**The Connected Collector: Collecting in a Web 2.0 world**

A submission for:

*Journal of Popular Culture*

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**Abstract**

This paper extends consideration of the personal and social dimensions of collecting by examining the mediating effect that ‘web 2.0’ and associated networked communication technologies have had on the practice of collecting. Arguing that the tripartite formulation *acquisition-maintenance-curation* constitutes a useful conceptual model for considering web 2.0 mediated collecting practice, this paper provides insights into how networked communication technologies extend collecting as a social practice. The implications of web 2.0 are significant for collecting and in drawing on the broad typology of *acquisition-maintenance-curation* as an explanatory framework for understanding collecting, we suggest that collecting is given specific form and dimension when enacted online. In particular, the paper draws attention to the ways that web 2.0 expands the collector’s access to collecting fields and networks of collectors whilst also nuancing the ways that collectors identify as ‘collectors’.

**Keywords**

Collecting, Web 2.0, Curation, Electric Guitar, Networked Communication Technologies

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Such a cabinet should contain all significant things and rarities created by nature and man… In short, all that could enlighten and please the eye. (Leibniz 1708, qtd. in Purcell and Gould 17).

A goodly huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art of engine hath made rare in stuff, form, or motion; whatsoever singularity chance and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsever Nature hath wrought in things that want like and may be kept; shall be sorted and included. (Francis Bacon, qtd. in Spedding, Ellis and Heath 335)

**Introduction**

This paper emerges from the personal-professional interests of the authors as *collectors*. Collecting proceeds as a social practice where artefacts that hold specific personal resonance are gathered together and curated with intentioned purpose. Russell Belk *et al.* describe collecting as the “selective, active, and longitudinal acquisition…of an interrelated set of differentiated objects (material things, ideas, beings or experiences) that contribute to and derive extraordinary meaning” (8) for the collector. This definition draws attention to the intentionality that underpins the act of gathering together disparate artefacts and the purposeful formation of the collection. As curated assemblages of material culture, collections gain their meaning “on the edge of where the practices of the past, the politics of present power, and the poetic capacity of each human being blur together” (Pearce 1).

This paper extends these considerations of collecting by examining the mediating effect that ‘web 2.0’ (O’Reilly) and networked communication technologies have on collecting practice. Arguing that the tripartite formulation *acquisition-maintenance-curation* constitutes a useful conceptual model for considering collecting practice, the analysis that follows in this paper offers insight into how networked communication technologies extend and enhance the practice of collecting and define the persona of the ‘connected collector’.

Web 2.0 holds a number of implications for collecting, and in drawing on *acquisition-maintenance-curation* as a foundational typology, we will outline an explanatory framework for considering the mediating effects that web 2.0 exerts on collecting practice. With reference to our own experiences in curating collections – in our case, collections of electric guitars – we explain how practices related to the speculation, procurement and trade of collectible artefacts have been markedly altered by web 2.0 in terms of the capacity that collectors maintain to rapidly develop specialised knowledge of collectible artefacts, participate in dispersed collecting communities and engage in the trade of collectible artefacts. These hallmarks present as tangible expressions of web 2.0 mediated collecting.

We cite the description of web 2.0 collecting practice as ‘connected’ given the enhanced capacity that collectors have to engage with extended collecting fields and communities of collectors. Being connected is indeed a hallmark feature of collecting, whether online or not, with the network of collectors and collecting markets accessible to the collector prescriptive of the collector’s practice. With web 2.0 this accessibility is enahanced, and it is with attention to the ‘affordances’ (Gibson; Treem and Leonardi) that web 2.0 for connecting with expanded networks of collectors and collecting fields that we offer the following deliberations.

