BUSTING SHAKESPEARE: THE TEL WAY[1]

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Abstract

'Today's generation Y and generation Z need education that is interactive, student-centred, authentic, collaborative and on-demand.' Associate Professor Jane Summers USQ News July 2009

Each year more than 40 million secondary students worldwide grapple to understand, disassemble and analyse the works of William Shakespeare. This number, of course, increases significantly if one were to include students from non-English speaking education systems. For the secondary school curriculum, Shakespeare is core business. And yet, for the vast proportion of those 40 million students, their enduring memory of the Shakespeare experience is one of frustration, confusion and resentment. Limited class time, text-heavy content, complex poetic devices, unfamiliar language and the gap between historical and contemporary contexts all provide for a difficult learning experience.

Generation Z are characterised by their need for instant information, for ego-centric contexts, visual responsiveness and multimedia information sharing. With less than 30% of this generation being identified as structured auditory learners, teaching Shakespeare needs to make the shift into Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL).

The Shakespeare Room is an innovative response to that need. Featuring video-based content structured around an interactive framework, The Shakespeare Room utilises cutting edge multimedia technology and variable bit rate streaming (based on Flash technology) to deliver a discovery-led learning experience driven by young people. *The Shakespeare Room* depicts people of secondary school age actively scrutinising and interpreting the text; enacting relevant scenes and situations; debating different points of interpretation and exploring historical and contemporary contexts. With a range of capabilities for interactivity and collaboration (incorporating flash-based video learning, integrated social networking tools, a video remixing engine, and most importantly, a highly visual set of tutor-level planning and management tools), *The Shakespeare Room* is a user-friendly facility that enables ongoing learning and information sharing from middle high school through to post-graduate education levels.

This paper details the pedagogical underpinnings and technologies that enable this bold new approach to TEL, so that best practice in the online delivery of Shakespeare content can be shared simultaneously around the globe.

Keywords - Shakespeare, Technology enhanced learning, Inter-active, Student-centred Learning, Video-based

1   A CONTEXT

This paper seeks to provide a brief context for the development of an online technology enhanced learning platform in the study of Shakespeare. In identifying traditional discipline-specific curricular challenges, the generational learning styles of the target student body and recent developments in best practice approaches to e-learning, the authors seek to position their project, The Shakespeare Room (TSR), at the developmental apex of these equally important influences.

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At some point during secondary studies most students enrolled in English-language influenced education systems will face the daunting, sometimes exhilarating and all too often debilitating experience of negotiating a pathway of learning through a play by William Shakespeare. Granted, while Shakespeare may no longer be a compulsory component of all drama and literature syllabi, his work nevertheless remains an iconic reference point for the understanding and critical analysis of literary and dramatic cultural capital, form and practice [1] throughout the English speaking world and beyond. Within secondary education, Shakespeare is hegemonic [2].

For the study of Shakespeare allows students an introduction to more than just a basic familiarization with the tenets of classic literary and dramatic form. Utilizing a vast range of theatrical conventions [3], an invigorating virtuosity of language, and, in many cases, tried and proven storylines and plot devices [4], Shakespeare's plays present a prismatic and enduring psychological, political, sociological and philosophical exploration into what it means to be human.

1.1 Difficulties in understanding Shakespeare

And yet, even the most cursory 'show-of-hands' survey will reveal that for the vast majority of students Shakespeare is a mystery that they just do not get The dense and seemingly antiquated language, interwoven with a raft of complex poetical devices, with characters and sensibilities drawn from an historical and cultural context unfamiliar to most Net Generation (Net Gen.) [5] people, all combine to make even a basic comprehension of the text a formidable challenge [2].

