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Can Anyone Be a Designer?

Amateurs in Fashion Culture

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This article offers an analytical perspective on the implications of recent media evolutions for the conventional roles of the designer, with a particular emphasis on the changing relation between amateur and professional design in fashion culture. The article builds on the recent media studies literature on the intensification of media communications and the deeper transformations—mediatizations—of many areas in business and society. There is already extensive literature on the mediatization of finance, politics, food, and religion, for instance, but how is the process playing out in fashion? And what are the implications of this process for designers and design education? The article argues that media have become a key context for understanding the changing dynamics between professionals and amateurs and the evolution of more distributed forms of design creativity. The article is a conceptual paper that begins by situating the evolution of amateur design in theories of media and modernity to offer a theorization of amateur design and to establish an analytical perspective from which core aspects of the changing amateur/industry divide are illustrated in analytical sections. Among the examples are the online platform Etsy and the T-shirt company Threadless. The conclusion puts the findings of the case studies into perspective and points to a future where new generations of designers and design educators approach and strategically manage these new relationships and distributed forms of creativity.

Keywords: Amateur, professional, fashion culture, media

Given the power of visuality in early 21st-century media culture, it is unsurprising that fashion triggers considerable activity in the ever-expanding online media landscape. Online fashion culture involves new forms of distribution (e.g., photo and video sharing services), new publics (blogs and social networking sites), and sales (online shops). This article argues that these evolutions are not simply

extending the boundaries of fashion culture, but that they involve deeper transformations of the structures and dynamics of professional and amateur cultural production and distribution. Media is a powerful agent in transforming the fashion system (Kawamura 2005, p. 43) in the early 21st century. The article focuses on the implications of thinking about the role of the designer along the conventional amateur/industry divide. This research objective requires a healthy skepticism of sensational narratives of the digital revolution and of simplistic notions of media as neutral means of transmitting information. New media have different emotional affordances and empower new forms of communication beyond conventional social boundaries. The introduction of new media can thus be expected to result in new emotional cultures, aesthetics, and industry practices. Amateurs now have their own tools for mass self-mediation and community participation. Those mediations transform the dynamics within the fashion industry and ultimately compel us to reconsider conventional definitions of what constitutes fashion design and the fashion designer.

This article offers a theoretical perspective on how the roles of amateurs and professionals in the fashion system are changing, arguing that the adoption of new media technologies among amateurs expands and changes the dynamics of the fashion system, but that the fundamental structure of the system has not changed. The fashion designer is not being replaced by the amateur, but can productively develop competencies in “managing” amateur creativity and strategically engage in design processes characterized by more distributed forms of creativity.

Methodically, the article synthesizes and reframes existing literature within the genre of a historically informed essay. In particular, sociological theory of modernity and media is adopted to explain the existing literature’s relative ignorance of amateurs and

how amateurs and their role in the design process might be conceived. The main purpose is to open up new perspectives in fashion studies and illustrate implications for the concept of design within the broader field of design studies.

The article begins by rethinking conventional conceptions of amateurs within the broader discursive relationship between amateur and professional in modernity. This discussion draws from Latour's theory of differentiation and Heskett's theorization of the design concept. The conceptual framing of amateur culture is employed in the following sections, which analyze the transformation of amateur design culture in the overall shift from analogue to digital media systems. In this process, amateurs have become more visible, and avenues of amateur culture have been extended digitally. Moreover, new social arrangements between amateurs and between amateurs and professionals have evolved. These sections draw from fashion and media studies. The concluding section considers the question if anyone can be a designer and complicates the popular image of a single amateur movement in the digital

age. Today, amateur cultures range from the Makers Movement to talent shows on television, and they are objects of diverse theorizations in the sociology of leisure (Stebbins 2009) and in the critiques of neoliberal citizenship and labor markets (Baumann 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

AMATEURS IN THE FASHION SYSTEM

The etymology of amateurs presents us with a tension. On the one side, the amateur is associated with the privilege of pure passion. On the other, the amateur is defined negatively as lacking professional skills. Both meanings proliferate in the digital age, but are subject to ongoing processes of corporatization in the media industry. In particular, YouTube has long been associated with the positive meaning of amateur freedom and fun, but it started accommodating corporate professional models when purchased and developed by Google. Although amateur elements are still cultivated (e.g., tutorial videos titled "Make Something You Love"), the team behind the *YouTube Creator Academy* is professional and advances professional communication skills and

Designed by you-ad on Times Square, New York, 10 October 2013.

