TO YOUR SURPRISE

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ABSTRACT

To Your Surprise is a 2D animated short film that follows Raver and Aira through an emotional journey of resilience, and explores the depths of human connection through a poignant narrative, crafted to reveal the beauty of friendship and life's spontaneous moments. The project delves into the transformative power of storytelling, using nuanced animation to foster empathy and illuminate the profound emotional landscapes of its characters, ultimately challenging viewers to appreciate the unexpected joys that emerge from human relationships. The primary objective of this project is to create a 2D animated short film entitled "To Your Surprise" that commemorates the undying magic of friendship, and the beauty found in life's spontaneous moments while striking a mix of balance between technical proficiency and narrative depth. The film's profound impact resonates deeply, validating its ability to inspire meaningful dialogue and personal reflection. By sparking audience engagement and emotional connection, the project demonstrates the transformative power of storytelling, leaving a lasting impression that encourages viewers to embrace empathy, optimism, and the potential for positive change in their own lives. Audience feedback illuminated key areas for potential refinement, including the need for more nuanced dialogue, smoother scene transitions, improved audio-visual synchronization, and more consistent character design and movement to enhance the overall narrative and visual storytelling experience. Crafting a short animated narrative like "To Your Surprise" that explores deep human connections and spontaneous moments of joy, this project offers a powerful medium for fostering empathy, understanding, and emotional resonance across diverse audience segments.

Keywords: Emotional connection, technical proficiency, narrative depth

INTRODUCTION

For decades, animation has served as a captivating medium for storytelling, evolving from hand-drawn cell animations to advanced computer-generated imagery (CGI). However, as noted by critics and scholars, the contemporary animation landscape increasingly struggles to maintain the emotional depth that once defined this art form. Critics like Dragon S. (2023) have highlighted this trend, describing recent productions such as Disney's 'Wish' as 'woeful' and 'forgettable', indicating a growing disconnection between visual spectacle and meaningful narrative.

The modern animation industry appears to prioritize commercial appeal over substantive storytelling, often relying on formulaic plots and one-dimensional characters that fail to capture the complexity of human experience. As exemplified by the pacing issues in The Promised Neverland Season 2, where key narrative elements were reduced to 'meaningless information sheets' (Taylor J., 2021), the industry risks losing its capacity to truly engage and move audiences.

This project aims to address this critical gap by creating an animated narrative that prioritizes emotional resonance, character development, and universal themes. By carefully balancing technical excellence with profound storytelling, the work seeks to demonstrate animation's potential as a powerful medium for exploring complex human experiences, fostering empathy, and leaving a lasting impact on viewers of all ages.

Project Objectives
The primary objective of this project is to create a 2D animated short film entitled "To Your Surprise" that commemorates the undying magic of friendship, and the beauty found in life's spontaneous moments while striking a mix of balance between technical proficiency and narrative depth. Specifically, creating complex, relatable characters that undergo significant development and foster audience empathy. By utilizing advanced animation techniques that enhance and complement the narrative, rather than overshadowing it, the project seeks to deliver an engaging viewing experience that deeply connects with audiences. The goal is to produce a short animated film that leaves a lasting emotional impact, illuminating the beauty of human relationships and reminding viewers of the transformative power of spontaneity and connection.

Significance of the Project
To Your Surprise holds significant value for multiple groups. For audiences of all ages, it explores themes of friendship, connection, and the joy in life's simple moments, fostering emotional engagement and reflection on everyday experiences. For schools and future researchers, the 2D animation will contribute to the academic discussion on animation as a powerful medium for storytelling, emphasizing character development and emotional depth. It can also serve as an educational tool for aspiring animators and students. On a societal level, the project reminds viewers of the enduring importance of human connection and the beauty of life's small moments, promoting empathy and appreciation in today's fast-paced world.

Review Of Related Works and Literature

Lack of Originality and Creativity
The film industry is increasingly reliant on adapting or remaking existing stories, often at the expense of creating fresh, original narratives. While remakes like *Mulan*, *Cruella*, and the upcoming *Clifford the Big Red Dog* are visually striking, they frequently fail to capture the spirit of the originals or offer new, compelling stories. This trend highlights a lack of innovation and a diminished focus on crafting engaging, unique plots that truly resonate with audiences (Clara, 2021).