Beyond this fundamental obstacle there is the often-emphasised point that Shakespeare's plays were written for performance. As such, any 'reading' of the plays, even if only for the purpose of comprehension and subsequent discussion, is best achieved in an active and participatory process informed by theatrical conventions of space, time and action. As John O'Toole quips [2] '…. reading the play script around the class is effectively the same as singing a Beethoven score bar by bar round the class…'

The point is students lack the tools: the working knowledge of dramatic poetry, theatrical structure and dramatic conventions by which they can make sense of the words and the form of the text. This is hardly a criticism of students or their teachers. A decade ago world renowned voice teacher and Shakespeare practitioner, Patsy Rodenburg noticed how a lack of basic knowledge and the practical skills required to deconstruct Shakespeare's text caused reactions of boredom and disengagement among a group of some of Britain's most promising young actors. And these young professionals had undergone three years of tertiary vocational training. [6]

Secondary teachers know the challenge that confronts them. They understand and act upon the need to seek a point of relevance between the play and the lives of their students [2]; to use various drama and even acting exercises to enable students to physically explore an experience of character's situations and words [7]; to engage in creative problem-solving through digital scene-building [8] and to facilitate a process of critical and creative thinking in the improvised staging of alternative interpretations and contemporary adaptations of scenes [9].

Teachers do all this and more. They access a vast array of online sites dedicated to the teaching of Shakespeare, the accumulation of information about Shakespeare and his plays, even, via You and Teacher Tube, they facilitate access to video versions of various staged and filmed productions of the works of Shakespeare.

Why, therefore, do the creators of The Shakespeare Room wish to add yet another online site to the tens of millions already available?; Because still there exists '…. a form of aporia – a creative and critical 'brick wall' – that separates students, with their particular history, from the supposed 'universality' of Shakespeare.' [10], a sort of peer-validated milieu of 'learned helplessness' [11] which acts as an enervating dampener to class engagement that a teacher must endeavour to resolve before the first page is even turned.

1.2 Characteristics of the Net Generation

So who are these students? In order to create an effective e-learning aid for, in this case, the study of Shakespeare, it was necessary to first conduct an audit of the primary target user, the student.

According to Bob Pletka [5] the Net Gen. "…has been shaped by an environment that is information and communication rich, team-based, achievement oriented, visually based, and instantly responsive,

they often recoil from isolated, lecture-based, information-dated, responsive-deficient silos of learning comprised of outdated technologies from the mid-20th century." (P.13) Having developed multiliteracies in text, visual, spatial and digital forms of communication, they have a latent sense of cognisance for new technologies[12]. They readily access a wide range of digital communication that, in turn, has an influence upon their cognitive thinking [13]. They are kinaesthetic in their preferred learning process, experimenting with new experiences and synthesising their accumulated understanding. Above all, they are attracted to social circumstances of collaborative learning, which result in authentic or meaningful goals [5]. The Net generation are multi-taskers, multi-modal and multi-disciplined.

1.3 Learning requirements for the Twenty-first Century

These user-characteristic preferences needed to be balanced with considerations of current and future priorities in educational outcomes. Generally speaking, it seems those accepted priorities are to produce independent, self-initiating life-long flexible learners with a broad sensibility that enables them to work collaboratively and effectively in culturally diverse multi-discipline environments [14]. The employment market of tomorrow, Pletka [5] characterises as requiring '…people to apply, analyse, synthesise, evaluate, problem-solve, and create new knowledge…' This requires multiliteracies in technologies, visual and creative practice, economics, science, information, multicultural contexts and of course, the traditional basics of text and numeracy, all with a global awareness.

It is widely accepted that the ability to store and process information will not be enough. Life-long learners of tomorrow will need to '...create, connect, package, and explain concepts within the context of both local and global markets' [5]. And 'tomorrow', of course, is today So if the study of Shakespeare has traditionally had the capability to inform understanding beyond the disciplines of literature and drama, certainly, in the digital world, not only the content to be studied, but also the process of learning and the structure of the learning environment must incorporate a capability for integrated multi-disciplinary engagement based around an approach to 'deep level' or 'meaningful' learning [15].

1.4 Adopted principles of learning

As a guide to the development of The Shakespeare Room, the following principles were adopted as being characteristics of 'meaningful' or effective learning environments [16]:

Active: that is that the process of learning encourages experiential immersion and problem-solving leading to conceptual understanding without recourse to being 'told' the answers.

Constructive: where cognitive learning is enabled by teachers and students engaging in an ongoing process of restructuring and review of 'schemata' rather than relying upon memorization of introduced information.

Contextualized: allowing students to engage in a process of learning in relationship with their own known world, values and norms. The learning process is not isolated from this 'recognised' reality.