Photo by Fabian Holt.



cinematography (YouTube 2014). Yet, there is still a great deal of skepticism about the huge popularity of videos of trivial events, such as cats or farting, and how amateur production is replacing professional journalism and music-making (Snickars and Vonderau 2009; Keen 2007).

The schism between positive and negative connotations at the level of etymology only takes us so far. To understand the changing relation between amateurs and professionals in fashion culture and education, we need to look at the conception of amateurs within social processes. Of particular relevance is the process of differentiation in modernity.

The long history of industrial approaches to cultural production in which the design concept is embedded is part of a more general process in modernity. Modernity is a designation for an era in history fundamentally characterized by *differentiation* between domains such as the state, the market, and the church, but also between work and leisure, with implications for how creative practices such as design are organized and rewarded in society. In this discursive and economic order, creative work outside a market economy does not fit the dominant agenda. In his influential book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Bruno Latour develops this idea of practices that fall in between the schemes of modernity and whose existence has therefore not been recognized. In this perspective, we might say that amateur design never existed and that amateur fashion is one of the monstrosities of modernity. The imagination of amateurs in modernity is reflected in how educational institutions and industries imagine the relationships and forms of exchange between amateur and professional in fashion products and consumption. The dominant narrative is one of separate domains rather than the more complex dynamics that characterize fashion in the digital age.

This broader process of differentiation helps explain the discursive dynamics of the literatures on the topic of the amateur. There is a small literature within the sociology of leisure that studies non-paid, informal creative activities as the result of basic human motivations with a broader perspective than the categories and social systems of an era. This literature has a strong focus on amateurs. At the same time, there is a creative industry literature in which much design writing is embedded, and this literature is driven by the dominant narratives of professional and industrial development in modernity. This literature does not operate with the notion of amateurs, but cannot completely ignore it either. For instance, in Heskett's lucid *Design: A Very Short Introduction*

(2002), the main challenge in defining design is the popularization of the term. It has evolved in too many directions, writes Heskett. However, when attempting to explain the nature of design, he emphasizes the strict meanings of design as a profession in the spirit of modernity, but he is also tempted to move beyond it as he writes about design as a fundamental human activity. Heskett states that design is "at the very core of our existence as a species" and that design in this perspective is as fundamental as language. Heskett reaches out for these broader and existential perspectives that cannot easily be integrated into conventional modern definitions of design. In short, this discussion shows how amateur design is a discursive monstrosity. It exists but has no place in modernity.

The literature on creative labor within the field of culture industry research is relevant to the amateur-professional relation. This literature has pointed out that creative work can offer certain forms of autonomy but also be exploitative and precarious (Holt and Lapenta 2010). Also relevant is the recognition of fluid relations between work and non-work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2012). This literature provides useful critiques, but it has paid little attention to amateur creativity and culture.

In turning to media studies for knowledge of amateur culture, one finds echoes of modernity again. The discourse on participatory media—media that in principle allows everyone with computer and online access to become an agent of electronic mediations and communications—has been shaped by powerful agendas such as consumerism and innovation.

Media scholar José van Dijck pointed to important changes in the perception of non-professional media agents this way:

When *Time* designated "you" as Person of the Year 2006, the editors paid tribute to the millions of anonymous web users who dedicate their creative energy to a booming web culture. The cover story heralded the many volunteers filling so-called user-generated content (UGC) platforms. After decades of vilifying the passive couch potato, the press now venerates the active participant in digital culture. But just who is this participant? Who is the "you" in YouTube and what kind of agency can we attribute to this new class of media users? (Dijck 2009, p. 41)

This language of the generic user is an invention reflecting a key dimension of digital communication. The term “user” is still widely employed and serves a practical purpose. It gives individuals and collectives new possibilities, for instance, by quickly mobilizing crowds to gather and share information. But the term “user” has also come to perform easy generalizations that ignore new forms of social behavior and subjectivity. Following Dijck, one might ask how amateur agency is being restructured. Responding to the popular press that reaffirms a long history of transforming leisure into consumption (Stebbins 2009), one might ask if anyone in the contemporary media landscape says, “Amateurs like us”?