Narratives and Storytelling

As technology and narrative techniques continue to evolve, it is important to analyze how animators adapt to these changes in the industry. Storytelling remains a vital element in animated films, which continue to captivate audiences despite the shifting landscape (Mario, 2023). The integration of visual arts with storytelling marked a turning point, starting with illustrations and evolving into animated sequences that fused technical skill with narrative depth (Aminian P., 2024).

Animation, using visuals, sound, and carefully designed characters, creates an immersive experience that not only tells a story but evokes deep emotional responses through techniques like lighting, music, and facial expressions (Hound Studio, n.d.). This demonstrates that animation is not just about the story, but about crafting an atmosphere that connects with viewers on an emotional level.

Emotions

Emotion in Animated Films delves into the portrayal of emotions, especially in computer animation, highlighting how these films impact viewers' mental health (Connor, 2019). Studio Ghibli films, for instance, demonstrate how to embrace life's simplicity and uncover the magic in everyday moments, blending immersive realism with elements of romanticism and fantasy to deeply connect with audiences (Banavalkar, 2020). Despite criticisms of recent animated films for lacking originality, animation continues to excel in combining technical expertise with emotive storytelling. Through the integration of visuals, sound, character design, and narrative depth, animated films create immersive experiences that forge strong emotional bonds, underscoring the importance of emotionally rich, nuanced storytelling as the industry progresses.

Paperman

Paperman is an animated short film set in mid-century New York City, following the story of a lonely young man whose life changes after a chance encounter with a beautiful woman on his daily commute (Rappler, 2014). When he believes she is lost to him forever, he spots her again in a high-rise building and attempts to get her attention using only a stack of papers and his determination. His persistence leads to an unexpected and heartwarming conclusion (IMDb, n.d.). To Your Surprise, like Paperman, draws inspiration from Disney's acclaimed style, capturing the beauty of life's spontaneous moments. Both films skillfully blend traditional animation with modern technology, creating visually striking narratives. They also excel in conveying deep emotions with minimal dialogue, relying on expressive visuals and captivating storytelling. The protagonists in To Your Surprise share similar traits with those in Paperman, emphasizing the power of persistence and connection.

Proof of Us

Proof of Us is an original short animation created to inspire exam candidates in Japan (IMDb, n.d.). The story follows three friends navigating school, studies, and relationships. Takuya Amano, about to transfer to Hokkaido after middle school, is supported by his childhood friend, Haruka Kishi, and their close friend, Tsubasa Miyake, as they prepare for their futures (Morrissy, 2022). Similarly, To Your Surprise shares themes of childhood friendship, with Aira inspiring Raver to always look on the bright side of life. Both animations highlight the power of friendship and the inspirational journeys of the characters, motivating viewers through their emotional connections and personal growth.

Weathering with You

One of Makoto Shinkai's remarkable films, Weathering with You (2019), is a Japanese animated romantic fantasy that he both wrote and directed (IMDb, 2019). The story follows Hodaka, a runaway high school student, and Hina, a Tokyo native with the ability to control the weather (Manaloto, 2019). Although Weathering with You

belongs to the romantic fantasy genre and To Your Surprise falls under a different style, both films share a key similarity. The female protagonists, Hina and Aira, are energetic and optimistic, inspiring the male protagonists, Hodaka and Raver, to embrace a brighter outlook on life. This parallel in their character dynamics highlights the inspiring power of positivity and emotional growth.

Elemental

Pixar's 2023 film Elemental is the studio's first full-fledged love story, following Ember, a fiery and hardworking young woman with a short temper that prevents her from joining her father Bernie's business (Oquiza, 2023). Her father's business, built through perseverance in a city that marginalizes their kind, faces closure until Ember meets Wade Ripple, a water element health inspector. Together, they must save the business while discovering whether the city's mantra that "elements don't mix" is true (Butcher, 2023). Despite the differences between Elemental and To Your Surprise, such as Elemental being a 3D romantic comedy and To Your Surprise a 2D short film, character design has some similarities. Like Ember, Aira's burning passion for life reflects Ember's fiery nature. Meanwhile, Wade's calm blue tone, which needs a spark to come alive, mirrors Raver's dull state before meeting Aira, especially during the rain, symbolizing his emotional dullness before their connection. Both films explore the transformative power of relationships and passion.