**Web 2.0: A brief summary**

At its core, ‘web 2.0’ represents an amalgam of networked communication technologies that enable dialogic and participatory engagement between users in online, web-mediated environments. Tim O’Reilly’s definition provides a useful description of the key features of web 2.0:

Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an “architecture of participation”, and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences. (288)

Utilising ‘platforms’ (O’Reilly), including social media and similar networked applications, web 2.0 emphasises participation by users. Belk defines this participatory feature of web 2.0 under the guise of *sharing*:

It is clear that the Internet, and especially Web 2.0 activities, have opened up many new possibilities for sharing… Bringing people together for both communal and utilitarian purposes is now greatly simplified compared to pre-Internet days. Before the Internet if you wanted to find others with a passion for mushroom hunting, building model airplanes, preparing foods without cooking, or writing and reading fan fiction for *Xena Warrior Princess*, it could be a real treasure hunt to find likeminded people. Today they are all a few keystrokes away. (19)

The dynamic nature of the interactions made possible by these technologies represents an important feature of web 2.0. When extrapolated to the practice of collecting, web 2.0 opens opportunities for an expanded collecting practice where the collector’s “privileged relationship with material culture” (Bielecki 3) is extended across space and into highly specialised and organised collecting fields. This capacity to engage instantaneously with like others emerges as a particular hallmark, with the affordances of web 2.0 for the identification of and engagement with widely distributed communities of collectors extending the reach and capacity of the individual collector. While we argue in the analysis that follows that the fundamental characteristics of collecting, including the acquisition, maintenance and curation of collections remain core to collecting practice, we observe that the affordances of web 2.0 *expand* the possibilities for collecting by opening access to distributed networks of collectors that extend the reach of the individual collector while also exposing the ‘markets’ through which collectible artefacts are traded and exchanged.

*The Constraints of web 2.0: Access and Participation*

Although we note that the participatory features of web 2.0 have expanded the possibilities for collecting, we nonetheless remain cautious in reifying any claim for the unquestioned *liberatory* potential of web 2.0 and its incumbent technologies (Brake; Blank; Blank and Reisdorf; van Dijck and Nieborg; Hargittai and Walejko). For example, Hargittai and Walejko’s analysis of digital participation identifies the socio-economic predictors that constrain access, highlighting the differential capacity individuals have to utilize these technologies. As Hargittai and Walejko note, participation in online settings correlates with broader socio-demographic markers and that “exposure to experiences that increase participatory culture and digital literacy *are unequally available* to individuals regardless of their access to digital media” (241; emphasis added). Extending this view, Blank and Blank and Reisdorf’s consideration of the basic “ability” required to navigate web 2.0 technologies demonstrates how requisite technical literacies are unevenly distributed across demographic categories. For those *with* access and the ability to manipulate the mediations of web 2.0, the prospects for participation as a ‘connected collector’ are significant; yet, it remains that access to these technologies and capacity to utilize their affordances are not universally shared.

The hyper-commercial functionality of web 2.0 also presents challenges (Athique; Krsteva and Pavlovic-Latas). As Van Dijck and Nieborg have argued, the foundations of web 2.0 have at their core commercial imperatives and far from representing an entirely ‘open’ and egalitarian space “functions entirely inside commodity culture” (855). Connected collecting is implicated in this dynamic and functions as a mode of consumption that is prone to the collector’s capacity to consume. While we acknowledge Belk et al.’s suggestion that collecting is a “specialized form of consumer behaviour” (180), we nonetheless note that pragmatic questions regarding the collector’s capacity to acquire and curate collectible artefacts define the practice of collecting. Our practice as collectors, too, has a clearly commercial implication, and we do of course acknowledge the commercial imperatives that come with the trade and acquisition of artefacts. Collecting in this late capitalist moment is deeply invested in the commercial imperatives of trade, with the implication of this dimension of collecting including the challenge of discerning “where sharing ends and commerce begins” (Belk 7).

The confluence of engagement, sharing and commerce indicates the terrain of web 2.0 mediated collecting. Web 2.0 affords access to both the ‘network’ *and* the ‘market’, with the potential conflict that this represents marking an important tension. Although web 2.0 functionality and platforms afford the potential for access to networks of collectors (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal), the capacity to engage with these technologies and the commercial imperatives that underpin its purpose identify concomitant challenges.