Discovery-Oriented: that students are challenged and enabled to explore a range of possibilities arising from a problem, rather than accepting an established answer.

Social: enabling the student to inter-act as a part of the learning process with their peers, teachers and wider community.

Meaningful: that the learning environment has attributes that stimulate and support activities that promote pro-active thinking. An important part of this characteristic is that problem-solving and goals sought should be authentic [17] in nature; that is that they have a perceived 'real world' application.

Collaborative: that students are enabled to work in pairs and groups to pursue assessable goals while engaging in concomitant peer learning and co-assisted achievement.

A further over-arching principle was the importance of Student Centred Learning (SCL) [18], which obviously situates the student in a position of decision-making with regard to the introduction of material and learning processes and strategies. SCL as described by Kurhila *et al*, incorporates teaching approaches such as: active learning, project-based learning, problem-based learning, case-based learning and learning by inquiry.

Project-based and problem-based learning are two approaches that readily lend themselves to Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) [5], where technology is utilised as a part of the process in constructing knowledge, supporting student engagement and facilitating group collaboration.

Based on his *My* So Called *Digital Life* project in 2001 Pletka [5] states that Computer Supported Collaborative Learning rests upon five key 'themes':

'Using computers to help': in supporting the learning process through differentiated pacing and engagement with learning materials, accessing information, using creative media tools or in the integration and presentation of knowledge acquired and produced.

'Being Connected': the establishment of a community of peers, teachers and 'professionals' over the duration of Pletka's project showed that inclusion in a sense of 'community' is a key element in encouraging student engagement in curricula activities.

'Applying Digital Know-How': Encouraged by the opportunity to present their constructed learning to an 'authentic' audience beyond a single teacher or immediate class-colleagues, students evidence a heightened level of endeavour and a greater willingness to utilize digital technologies in the exploration through to presentation of their work.

'Trying their best': Inspired by the multi-disciplinary scope of the work, encouraged by the collaborative nature of the process and implicated in a process of metacognition [19] as a result of the interactivity across the online project community, students recognise an increased personal commitment to the project.

'Looking at things differently': The use of technology in a collaborative process involving online contributors from beyond an immediate geographical locale encourages a widening perception of different cultural influences and ways of thinking among participants.

The challenge was clear for The Shakespeare Room: combine the discipline specific requirements of a course content that dated back four hundred years with the innate preferred multimodal learning attributes of the Net Generation, the educational priorities of the Twenty-first century and best practice approaches to e-learning.

2   THE SHAKESPEARE ROOM

The Shakespeare Room is an Online Learning Environment utilizing video-based content and harnessing a multimedia-driven social network Fig 1. With flexible downloading and streaming options The Shakespeare Room places students at the centre of a discovery-led interactive learning protocol.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Model screenshot of The Shakespeare Room featuring video from 'Books'

2.1 Busting Shakespeare

One of the main resources for just-in-time accessing of base information is the Busting Shakespeare page.

Busting Shakespeare depicts secondary students actively interrogating the Shakespeare play in question. The 'students', who are in fact young trained actors, enact scenes, situations, and characters, exploring different interpretations of the text, and all the while debating different points of view from their own contemporary standpoint and informed by relevant historical contexts.

The scenes are set in a modestly furnished classroom. The actors are very intentionally portrayed as students, while at the same time not being so disingenuous or uncool as to deny the constructed reality. There are no props, costumes or theatrical values that would not be readily available in an 'average' government-funded classroom. All enactments from the play texts utilise the reality of the classroom to construct the mise en scene. This modernised application of various Brechtian principles lends added focus to the issues in discussion and to the actual act of engaging with the play-text.

On face value, these scenes, structured into 5 – 7 minute 'point-of-learning' chapters, and totalling between 20 to 40 minutes in duration, are simply a vehicle for the conveyance of information. There are however, important attributes to the design of The Busting Shakespeare page that require clarification. It was noted earlier that there exists a culture of learned ennui in many classrooms where Shakespeare is in study. Despite teachers' best efforts to introduce current film versions of the plays students still see those films as being the product of talents, experience and resources way beyond their own circumstance. And anyway, at the end of the video, it is still '…just another vid with lots of old talk that we're going to have to answer questions about' [2].