AMATEURS IN MEDIA TRANSITIONS

The evolution of fashion has occurred in close relation to media. The boom in women’s magazines in the late 19th century, for instance, stimulated the proliferation of new fashion cultures across Euro-America (Moore 1971). Women’s magazines served the purpose of “informing, assisting, and advising” (Angeletti and Alberto 2006, p. 4). The sewing machine, invented in 1846, had made it possible for more people to create their own fashionable clothes at home. The clothing industry for women grew in the early 20th century and with that, a new type of female consumer became a prime target for manufacturers, businesses, and department stores. The boom in the economy increased the number of women with leisure time and the privilege for consumption. According to Veblen (1899/2007), what women wore and how they lived could be seen as a way of demonstrating their standing in society. Therefore, women’s magazines became valuable for guiding women in negotiations of status.

The overall development from the early fashion plates to the mass market of fashion magazines in the late 20th century involved a professionalization of communication (Nevinson 1967, p. 68). However, since the turn of the 21st century, the dissemination of fashion information has diversified radically with the introduction of digital platforms of communication. In contrast with print magazines centralized in large corporations such as Condé Nast, digital media offer new opportunities for amateur culture. From the fashion blogger (Rocamora 2011) to crafting (Levine and Heimerl 2008), new media have provided a challenge to the widespread monopoly of fashion media with ramifications for design, production, and consumption of fashion.

Social media allow amateurs to create and share images, while also exposing themselves to professionals and wider online audiences. This evolution changes the dynamics because intimacy and privacy have historically been important to amateur cultures where social experience and community are as valuable as the product.

Amateurs in the digital age

In the digital age, moreover, amateurs have gained easy access to micro-publishing and micro-commerce, potentially creating a challenge to the traditional fashion system. The creative process, which historically has been the designer’s privilege, now includes co-creation, user-driven innovation, micro-production, and DIY among consumers themselves, and, perhaps paradoxically, within the fashion industry itself. The recurrence of crafting and customizing in the 21st century is less dominated by the anti-fashion attitudes of the 1970s and 1980s subcultures in which “fashion was not in fashion” (Steele 2006, p. 79). Rather, the rise of amateur production tends to celebrate a sense of authenticity in relation to mass culture and individualism, reflective of a deregulated but also fragmented media culture in which the nation rarely, if ever, watches the same television show anymore (Lotz 2007).

Amateurs can now for the first time in history sidestep professional media channels and communicate directly in their own media platforms. New media thus allow for the creation of new forms of identity among amateurs, with infinite specializations and rearrangements of conventional elements in the amateur-professional continuum. The deregulation of production and distribution, moreover, implies that amateurs can be creative in multiple ways as designers of more or less complete objects and can act as “a creative mob” that produces and evaluates many designs. The amateur can be creative at the micro-levels when using templates or partially finished designs by other amateurs or by professionals. Amateurs are no longer left out of mass media marketing, but can market their designs and objects directly via global media services such as Facebook and YouTube. In these and other social media, amateurs can share with other amateurs their own approach to design and create their own storytelling in the form of a video, for instance; practices that allow for the mediation of emotions and behaviors through bodily expression (Meyrowitz 1985). Professional designers can watch and learn from amateurs in social media and be strategic about developing relations with amateur communities for inspiration, teaching, or marketing purposes.

Amateur culture crucially employs blogs, online photo and video services, and crowdsourcing tools in combination to *mobilize networks around common interests and create digital extensions of physical spaces in fashion*. Since amateur production and sharing are fundamental human activities, they will continue to evolve and transform within changing economies and markets. Advertising- and subscription-based models create competition between conventional amateur bloggers and more famous and professional bloggers that take inspiration from amateur models (Stebbins 1979, 2007, 2009).

A sea of amateur activity has become visible in the digital age and evolved into new environments for informal learning, experimentation, and marketing in fashion. This is not simply the return of the 19th-century arts and crafts movement, but rather a more complex cultural transformation. Electronic media complicate notions of time and space. Above all, social media call for fashion professionals to take amateur and consumer interest and media cultures more into account and move away from the needle-logic of “injecting” messages into the culture. Rather, amateur fashion designers mediate to share interests, socialize, and display their creativity.