**A Typology of Web 2.0 Collecting**

Albeit with these challenges in mind, we are primarily interested in detailing the affordances that web 2.0 provides. In terms of our own engagement with web 2.0 and the maintenance of the collections we curate, we suggest that for those who maintain access to the platforms of web 2.0 and hold the capacity to manipulate these, web 2.0 enables the capacity for undertaking the following:

i) The ‘reconnaissance’ of items, including the search-for and investigation-of prospective collectibles. This aspect of collecting practice emphasises the capacity to identify and access key information about prospective collectibles, including the provenance and value that these items hold and the location and market ‘status’ of specific artefacts.

ii) The generation of ‘knowledge’ on specific collectibles. Generating detailed knowledge of a specific item and its collectability is markedly enhanced with web 2.0. Instantaneous access to communities of collectors and the capacity to virtually engage with recognized ‘experts’ provides the collector with valuable resources for assessing an artefact and its relative collectability.

iii) The commercial ‘exchange’ of items. Enacted via e-commerce platforms and applications that enable the trade of artefacts (including extended service networks dedicated to the brokerage, evaluation and transport and delivery of traded artefacts), a major aspect of web 2.0 mediated collecting practice revolves around the ‘expanded market’ that web 2.0 provides. Collectors are no longer limited to markets within their immediate geographic reach, with applications and platforms dedicated to the trade of artefacts eliminating many of the constraints posed by access and proximity to collectibles.

iv) The ‘curation and display’ of collected artefacts. Following Treem and Leonardi’s (2013) accounts regarding the ‘visibility’ afforded by social media, or what Bregman and Haythornthwaite term “the presentation of self” (p. 5), web 2.0 platforms also enable the collector to curate the display of collections. We extend Trem and Leonardi’s observation that “social media technologies enable people to easily and effortlessly see information about someone else” (150). We suggest that much the same extends to the visibility of collections. Web 2.0 enables the curation of collections *for* display via platforms that allow for the sharing of audio-visual content and commentary by collectors.

v) Collector ‘dialogue’ and exchange. Sharing accounts of one’s experience as a collector corresponds with practices associated with the sharing of knowledge identified above. Beyond the capacity for the assertion and demonstration of one’s identity as a ‘collector’, social media platforms and forums dedicated to particular collectibles and collecting communities enable individual collectors to engage with each other and enhance opportunities for the exchange of knowledge, social interaction and the development of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger; Wenger) built around specific collectibles. Extending Rassuli and Hollander’s suggestion that the function of material culture is to communicate “belonginess to a group” and an earlier traditions in cultural anthropology that position objects – collectible artefacts included – as representative of a shared bond and common interest (see in particular Douglas and Isherwood; Boortsin).

These points function as hallmark features of the ‘connected collector’. Taking these elements of collecting practice as foundational to the connected collector’s persona, we argue that the tripartite *acquisition-maintenance-curation* that represents the foundational components of collecting practice are issued specific nuance and detail when considered in terms of the affordances that web 2.0 provides. We turn now to extend this consideration of the *acquisition-maintenance-curation* tripartite in context of web 2.0.

**Connected Collecting: a short methodological analysis**

In applying the term *collector*, we draw on Wajda’s observation that “anyone who has traded baseball cards, saved birthday cards, or created albums of printed matter dedicated to an event or life has been a collector” (174). Bielecki extends this further to note that collectors,

…can collect anything- shoes or sea shells, pottery or painting, mummies or musical instruments. These texts approach the collector as a vehicle for the exploration of a certain mode of consumption, and the article being consumed is of only incidental importance. (24)

Collectors are defined as collectors because of their collections, with the social demarcation of this status and identity implied by the collection. In our specific cases, we identify as collectors of electric guitars, with our collections and association with communities of collectors and wider networks of retailers and brokers signifiying this status. Although we identify as ‘amateur’1 collectors and “passionate subjective consumers” of these specialist artefacts (Belk), we nonetheless devote considerable time, resources and effort maintaining our respective collections, as well as participate in communities associated with electric guitars.

As ‘amateur’ collectors drawn to the aesthetic and historical significance of the artefacts we collect, we seek understandings of the historical and cultural ‘place’ of the artefacts we curate. The practice of collecting draws with it this desire to situate and understand the historical significance of the material culture that the collectible represents. Along with the curation of the item according to its aesthetic appeal and the personal connections that individual artefacts represent for the collector, establishing a sense of the artefact’s place within a context of cultural meaning is also significant. Ownership and maintenance of the artefact connects the collector to the artefact’s heritage, with registers of meaning and interpersonal association implicated in the social resonances that the artefact provokes. Collecting involves not only assembling collections of “sublime sets of objects” but also understanding the “rituals and sacredness” (Belk 539) that extend from the artefact. The collectible artefact’s appeal is not only affiliated with the physicality of its object form, but also in what it represents socially, culturally and historically.

