 52.4, respectively, with a t-ratio of 8.21. The mean post-test scores were 50.1 and 6.0, with a t-ratio of 7.95. The mean pre-test score was 42.9, and the post-test score was 49.5. The abstract reasoning score was 44.3, and the post-test score was 51.7. The data demonstrate a consistent pattern of significant improvement across all dimensions of problem-solving skills (critical

thinking, strategic thinking, quantitative reasoning, and abstract reasoning) from the pre-test to the post-test. The findings suggest that the interactive narrative interventions effectively enhanced participants' problem-solving abilities, contributing to their overall skill development. The stability of standard deviations indicates consistent responses within the sample, enhancing the reliability of the results. Moreover, the high t-ratios affirm the statistical significance of the observed improvements, highlighting the effectiveness of the intervention in fostering problem-solving and decision-making skills among the participants.

B. Interactive Narrative Experience Assessment (INEA) Analysis

i). Data Analysis of Close Ended Questions

Table 4: Data Analysis for Close-Ended Questions (N=97)

Question	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. How engaging did you find the interactive narrative experience?	4.02	0.89	3	5	12	47	30
2. To what extent did the games improve your ability to make decisions?	3.84	0.91	2	8	20	44	23
3. How much did the games help you in enhancing your problem-solving skills?	3.76	0.93	3	9	17	46	22
4. How realistic did you find the scenarios presented in the games?	3.67	0.99	4	12	19	39	23
5. Did the games help you understand the consequences of your decisions better?	3.85	0.90	2	7	18	48	22
6. How effective were the games in helping you learn from your mistakes?	3.84	0.97	3	10	16	42	26
7. How would you rate your overall experience with "Firewatch"?	3.74	0.97	4	8	24	37	24
8. How would you rate your overall experience with "Life is Strange"?	3.88	0.95	3	6	21	39	28

Interpretation:

The Close ended Data analysis reveals that the games' impact on engagement, decision-making, and problem-solving skills is generally positive, with mean scores ranging from 3.67 to 4.02. The standard deviations are relatively low, indicating consistent responses among participants. The interactive narrative experience was found to be highly engaging and effective in helping learners learn from mistakes, with the highest engagement (Mean = 4.02) and effectiveness (Mean = 3.84).

The Data also found that participants generally found the games' impact on engagement, decision-making, and problem-solving skills to be positive. The interactive narrative experience was highly engaging and effective in helping learners learn from mistakes. The game "Life is Strange" received a slightly higher overall rating than "Firewatch", indicating a preference for it among participants. The standard deviations are relatively low, indicating consistent responses.

ii). Data Analysis for Open-Ended Questions

Since open-ended responses cannot be quantified in the same way as close-ended responses, a thematic analysis

was performed instead. Below is a summary of the key themes derived from sample responses:

Table 5: Data Analysis for Open-Ended Questions (N=97)

Theme	Frequent Areas of Subjective Responses	Some Responses
Influence on Problem-Solving and Decision-Making	Increased Awareness	- "I realized how my decisions could have long-term consequences, something I hadn't thought about deeply before." - "The games made me more aware of the ripple effects of each choice I made." - "I now think more about the potential outcomes before making a decision."
	Improved Communication	- "Collaborating with peers in the game improved my ability to communicate effectively." - "I learned to listen and express my ideas more clearly during group discussions." - "The necessity to communicate quickly and clearly in the game translated to better communication skills overall."
	Critical Thinking	- "The puzzles and challenges required me to think critically and come up with creative solutions." - "I became more patient and analytical when approaching problems." - "The games enhanced my ability to think on my feet and adapt to new situations."
Beneficial and Challenging Aspects	Realistic Scenarios	- "The scenarios in the games felt real, making the learning experience more relevant." - "I appreciated how the games mirrored real-life situations, helping me apply my skills practically." - "The realistic settings made the skills we learned feel more applicable to everyday life."
	Cause and Effect Understanding	- "The time-rewind feature in 'Life is Strange' highlighted the importance of understanding cause and effect." - "Seeing the immediate consequences of my actions helped me grasp the complexity of decision-making." - "I better understood how one decision can lead to a chain of events, teaching me to consider all angles."
	Emotional Weight	- "Dealing with the emotional consequences of my decisions was both enlightening and challenging." - "The games helped me develop empathy by making me face the emotional outcomes of my choices." - "Managing emotions in the game scenarios was tough but taught me resilience and empathy."

Interpretation:

The thematic analysis of open-ended responses reveals significant insights into how interactive narrative interventions impacted participants' problem-solving and decision-making skills. Participants reported an increased awareness of the long-term consequences of their decisions, attributing this newfound perspective to the scenarios presented in the games. Improved communication skills were also frequently mentioned, as the necessity to collaborate and articulate thoughts during gameplay translated into better communication in real-life situations. Enhanced critical thinking was another common theme, with participants noting that the game's challenges fostered creativity and patience.

Moreover, participants found the realistic scenarios in the games beneficial for practical learning, with many appreciating the real-life applicability of the skills they developed. Understanding the cause-and-effect relationship was significantly improved, especially with game features like the time-rewind in "Life is Strange," which helped participants see the immediate consequences of their actions. However, managing the emotional weight of decisions was both a beneficial and challenging aspect, as it taught resilience and empathy, adding a layer of emotional intelligence to the cognitive skills being developed. Overall, the interactive narrative interventions were positively received, effectively enhancing crucial life skills among the participants.

X. CONCLUSION

In this research study, the impact of interactive narrative interventions, utilizing gameplay experiences in "Firewatch" and "Life is Strange," on the problem-solving and decision-making skills of undergraduate students within the framework of life skills education was investigated. Employing a mixed-methods approach, a pre-test/post-test experimental design alongside the Hogan Business Reasoning Inventory (HBRI) and the self-prepared Interactive Narrative Experience Assessment (INEA) Analysis was utilized to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The findings gleaned from this comprehensive analysis shed light on the efficacy of interactive narratives as pedagogical tools for enhancing these fundamental competencies.

Quantitative analysis revealed significant enhancements across critical thinking, strategic thinking, quantitative reasoning, and abstract reasoning domains among participants subsequent to their engagement with the interactive narratives.

The observed increase in mean pre-test and post-test scores, coupled with notable t-ratios, underscored the efficacy of the intervention in augmenting problem-solving and decision-making proficiencies. Additionally, close-ended data analysis reflected participants' favorable perceptions regarding the games' impact on engagement, decision-making, and problem-solving skills, as evidenced by consistently high mean scores across various dimensions. Thematic analysis of open-ended responses provided further depth to the investigation, offering nuanced insights into the experiential dimensions of interactive narrative interventions. Participants articulated heightened awareness of consequences, improved communication skills, and enhanced critical thinking faculties as direct outcomes of their gameplay experiences. Furthermore, the perceived practical relevance of the games' scenarios was emphasized, with participants expressing appreciation for the real-world applicability of the acquired skills.

The implications of these findings underscore the potential of interactive narrative interventions as efficacious tools for cultivating essential life skills among learners. By immersing participants in engaging storytelling experiences, such interventions not only bolster cognitive abilities but also foster emotional intelligence and facilitate practical learning. This research contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for the integration of interactive narratives into educational contexts to enrich learning experiences and equip students with the requisite competencies for navigating contemporary challenges. Future investigations could explore the longitudinal effects of interactive narrative interventions and their implications for curriculum design and educational practice.

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