EXPANDING THE MEDIA ARCHITECTURE OF THE FASHION SYSTEM: CATWALKS AND SIDEWALKS

Throughout the 20th century, the presentation of fashion on the runway has become gradually more formalized, with bi-annual fashion weeks around the world, with Paris, Milan, London, and New York as the key locations. Moving from salons over department stores to designers’ own events and the organized fashion weeks, the runway show has continued as an important factor though the formats have changed (Evans 2005). The fashion show is an effective marketing tool creating close bonds between PR, media, and designers, especially during fashion weeks. Fashion shows have historically been notoriously difficult to gain access to which has helped brands create a sense of exclusivity. The advent of the digital catwalk has changed this situation. With the Internet, fashion shows have become increasingly accessible through the archives of sites such as Style.com, which features both film and images from the major fashion weeks as far back as 2000, and more recently, through live streaming of shows on the designers’ own websites and social media platforms. The sudden rise to fame of bloggers reporting live from the front rows of fashion shows has also increased the sense of accessibility of fashion shows. The role of the amateur in this apparent democratization of the space and mediation

of fashion is key to understanding the potential of amateurism in fashion as well as the challenges facing the fashion industry. If anyone can view the fashion shows live months before the looks arrive at the stores, then how can the fashion system retain its role as the driver of innovation? New media practices have thus speeded up the fashion cycle. The cyclical organization of fashion in bi-annual seasons has been difficult to maintain in the face of mass fashion copying, made easy through the open source policy of high-end fashion. The reaction from the high-end fashion industry is a surge of mid-season collections that have led to a sense of “season-less” cycles (Thomas 2007, p. 316). The question is if or when this acceleration caused by the digital age will stop, especially considering the challenge of working for a sustainable path for fashion.

Another concern is the quality and complexity of information. The decentralization of information is at risk of creating high levels of noise and overload. This is especially the case with the rise of the fashion blogger as an example of “the cult of the amateur,” which could have “a corroding effect on the truth, accuracy, and reliability of the information we get” (Keen 2007, p. 63). While not dealing with fashion as such, entrepreneur Andrew Keen is concerned that we may be moving from a dictatorship of experts to a dictatorship of idiots (Keen 2007, p. 35).

The same theme is played out in the tension between fashion designers and consumers. The sense that the “dictatorship,” to use Keen’s term, of designers has declined in favor of the consumers started in the 1960s. Gone are the days when Dior or Balenciaga could dictate the length of the skirts. Since then, intensifying in the 1980s, designers often take their cues from the street when creating and marketing new collections (Polhemus 1994, p. 8).

For centuries, the sidewalk has been a prime site for the demonstration of social status through fashion. From Baudelaire, who described the *flâneur* as a botanist of the sidewalk in the 19th century, to the 1960s when fashion took its cues from the streets rather than *haute couture*, street style has become a mainstream area of interest to the fashion houses as a source of inspiration, to the media and to scholars (Polhemus 1994). In the 21st century, the sidewalk is being globalized and digitized. Parading the streets to strut one’s stuff has found a new playground in social media with blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The digital promotion of individual style is not just part of a strategy of

personal branding or casual pastime. The fashion industry also incorporates parts of this sidewalk activity as a means of incorporating an amateur flavor into corporate products and marketing. The incorporation might happen through street casting models for fashion campaigns, a radical example of which was Lanvin's AW2012 campaign. Alber Elbaz explained that it was a way of bringing clothes back to the street: "There was something very democratic about the approach" (Socha 2012). Another example of this democratic turn in high fashion is the blogger as designer. There have been numerous examples, from Swedish blogger Elin Kling for H&M (2011) in fast fashion to Bryan Boy for Marc Jacobs with the *BB bag* (2008). A similar tendency is to use fashion bloggers as the face of a campaign, such as bloggers Chiara Ferragni for Guess (2013), Tavi Gevinson for Cole Haan (2013), and Jillian Mercado for Diesel (2014). The role of the amateur in fashion is also seen in the celebrity designer, a phenomenon that is similar to the blogger designer. Recent examples include Rihanna for River Island (2013) to Alexander Wang for H&M (2014).