Though we each collect certain styles of guitar – for authors Hickey and Grant, the collection of post-Second World War models of ‘solid body’ guitar (predominantly) from the United States, and for author Woodward, ‘archtop’ guitars that have their lineage from the 1930s – the role that we each fulfill as arbiters of the legacies of these instruments presents as a significant aspect of our collecting practices. We have, over the course of decades of association with these instruments, generated knowledge of their ‘place’ as cultural (and *cultured)* artefacts. This understanding of our guitars’ cultural significance has been generated through association with other musicians and collectors and the networks of retailers, brokers and intermediaries that associate with this field. While the functional performance of these instruments *as* guitars is important (we each also *play* these guitars professionally), understanding the place they hold in the history of guitar and the interpersonal associations they provide to networks of others is just as significant.

*Web 2.0 Transformations of Collecting Practice*

The affordances that web 2.0 has provided for broaching these connections with networks of collectors, retailers and other intermediaries provides a major extension to our collecting practice. *Figure 1* provides a snapshot of how our own practice as collectors has evolved in context of web 2.0, with consideration of the hallmarks of our respective collecting practice *pre*-web 2.0 contrasted with a series of observation derived from more recent experiences. We cast this comparison in terms of the tripartite *acquisition-maintenance-curation* noted earlier in order to demonstrate how these prevailing dimensions of collecting practice remain identifiable, but in evolved form, in context of web 2.0.

*Figure 1: Collecting practice*

**Period Dimensions Observations**

Pre web 2.0 Acquisition

* Prior to web 2.0, guitars, like other musical instruments, were predominantly bought and sold in physical retail spaces. This usually meant a limited supply of prospective instruments were available within the geographic reach of the collector.
* Although traditional media dedicated to the collection of guitars - principally popular magazines, trade catalogues and classifieds - worked to some extent to confound the geographic boundaries of the collector’s reach, these media forms were not entirely successful in relaying a sensory experience of particular artefacts.
* The physical retail space functioned as the centre of a collector’s network. Access to other collectors and the market was largely mediated via this physical setting. In conjunction with these spaces ‘secondary’ retail outlets - pawnbrokers and second hand outlets - would offer an alternative to the specialised instrument retail space.
* Players, if part of a discernible community, would also sell and trade amongst each other, spruiking instruments primarily by word of mouth. Guitars were/are also frequently traded and sold by teachers to their students, and from student to student.
* Establishing a price-point and understanding of the relative (financial) value of an item, and its accompanying symbolic capital, was dependant largely on the identification of the guitar as desirable, and prevailing conditions of ‘supply-demand’. Particularly in non-metropolitan spaces, simply gaining physical access to a noted guitar could be difficult (especially if that guitar were from a low-volume maker). The price-point would then be set according to the micro-economics of demand generated in that geographic space according to the desirability of the instrument and the ‘aura’ of its aesthetic.

**Maintenance**

* As per the acquisition of items, building and maintaining knowledge of artefacts was largely undertaken within the context of a geographically defined community of collectors (and others associated with these artefacts, including players). Often built around a physical store-front, the collector’s knowledge of specific items and their provenance was heavily informed by association with experienced collector-players encountered *within* the store.
* Although traditional media, usually in the form of magazines, offered an insight into a wider context of collecting, it was primarily via face-to-face communication with the collector’s immediate network that knowledge of a particular guitar and its upkeep was gained.