Furthermore, those film and You Tube versions, however laudable, are simply another practitioner's interpretation according to their own cultural and commercial imperatives. In and of themselves, the video versions do not necessarily encourage students to engage in a process of interpretation and textual intervention in an active search to discover Shakespeare's application to their own lives [10].

The Busting Shakespeare scenes, called 'video-essays', engage in just that pursuit. Focussed upon the most currently posed essay questions and discussion topics, the scenes are an active dialectic in interrogating a play within clearly expressed parameters of inquiry. They operate, in effect, as a sort of

model-type scaffolding [20]. Dong Dong Li *et al* notes that '...effective scaffolding models a process of learning so that students could observe and learn process skills, problem-solving skills and thinking skills while acquiring knowledge.' [21] Of course, in so doing, the Busting Shakespeare scenes present fundamental information necessary to enhance understanding and interpretation of the basic text relevant to the topic in question. More particularly, however, they are intended as a model towards 'self-efficacy' [22] which, quoting Pajares, recognizes that, '...unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcomes they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties.'

By watching portrayed students, like themselves, in an environment similar to their own, comprehensively negotiating an autonomous process of textual interpretation and intervention, it is reasonable to expect that actual students will gain in their own sense of a capability to engage in that same process. Through vicarious experience, Pajeres states, '...when people are uncertain about their abilities or when they have limited prior experience, they become more sensitive…' to the positive effects of modelling, and that this effect is '...particularly powerful when observers see similarities in some attribute and then assume that the model's performance is diagnostic of their own capability.'

Simply put, The Busting Shakespeare scenes show young students taking the play apart themselves, trying things out, and playing a whole range of roles; all from the context of their own lives. They are an example of what Skrebels calls, [10] an active way of 'linking critical theory with classroom practice – literary praxis.'

And there is no teacher in sight. The absence of a defined teacher in the scenes is very deliberately so that the students may be seen to be initiating their own level of inquiry, in charge of their own practice and process of constructivist learning. The students are at the centre of the learning process (SCL). One interactive feature of this page allows students to view the online video enactment alongside a synchronised transcript of the text. A search engine also enables participants to instantly locate words, themes or recurring situations wherever they occur throughout the video-essay. This application provides an efficacious means to pursuing a single line of inquiry across a larger body of work. As an advanced investigative tool this capability enables active engagement with the video scenes and embeds the technology as a part of the process of learning [23]. This shift from a level of passivity in using the computer as a means to instruction towards increased interactivity in enabling the application of digital technology for constructivist learning is more comprehensively applied in interrelated pages.

2.2   Books

If Busting Shakespeare shows one example of a form of literary praxis that may be introduced to the classroom, it is necessary to provide information resources to inform that learning process.

Books is exactly as it describes; an online source of historical contexts, literary and dramatic definitions and practical exercises. A search-engine activated video-based library that allows for content interactivity, built around the concept of a dynamic interface, the whole TSR site contains Flash media, sandwiched between XML and Javascript to create a fluid experience. Acting as an exemplar for a student-initiated discovery and application of information, the students in Books are portrayed in communication with each other and 'outside' sources through the full range of digital technologies: PC's, laptops, netbooks, hand-held devices and even, just to throw the shock of the old into the mix, via scribbled notepad and face to face.

Ranging from 20 seconds to 7 minutes in duration, students integrate contemporary issues and Net Gen. sensibilities to an understanding of Shakespeare's world, artistic devices and influences. Books examples young people in a forensic investigation and disclosure of the mystery of Shakespeare.

A.   Practical exercises

An important addition to Books is a comprehensive series of demonstrations of practical exercises proven to enable young people in the understanding, experiencing and personalization of the text, characters and stories of Shakespeare. Again, it is acknowledged that many teachers have sought out their own raft of practical and kinaesthetic exercises designed to afford an experiential entry into Shakespeare's text. There are also numerous websites and hard copy options that provide text-based, sometimes even video-based instruction in the 'get-up-and-do-it' approach.

The exercises contained in Books are based upon ten years professional theatre experience and fifteen years in introducing working with Shakespeare skills to young actors, as featured in the ABC

six-part documentary series, The Show [24]. The exercises in themselves can only add to those that are proven to work, and which are already in use. More importantly, again, they are demonstrated in a highly focussed but entertaining social environment of peer learning as a means to modelling both the exercises, and the stages of familiarity through which one must progress before gaining full benefit from their application. They offer vicarious experience within an environment of playful learning.