These examples demonstrate how the fashion system turns the challenge—in this case of the amateur—into an advantage for the professional. In that sense, the cult of the amateur does not appear to have a corroding effect on the fashion system, to paraphrase Keen. Rather, fashion incorporates amateur culture in marketing and product development, giving rise to the notion of "rookie washing" which,

akin to pinkwashing or greenwashing, joins a noble cause—in this case the elimination of the fashion hierarchy—to commercial advantage.

Crowdsourcing

Amateurs are entering realms of creativity that have previously been dominated by professional designers. The most striking evolution in the digital age is arguably the advent of media architectures for creating and validating amateur creativity collectively. Online facilities allow amateurs to upload and comment on each other's designs and, in some cases, buy the products that they have helped create. A pioneering scholar on the topic states that, in the early 2000s, "we saw for the first time a surge of interest on the part of organizations to leverage the collective intelligence of online communities to serve business goals, improve public participation in governance, design products, and solve problems ... This deliberate blend of bottom-up, open, creative processes with top-down organizational goals is called *crowdsourcing*" (Brabham 2013). The term was coined in a 2006 issue of *Wire* magazine titled "Crowdsourcing: Tracking the Rise of the Amateur" (ibid.). This was right before social media were developed by corporations such as Google and Facebook and at a time when amateur blogs had much less competition from more professional blogs. Still, contemporary media offer these spaces of collective amateur activity. One of the motivating forces in amateur culture is the idea of spaces in which everyone can display and maybe sell



Threadless T-shirt.

Photo "Threadless (4745984718)" by nathanmac87 - ThreadlessUploaded by Anastasiarasputin. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons - [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Threadless_\(4745984718\).jpg#media-viewer/File:Threadless_\(4745984718\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Threadless_(4745984718).jpg#media-viewer/File:Threadless_(4745984718).jpg)



Threadless T-Shirt.

Photo from the blog Melodic, Thrifty & Chic used by permission from Anna Martin, <http://www.melodicthriftychic.com/fashion-blog/dark-humor-t-shirt-challenge-part-79>.

self-made artifacts in the spirit of a pre-modern gift economy, even if the actual exchange of products is performed via money capital in practice.

One example is the web-based T-shirt company Threadless, founded in 2000, that has built its brand on user-driven innovation and crowdsourcing. T-shirt designs are posted, and those with the most votes are put into production. Models are street casted or chosen from personal photos uploaded by the users. The effect of working with talented amateurs offers the extra symbolic value of ascribing amateur authenticity and pleasure to the organizational brand and product. The impact of amateur-based fashion brands such as Threadless may seem to hold downsides for the professional designers, Threadless's revenue went from \$6 million in 2005 to \$30 million in 2012. Threadless has collaborated with brands and retailers such as Gap (2012). Thus, the rise of the amateur has positively impacted the fashion system. The democratization

of the fashion designer's role has offered challenges to the fashion system, particularly for the role of the fashion designer. However, on the level of the new designers and, by implication, the design schools, the impact of the amateur on fashion culture could potentially be more damaging. If the distinction between amateur and professional designer is blurred, and a blogger might be promoted over a young fashion talent, then the conditions are made even more difficult for new designers. A positive indication of a shift in this priority within especially large corporations is the H&M Talent Award, established in 2012. The most recent winner, 24-year-old Eddy Anemian, who was a student at La Cambre in Brussels at the time, presented his 10-piece capsule collection in October 2014 for worldwide distribution.

E-commerce has challenged retailing by transporting consumption to virtual sites. However, e-commerce has also created new opportunities for amateurs to craft, customize, co-design, or resell fashion in micro-shops, as seen with, for instance, Etsy. The site contains 800,000 e-shops with a total of over 13 million listed items (2012). Etsy markets itself on the notion that "people value authorship and provenance as much as price and convenience" (etsy.com). An interesting example is provided by Yvette Brook, owner of the Etsy store Wonderbugs, who describes herself on her site as an amateur-professional hybrid: "I have always been into crafts and like to dabble with everything! I have three wonderful children, they have provided me with the inspiration to start making fabric items for children" (Brook 2013). In this sense, the amateur production becomes associated with contemporary values of authenticity (Gilmore and Pine 2007), which in turn challenges the premise of fashion professionals.