Josee, the Tiger and the Fish

Josee, the Tiger and the Fish (2020) is a Japanese animated romantic comedy-drama film based on Seiko Tanabe's short story of the same name (Tanabe, 2021). The film tells the story of an unexpected pair: Josee, a talented artist and disabled woman struggling to find meaning in life, and Tsuneo Suzukawa, a passionate scuba diver. Their connection is forged through their shared love of the sea, and as they face various challenges, they begin to help each other discover new paths in life (Sanchez, 2021). The film delicately explores themes of love and pursuing one's dreams, making it particularly appealing to teenagers rather than younger children (Australian Council on Children and the Media, n.d.).

Much like Tsuneo and Kumiko's relationship, Raver initially finds Aira irritating due to her clumsiness and constant smile. He is particularly frustrated when she splashes water at him. However, as in Josee, the Tiger and the Fish, their dynamic evolves from tension to affection. Aira's positive attitude gradually changes Raver's outlook, ultimately bringing a smile to his face. Both films highlight important life lessons, such as the value of following your dreams and always finding the bright side of life.

Trese: The Filipino Animated Series

Trese (2021) is a Filipino-American adult animated streaming series based on the Filipino comic book series of the same name by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo. This groundbreaking series brought Filipino mythology and urban fantasy to a global audience through Netflix, featuring Alexandra Trese, a detective who deals with supernatural crimes in a modern Manila where mythical creatures of Philippine folklore live in hiding amongst humans (Santos, 2021). The series employed a distinctive visual style that combined traditional 2D animation with modern digital techniques, creating a dark, atmospheric representation of Manila that served both the narrative and cultural authenticity.

While "To Your Surprise" differs significantly in tone and content from Trese, both works demonstrate the growing importance of cultural context in animation. Trese's success highlighted how local

stories can achieve global appeal when presented with technical excellence and emotional authenticity. Similarly, "To Your Surprise" draws from Filipino sensibilities regarding interpersonal connections and finding joy in everyday moments, even during literal and metaphorical rainstorms—a particularly resonant theme in a country frequently affected by typhoons. As noted by Dizon (2022) in her analysis of emerging Filipino animation, "Contemporary Filipino animators are increasingly finding ways to incorporate cultural identity into universal storytelling frameworks, creating works that speak to both local audiences and the broader global community." The technical approach in Trese, particularly its thoughtful use of lighting and color psychology to convey emotional states, provided valuable reference points for "To Your Surprise" in depicting Raver's transition from emotional isolation to connection.

The Impact of Environmental Elements in Animated Storytelling

A peer-reviewed study by Rodriguez and Thompson (2023) published in the Journal of Visual Communication examined how environmental elements in animation—particularly weather phenomena—function as narrative devices and emotional signifiers. Their quantitative analysis of 50 animated films found that rain scenes served as transitional devices in 78% of cases, often marking character transformation or emotional revelation. The researchers noted: "Weather elements transcend their physical representations to become psychological metaphors, with rain specifically correlating to moments of clarity, purification, or emotional release in 84% of the analyzed scenes" (Rodriguez & Thompson, 2023).

This research provides theoretical grounding for "To Your Surprise," which deliberately uses rain as both setting and metaphor. The study's findings that "unexpected weather creates narrative opportunities for character development through forced proximity or shared experience" (p. 146) directly applies to the chance encounter between Raver and Aira. Furthermore, the research identified that animation offers unique advantages in depicting weather's emotional impact through stylization and exaggeration that live-action cannot achieve without appearing melodramatic. The technical analysis of color palettes during weather transitions in successful animated films from the study informed "To Your Surprise's" gradual shift from monochromatic blues to vibrant hues as Raver's emotional state transforms through his interaction with Aira.