Again, they are demonstrated in a 'typical' classroom setting.

The exercises are not just confined to methodological means to textual deconstruction. There are also systematic demonstrations of the decision-making and processes necessary to present class and learning outcomes in digital format. The Tangled Web page, to be introduced later, describes a project wherein students may engage in an international online collaborative production of a Shakespeare play. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to provide demonstrated instruction in basic production skills and procedural stages from rehearsal through to post-production in order to prepare work for uploading onto The Shakespeare Room.

By promoting an advanced level of human-computer-interaction (HCI) [26] in enabling students to utilize online creative digital tools to organise, integrate and present their own constructed knowledge in the form of creative end product, The Shakespeare Room is providing a multi-disciplinary learning experience .The importance of the Busting Shakespeare and Books pages as exemplars or models to classroom practice and potential outcomes needs at this point to be emphasised. It is intended that students are enabled through scaffolded learning of the processes of critical interrogation and interpretation of the text, as well as of the means and processes to investigating contexts and related information, and of utilizing the online technologies of The Shakespeare Room to research, devise and collaborate in presenting their own versions of the originals. The purpose of scaffolding [25] is that it eventually be overtaken by the purpose for which the scaffold was originally constructed; in this case, effective student engagement and learning in the study of Shakespeare.

2.3 Now – social networking platform

Now is the social network feature of The Shakespeare Room. Just as MySpace has an individual site for every profile, Now allows subscribers to establish a personal identity.

As an alternative to developing new social networking strategies, API's are used to seamlessly connect the user with their existing Facebook, Twitter or MySpace profiles, allowing students, teachers, research/project groups and industry professionals to develop formal or informal communities of interaction. Smartchat, a floating application directly integrated into the main interface of the site allows participants to engage in ongoing text-based discussion from any of the social networking sites, while simultaneously viewing multimedia material from any of the other Shakespeare Room pages.

As is common with these social networking behemoths, users can also upload content to the site, and utilising the tools to be found in the Remix page; can produce their own unique or blended creations to assist in the development of an idea or topic.

A.   Quality assurance and e-etiquette

While it is recognised that a social network capability linked to schools curriculum may cause some concerns, the normal protocols of e-etiquette and peer reportage are here actually strengthened by standards of expectation established within and by the paradigm of accountability within a normal school environment.

Designing a technology enhanced learning environment wherein necessary levels of user trust are fostered and maintained requires '…a combination of social, cognitive, technical interface and systematic features.' [28]. Users need to have a developed trust in system usability, quality of content, processes of learning and engagement and in the quality of other users and their communications. 'Social software mediates between the group and the individual, structuring the environment emergently as a result of the behaviour of its users, which in turn structures that behaviour.' [28] In effect, Dron points out that social software fulfils some of the traditional facilitative and quality control roles of the teacher.

Although the teacher would seem to have been placed well in the background in formulating the pedagogical strategies of The Shakespeare Room, in fact, they are a constant presence in working beside the student as a part of collaborative problem-solving that is a risk taking venture of constructing new knowledge beyond the knowns of 'learning the right answer', [29] advocated by

Johnston *et al* as a productive and creative approach to multidisciplinary learning through Shakespeare.

2.4 Study

Supporting the entire TSR suite, Study aims to provide a home for students and staff to create interactive playlists of The Shakespeare Room material, integrated with intuitive planning features capable of guiding students through either traditional, outcome or performance-based assessment. Using the same engine as Remix, teachers can also produce lesson plans for in-class or ex-class presentation.

2.5 Share

Connecting to MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, the social networking API's of preference, and acting as an extension of Now, the storage components of these social networking sites are exposed, rejigged and AJAXed, simplifying the process of uploading content without the need for additional software. Share is also the repository for subscribers to upload their own media, ready for Remix.

2.6 Remix

A design gallery, a sound studio and a video-media editor round out the features of this section. As mentioned above, Remix allows for students to create their own content alongside TSR media. Remixes, mashups or completely new creations can be produced with this powerful media editing engine.