Yet again, however, the fashion system excels in incorporating elements that might undermine it. This development has extended the fashion system by allowing for greater consumer involvement. An effect this has had on the fashion system is the widespread use of DIY (do it yourself) as part of a branding strategy, as seen with Converse and Nike using co-design tools to involve consumers on their websites.

Here, the sense of personal taste is intertwined with global brand identity as a way to combine "the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change," as Georg Simmel described the dilemma of fashion as a social demand (Simmel 1971, p. 297). In other words, the professional world is not simply co-opting amateur



Hand-crafted children's sweater from the Etsy-store Wonderbugs.

Photo by Yvette Brook.

aesthetics into the corporate form of production; it is also being influenced in direct and indirect ways by evolving amateur cultures in the contemporary media landscape.

CONCLUSION: CAN ANYONE BE A DESIGNER? THE UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF AMATEURSHIP

The point of departure for this article was the recognition of a need for new narratives for analyzing the role of amateurs and the meanings of amateurship in fashion culture. It was clear from the outset that amateurs have not only become more visible, but that they have also developed new forms of expression within or because of new media practices. These developments in turn call for a reconsideration of the concept of design within the context of contemporary fashion culture. In developing arguments about the long-term implications of digitization and the advent of new forms of publicness and production, what is one fruitfully drawing from the long history? A recurring pattern is how media allow humans to develop and share new forms of cultural and emotional expression more independently of time and place, relatively independently of social and organizational structures, as evidenced by evolutions in the fashion system.

The growing amateur activity—from blogging to systematically organized hybrids such as Threadless and Etsy and beyond to the corporate customizing practices of Nike—challenges conventional conceptions of the designer and the fashion

system. A key conceptual point of this article is that in conventional definitions, a designer is a professional designer, but as the result of a process of differentiation in modernity that renders amateurship a discursive monstrosity in Latour's sense. In this perspective, amateurs are generally defined negatively. The predominance of the professional and industrial perspective in modernity shows in the subtle ambiguities of contemporary design theory such as Heskett's authoritative discourse. The privileging of the professional perspective might no longer be tenable. Design and fashion studies can benefit from studying amateur culture, by recognizing how it is transforming the field and serving as a source of innovation. In the digital age, agency is distributed across software design and various forms of participation in nonlinear flows, so there is a wider range of design agency. Design agency is occurring anywhere from the corporate headquarters to the customer on the ground or amateurs on the sidewalk.

If humans will explore whatever tools are available for artistic and social expression, humans in the digital era have considerably more communication power than in the era of cave paintings. When more people have the basic economic conditions and technologies to engage in some form of amateur creativity, those people will ultimately push the worlds of professionals, from finance to fashion, to move beyond the conventional focus on user participation merely for the stimulation of consumption. Conversations about "driving traffic" or measuring

“likes” on Facebook leave out the rich potentials in imagining new roles and experiences of participation. User participation and amateur creativity are not the same thing.

From this perspective, we can begin to see how the values of amateurship from fashion to cooking and beyond open up perspectives for explaining the new dynamics between amateurs and the concepts of users and consumers that dominate thinking about the cultural and media industries more generally. We can begin to see how amateurship can generate social capital for individuals and motivate many people to be part of what one might call the amateur creative class. Amateurship can enrich people’s lives. Amateurship is, arguably, an element of the good life as conceived by philosophers and sociologists drawing from Aristotle’s ethics; a life of human flourishing that cannot happen within work and consumption alone. However, when amateur culture is popularized within new media and market dynamics, how will the nature of amateurship be affected? This article suggests that, in ignoring amateur culture, the literature on creative industries not only fails to understand the creativity and power of amateurs, but also to offer more nuanced critical perspectives of what it means to be a citizen in contemporary society and how we might imagine social futures. For more than a century, amateurship has commonly been defined negatively as an imperfect condition. In recent decades, amateurship has re-entered the public stage to broaden the field of design and ultimately to transform the place of professional designers.

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