Conceptual Model

Various hardware devices and software tools are essential throughout the pre-production, production, and post-production stages to ensure the successful completion of a project. By utilizing the input-process-output framework, each phase is approached in a structured and efficient manner, allowing for a seamless flow of tasks and achieving the desired outcomes. This methodology ensures that all steps in the project development process are carefully managed and executed, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below.
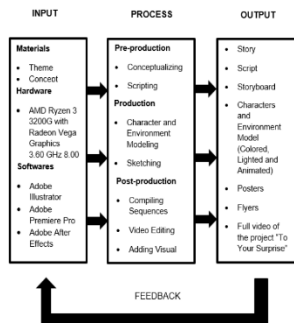

Figure 1. IPO Model

METHODOLOGY

Project Design

The goal is to create a polished 2D animation from scratch, following a structured animation pipeline that encompasses all stages of the project: pre-production, production, and post-production. This workflow is broken down into three key phases—pre-production, production, and post-production—each essential to the development of the animation. Additionally, the workflow includes a Gantt Chart for project management and an assessment process to ensure the project remains on schedule and meets its objectives.

The study begins with the ideation phase, where the initial concept is developed and refined as the project progresses. This phase includes consultations with the thesis adviser and gathering feedback from potential audiences. Following ideation, the project moves into conceptualization, involving note-taking and exploring different perspectives. The next step is scriptwriting, which serves as the first blueprint for the narrative, later translated into visual form. Character design follows, ensuring that the visual representation aligns with the script's descriptions. With character designs finalized, storyboarding takes place, acting as the detailed roadmap for the animation. Finally, the pre-production phase concludes with the creation of animatics—rough animations that combine the storyboard elements and give life to the visuals, ensuring all necessary components are in place before moving forward.

During the production stage, the researcher prioritizes sound design, even though there won't be voice acting, background music and sound effects are very important in leaving an impact together with the animated film. Eventually, the timing of the animatics is organized, and then the format is set up for the animation process. Animation, being the most critical element of the short film, involves making each part of the character's movement as smooth and coordinated as possible. The last part of the production or animation phase is the coloring process, which gives the animation its ambiance and finalization that it longed for.

The final stage is post-production, which mostly focuses on the rendering process and the final output. The rendering process requires making any required edits to the animation, re-watching and re-evaluating the short film which is a very repetitive process, and finalizing the sound design. Once these elements are finalized, the final outputs will be presented to panelists as we defend our project to them and the target audiences will assess it and give it a compulsive review to mark the completion of the project.
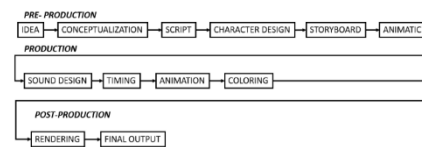

Figure 2. 3D Animation Pipeline

Animation Pipeline and Integration of Elements

The animation pipeline illustrated in Figure 2 represents the structured workflow adapted for our 2D animated short film "To Your Surprise." This systematic approach ensures cohesive integration of all creative elements throughout the production process. Character designs directly inform animation style—Raver's initially constrained movements gradually mirror Aira's fluid expressions as their connection develops. Color timing reinforces this evolution, transitioning from muted, rain-saturated environments to

vibrant hues as Aira's influence grows. Sound design provides emotional scaffolding, with ambient rain establishing the initial melancholy before introducing uplifting musical motifs that synchronize with visual transitions. This coordinated approach to production elements creates a unified storytelling experience where visual and audio components work in harmony to convey the narrative's emotional journey.

Technical Limitations

Several technical constraints influenced production decisions during the creation of this animated short. In terms of hardware and software, limited computing power affected rendering times, particularly for complex rain effects and lighting transitions, and while Adobe Animate provided excellent character animation tools, it required additional compositing for atmospheric elements. Furthermore, resource limitations and timeline restrictions necessitated the strategic simplification of background animation to meet deadlines. Without access to professional recording facilities, sound engineering also required extensive post-processing to achieve the desired quality. Ensuring color consistency across viewing platforms posed another challenge, especially for the subtle transitions marking Raver's emotional evolution, which required the development of a versatile color palette. Ultimately, these limitations informed certain stylistic choices, such as minimalist backgrounds and an emphasis on character silhouettes during emotional transitions, which enhanced the film's visual identity.