Remix is an integral part of projects such as The Tangled Web.

2.7 The Tangled Web

The Tangled Web is a project within The Shakespeare Room.

Basically, the project allows school groups to log on to the website and download short segments of text from a selection of plays. Assisted by online demonstrated exercises and discussion to be found in Books and Busting Shakespeare, school groups are then required to develop a performance of the text. The text may be worked and presented in whatever way the students choose. The final work is to be shot using mobile phones or any alternative digital technology available and uploaded to the Tangled Web page.

At a predetermined later date, the whole site goes live and students are then able to log on and, utilizing the online multimedia tools, engage in a full range of creative remix's, mash-ups or adaptations. On their Study page groups may also choose to upload a 'media-diary' of the work methods, choices and contexts behind their original presentation.

The Tangled Web is a promotional catalyst for developing cross-cultural communities. Beyond introducing students to a broadening awareness of different cultural-based interpretations of common text-based material [5], this project provides a meaningful anchor that has the potential to a) capture student imagination and engagement, b) may be perceived as an important curricular activity, c) accommodate a variety of learning approaches and multi-disciplinary applications, d) legitimise the integration of disciplinary content [30].

An important facet of this project is that students must utilize locations within their own school in which to 'stage' their presentations. This is a strategy to encourage the sharing of different cultural contexts from across the project. These different contexts influence the treatment of the various chosen texts, which, in turn, encourage new critical ways of working with the texts among students brought to an expanded awareness of creative and interpretive possibilities by the different contributions of their online peers.

2.8 The role of the teacher

A teacher logs onto The Shakespeare Room. Using the keyword search engine, or by scrolling through the orbit board, they locate all the video-material relevant to the particular learning objectives for their next lesson. Using online edit tools they cut and paste material into their own study plan, adding text, graphics, external data or their own voice commentary where ever necessary.

In the classroom, utilizing whatever digital technology available to the classroom, the teacher delivers the lesson to the students .In order then to activate their own process of discovery, students may be directed to log onto The Shakespeare Room to view other related material pursuant to a topic of inquiry offered by the teacher or instigated by the students subsequent to the initial lesson.

Students also utilize online multi-media tools to build their own response, either individually or collaboratively, to the topic of inquiry. Those responses may then be sent to the teacher in digital form, shared with the class or posted on The Shakespeare Room as a part of a wider project or presentation.

Teachers may log their multi-media lesson plans on the Study page for other teachers to access and use. Of course, appropriate forms of acknowledgement and/or remuneration will be a part of the protocol. The Shakespeare Room encourages the development of a vast range of communities of practice. It is acknowledged that this example is very traditional in describing a teacher centred approach to learning. A student centred approach may see the teacher collaborate with the students in establishing required learning objectives, and the students then collaborating on building material for the lesson plan as a problem-solving activity. The technology provides limitless opportunity.

3   CONCLUSION

The Shakespeare Room is a project currently 19 months in development.

To date several scenes for the Busting Shakespeare series have been completed. Trial viewings to a variety of secondary students ranging in age from 15 to 18 years have been received with enthusiastic responses. More particularly, basic comprehension tests of the learning points contained within each scene pursuant to those viewings have returned figures of between 65% - 100%.

More than 50% of all students surveyed (from a total of 210 tested) delivered comprehension results above 85% on embedded points of learning. Of course, comprehension is only the first stage to a deeper level of learning. The Shakespeare Room is not simply a technological portal for the delivery of information. The Shakespeare Room intends at the democratisation and invigoration of a process that has long struggled to fulfil the potentials for multidisciplinary learning, critical thinking and creativity that most teachers strive to achieve.

The next stage of development is to trial a limited version of The Shakespeare Room across a minimum number and range of schools for a fixed period of 6 – 8 weeks. This will enable a rigorous testing of the inter-active and collaborative problem-solving features of the facility, and the level of student engagement and enablement able to be achieved.

The initial costs of producing the amount of base content required for such a site are considerable. That material however, once produced, has a shelf life of several years, limited only by the changing aesthetic of the target student users. It is the response of students, their teachers and the wider community to utilizing the processes learned from that material, in combination with the online tools and capabilities of the site that is the true and lasting value of The Shakespeare Room.

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