**Curation**

* Extending the dynamics of maintenance, the curation of a collection and relay of one’s expertise as a collector was similarly undertaken through association with an immediate network. The development of one’s standing as a collector and as a knowledgeable ‘expert’ were negotiated as a process of direct peer mediation. As one became ‘known’ as a collector evidence of this staus was conferred via the physical presence of the collection itself. Engagement with the collection was brokered through the network to which the collector belonged, wherein recognised collectors would mediate access to their collections, but usually only with small groups of ‘known’ associates.
* Knowledge about a collection and a collector’s standing would also be communicated through the network, reinforcing the public demonstration of the collector’s expertise and capacity to curate the collection (for example, through the collector’s own live performance and public display of specific instruments, or through assistance of others with the acquisition or maintenance of particular instruments). The curation and display of specific instruments was nonetheless undertaken *physically* as part of face-to-face interactions and through which the display of collections and transfer of knowledge about particular instruments was relayed.

**Web 2.0**

**Acquisition**

* e-Commerce platforms have fundamentally changed the ways that collector’s gain access to collectible artefacts. Specifically with the advent of specialist guitar online retail and collector sites, *global* access to markets of instruments is now possible. Specialist online stores (for example www.archtop.com and guitarsnjazz.com) list significant inventories, and have built around them communities of collectors and players similar to those once built around a physical retail space; but now with global reach.
* Further to the increased reach of access, the capacity to verify the relative value of a guitar is a major feature of web 2.0 collecting. Collectors now can readily ascertain the relative value of comparable instruments by extending beyond the vagaries of ‘local’ markets.
* The capacity of contemporary freight services, some specialising in the shipment of guitars, has also streamlined the process of acquisition. Developed in parallel with e-commerce platforms, it is largely routine to acquire and ship instrument internationally.
* Many specialist user-groups and community pages also support dedicated trade and ‘for sale’ sub-pages. These secondary retail spaces fulfil something equivaelnt to the traditional media ‘trading post’; a second hand commercial space not attached to a retail storefront. As well as advertising the guitar, the interactive nature of these spaces allow for questions and comments. In this way, these spaces act as a space where members can show their expertise and competencies – transmitting their knowledge to the group and opening up possibilities for dialogue. Groups such as the Facebook group High-end Guitars Australia (https://www.facebook.com/groups/662762150502678/) combine a group moderated sales classified with broader discussion around valuations of individual instruments and technical advice.

**Maintenance**

* Online communities dedicated solely to the guitar are prolific. These extend from older ‘usenet’ and ‘blog’ based forums to those utilising more recent social media platforms. As with the proliferation of online e-commerce and retail sites, forums dedicated to the discussion and maintenance of guitars provide space for collectors to interact and share ideas around the playing, maintenance and upkeep of instruments. No longer limited to the geographic reach of the collector’s physical location, or linear transmission of information via traditional media, the web 2.0 collector has immediate access to information in real-time and via a distributed network of expertise.
* Multi-media applications as a hallmark of web 2.0 enable individuals to also access (and upload) material dedicated to particular instruments. Where previously the experience of the guitar was invariably mediated physically, or in more ‘static’ traditional media formats, one can now hear clips of a guitar being played, and see detailed high-definition imagery, including images detailing the general aesthetic, construction and build quality of instruments. Further, the proliferation of digital media dedicated to the support of particular types of instruments and sharing of knowledge on these artefacts provide collector communities with multi-media content that informs understandings of particular instruments. As an example, descriptions of particular models of collectible guitar on www.archtop.com provide detailed accounts of instruments, often referencing features and specifications of the instrument alongside details concerning provenance, and descriptions of a specific instrument’s playability and quality.

**Curation**

* The ability to reach a global audience and demonstrate one’s knowledge as a collector within geographically distributed networks is also a defining feature of web 2.0 collecting. As examples of this capacity to connect with and relay to wide audiences, newsgroups such as rec.music.makers.guitar.jazz and www.jazzguitar.be offer examples of specific ‘jazz guitar’ nuanced forums where expertise and members’ standing as knowledgable in defined aspects of guitar are valued. These spaces detail discussion on the musical form of the instrument and its histories, but importantly enable subscribers to exhibit their own collections of guitars and discuss the nature of specific instruments. An important aspect of this type of forum is the capacity for individual members to present curated ‘exhibitions’ of their instruments, with photographic and video content enabling these demonstrations.