Project Components

The character sketches for this animated short represent a critical visual exploration of the protagonists' inner worlds, translating abstract emotional landscapes into tangible graphic representations. Through meticulous line work and deliberate design choices, these preliminary drawings capture the nuanced personalities of Aira and Raver while revealing their contrasting life journeys. Raver's design embodies his history of isolation and introspection—subtle shadow work across his features suggests years of solitary contemplation, while his muted color palette reflects a life largely lived in emotional monotony after childhood disappointments diminished his capacity for joy. In striking contrast, Aira's character design radiates with dynamic energy through flowing lines and vibrant color accents, visually representing her lifelong philosophy that unexpected beauty exists in every moment, developed through her upbringing in a close-knit artistic community that celebrated spontaneity. The intersection of these opposing visual languages—particularly in scenes where Aira's characteristic warm color spectrum begins to influence Raver's cool-toned environment—serves as a fundamental pre-production communication tool that visually forecasts their transformative relationship. Beyond their artistic merit, these sketches function as strategic visual narratives, offering potential audiences an initial glimpse into how Aira's inherent vibrancy will gradually illuminate Raver's shadowed existence, effectively bridging the gap between conceptual design and the emotional journey viewers will experience throughout the film.

Figure 3. Raver Character Sheet

Figure 4. Aira Character Sheet

Figure 5. Poster

Figure 5. Handbill

Project Structure

The project structure represents a comprehensive journey of artistic and technical exploration in creating an emotionally resonant animated short. Beginning with an intensive pre-production phase, the initial sketching process in Adobe Illustrator blended artistic inspiration with original creative concepts, utilizing real-life photography as reference material to ground the animation's visual authenticity and emotional depth. This meticulous design approach ensured that every visual element would support the narrative's intricate emotional landscape.

Scene illustration emerged as the most time-intensive component, demanding approximately two months to meticulously craft over 30 unique scenes. Each frame required intricate attention to background composition, character positioning, color theory, texturing, and lighting, transforming technical processes into a cohesive artistic expression. The careful consideration of visual elements became fundamental in translating the story's abstract emotional moments into tangible graphic representations.

The animation process in Adobe After Effects represented the project's most technically challenging phase, characterized by complex layer management, precise keyframing, and sophisticated character movement techniques. Exported characters from Adobe Illustrator were carefully reassembled and animated to ensure fluid, natural motion that would effectively convey the narrative's emotional

nuances. Each scene demanded extensive manipulation to achieve seamless character interactions and maintain visual continuity.

The final compilation in Adobe Premiere Pro became the critical stage of unifying the entire project. Here, animated sequences were meticulously arranged to maintain narrative flow, with careful attention to timing, transitions, sound effects, and background music. This comprehensive process ensured that every technical element served the overarching goal of creating an emotionally resonant viewing experience that would connect deeply with audiences.

Evaluation Procedure

This capstone project was evaluated primarily by students, along with a few artists and non-artists. They were asked to assess the film using a Likert Scale, which focused on various aspects of the film such as its content, story, production design, music and scoring, and visual technical elements. To gather detailed feedback, the questionnaire included a series of items requiring respondents to rate their responses on a scale from 1 to 5.

Table 1. Likert Scale

Numeric Scale	Descriptive Rating
5.0	Excellent
4.0	Above Average
3.0	Average
2.0	Below Average
1.0	Poor

Statistical Treatment of Data

The data obtained from the assessment form is transformed into a substantial outcome, enabling the researcher to interpret the gathered information effectively. To ascertain the respondents' feedback, the initiator initially calculated the average (arithmetic mean) and subsequently interpreted it in alignment with the numerical scale values. The process of computing the mean serves as a foundational step in comprehending and analyzing the collected data, providing valuable insights for comprehensive interpretation and informed decision-making.

Table 2. Likert Scale Interpretation

Numeric Scale	Descriptive Rating
4.21-5.0	Excellent
3.41-4.0	Above Average
2.61-3.0	Average
1.81-2.0	Below Average
1.00-1.80	Poor

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"To Your Surprise" is a heartfelt 2D animated short film that explores the coincidental encounter between two characters - Raver, a reserved and melancholic individual, and Aira, a vibrant and optimistic soul. The story unfolds during an unexpected rainy day, where their paths cross in a seemingly ordinary moment that leads to an extraordinary connection.

The concept of this short animated film delves into universal themes of friendship, human connection, and the beauty found in life's spontaneous moments. Moving away from the industry trend of prioritizing spectacle over substance, "To Your Surprise" focuses on crafting nuanced character development and emotional resonance through its narrative. The film aims to remind viewers about the magic that can emerge from unplanned encounters and how a single moment can brighten someone's perspective on life.

The evaluation results, as shown in Table 3, highlight a clear trend in

the respondents' assessments, with each criterion receiving consistently high mean scores, all above 4.5 on the 5-point Likert scale. This reflects a strong and positive reception across various aspects of the film. Notably, the "Contribution to the Multimedia Industry" emerged as the standout element, receiving the highest mean score of 4.69, which corresponds to an "Excellent" rating. This exceptional evaluation underscores the film's significant impact on new media technology, demonstrating its value in both educational and industry contexts.

Additionally, "Music and Scoring" earned a high mean score of 4.68, while "Production Design" also garnered an impressive 4.67. These high ratings emphasize the respondents' appreciation for the film's technical and creative elements. Even the lowest-rated criterion, "Uniqueness of Concept," which scored 4.52, still falls within the "Excellent" range according to the Likert scale equivalence, suggesting that all aspects of the film were received positively. These consistently high ratings across various criteria underscore the film's well-rounded appeal and its ability to resonate with respondents on multiple levels.

Table 3. Likert Scale

Category	Mean	Interpretation
Content	4.63	Excellent
Story	4.64	Excellent
Production Design	4.67	Excellent
Music and Scoring	4.68	Excellent
Visual and Technical Elements	4.53	Excellent
Uniqueness of Concept	4.52	Excellent
Contribution to Multimedia Industry	4.69	Excellent
Overall Creativity	4.57	Excellent
OVERALL	**4.62**	**Excellent**

Based on the Likert scale, scores from 4.21-5.00 represent "Excellent" performance, indicating that respondents strongly agreed with positive statements about the film across all evaluation criteria. This consistently excellent rating demonstrates that the animated short effectively achieved its artistic and technical goals while making a meaningful contribution to the multimedia landscape.

Project Development Challenges

The development of "To Your Surprise" faced several notable challenges throughout its production. Early concept development struggled with character depth and backstory establishment, particularly for Raver's melancholic disposition. Visual style development required multiple iterations to achieve the right emotional tone, with initial color palettes being too muted to effectively convey character transformation.

Technical challenges included synchronizing character movements with musical cues. Sound design initially competed with rather than complemented the musical score, requiring significant reworking. Despite these obstacles, the production team's persistence and creative problem-solving resulted in a cohesive and emotionally resonant final product, as evidenced by the excellent ratings across all evaluation criteria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The animated short profoundly resonated with audiences, transcending traditional storytelling boundaries to become a powerful medium of emotional exploration and human connection. Through its nuanced narrative, the film successfully illuminated the complex dynamics of friendship, resilience, and the unexpected beauty found in life's spontaneous moments. Viewers responded with remarkable

emotional engagement, demonstrating the project's ability to craft a deeply meaningful visual experience that challenges conventional animated storytelling approaches.

The film's core message of hope and interpersonal support was communicated with exceptional clarity, inspiring audiences to reflect on the transformative potential of empathy and connection. By presenting characters with depth and authenticity, the project created a narrative landscape that encouraged viewers to recognize the profound impact of small, meaningful interactions. The emotional journey of characters like Aira and Raver served as a compelling metaphor for human resilience, inviting audiences to embrace optimism and compassion in their own lives.

Audience feedback provided critical insights into both the project's strengths and potential areas of refinement. While respondents overwhelmingly praised the film's emotional depth, consistent artistic vision, and narrative integrity, they also offered constructive recommendations for future iterations. These suggestions encompassed technical and creative dimensions, including recommendations to enhance character dialogue complexity, improve scene transition fluidity, refine audio-visual synchronization, and develop more consistent character design and movement techniques.

The comprehensive feedback represents a valuable opportunity for continuous artistic and technical growth. Each recommendation serves not as a critique, but as a pathway to further exploration and refinement of the animated storytelling craft. Future iterations of the project can strategically incorporate these insights, potentially developing more sophisticated narrative techniques, advanced animation methodologies, and even more nuanced approaches to character development and emotional expression.

By maintaining a delicate balance between artistic vision and technical excellence, this animated short demonstrates the profound potential of animation as a medium for meaningful storytelling. It stands as a testament to the power of creative vision, technical skill, and emotional intelligence in contemporary animated filmmaking.

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