**Discussion**

We argue that the foundational aspects of collecting continue to be defined in terms of the *acquisition*, *maintenance* and *curation* of artefacts as part of discernible collections. Reasserting the point made earlier, we stress that a collection represents an *intentioned* assemblage and that collected artefacts become part of a collection when this intentionality for forming the collection is enacted. Durost’s suggestion that individual objects themselves do not make a collection is prescient, with his assertion that collections must have at their core this intentionality concurrent with the argument presented throughout this paper. As Durost notes:

If the *predominant* value of an object or idea for the person possessing it is intrinsic, i.e., if it is valued primarily for use, or purpose, or aesthetically pleasing quality, or other value inherent in the object or accruing to it by whatever circumstance of custom, training, or habit, it is not a collection. If the predominant value is representative or representational, i.e., if said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some other object or idea, or objects, or ideas, such as being one of a series, part of a whole, a specimen of a class, then it is the subject of a collection. (10)

The collection is a collection because it is intended as such. The items that constitute the collection are gathered with specific purpose and intent to form the collection and, accordingly, it is with how these constitutent artefacts come to be *acquired,* *maintained* and *curated* as components of the collection that collecting-as-practice is given form and purpose.

The affordances of web 2.0 enhance these characteristics of collecting. Web 2.0 expands access to collectible artefacts and increases the collector’s reach to extended fields and communities. Further, web 2.0 enables the enactment of a more expansive collecting practice wherein platforms dedicated to the support of specific collecting fields coincide with the provision of functionality that enables the trade and exchange of artefacts. This includes e-commerce functionality and platforms dedicated to the sharing of specialized knowledge and expertise. Although the acquisition, trade and exchange of artefacts has always been an aspect of collecting practice, in web 2.0 these domains of collecting are expanded such that the “efficient generation, dissemination [and] sharing” (Constantinides and Fountain 232) core to collecting is enhanced at the same time that availability of artefacts and the reach available to collectors is broadened. It is in these terms that the tripartite *acquisition-maintenance-curation* continues to provide a viable model for considering collecting, but when overlaid onto the affordances that web 2.0 provides, the means for enacting a more expansive collecting practice is enabled.

**Conclusions**

The principal contention presented in this paper argues that web 2.0 technologies expand collecting practice. This is indicated in the affordances available to connected collectors to engage with extended networks of collectors and collecting fields, and the capacity that collectors hold to acquire, maintain and curate their collections in dynamic ways. This includes the provisions available for representing one’s self as a ‘collector’ and gaining access to specialised (sometimes esoteric) collecting communities.

In this regard, and to draw attention back to the “goodly huge” cabinet denoted by Bacon (qtd. in Spedding, Ellis and Heath) and Leibniz (qtd. in Purcell and Gould) in the epigraphs listed for this paper, web 2.0 platforms might be best characterised as providing access to such a repository of artefacts, collectors and fields, with the capacity for immediate connection to geographically dispersed artefacts and collecting communities providing a significant feature of connected collecting. When collecting is mediated via web 2.0, mechanisms for refining the knowledge required to seek out and acquire objects, capacities to develop and maintain insight and knowledge of collectible artefacts and fields, and means for curating representations of the collection are enhanced to enable a more intensive collecting practice. It is this capacity for an expanded collecting practice that stands as an important hallmark of connected collecting.

To draw this paper to a close, we offer the following final observations on the nature and characteristics of web 2.0 collecting. Following the accounts detailed throughout this paper, we note that when mobilised via web 2.0, collecting practice is not so much altered as it is *extended,* but that the capacity to establish a presence as a collector and curate both a collection *and* one’sidentity are markedly enhanced. What web 2.0 affords is a greater reach in collecting practice, extended association with networks of collectors, and ultimately, increased access to expanded markets of artefact that were previously inaccessible.

**Notes**

1We use this concept carefully with reference to Pearce’s (1998) categorization of amateur collectors – “people whose collecting is seen as a leisure time activity” – and its distinction from professional curators (65). Though we recognise this distinction, we however make the point that, however informal the collection may happen to be, some level of curation as expressed in the initial identification of the collection *as a collection* and its maintenance is nonetheless applied. In other words, to collect is to curate in one form or other.

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Top of Form

Bottom of Form

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