

# Practices of Readiness: Punctuation, Poise and the Contingencies of Participatory Design

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## ABSTRACT

How do we ready ourselves to intervene responsively in the contingent situations that arise in co-designing to make change? How do we attune to group dynamics and respond ethically to unpredictable developments when working with ‘community’? Participatory Design (PD) can contribute to social transitions, yet its focus is often tightly tuned to technique for designing ICT at the cost of participatory practice. We challenge PD conventions by addressing what happens as we step into a situation to alter it with others, an aspect of practice that cannot be replicated or interchanged. We do so to argue that practices of readiness are constituted by personal histories, experiences, philosophies and culture. We demonstrate this political argument by giving reflexive accounts of our dimensions of preparation. The narratives here are distinct, yet reveal complementary theories and worldviews that shape PD ontologies. We have organized these around the qualities of *punctuation* and *poise* as a way to draw out some less easily articulated aspects of PD practice.

## CCS CONCEPTS

**D.2.10 Design, Methodologies, Human Factors.**

## KEYWORDS

Readiness, punctuation, poise, feminist theory, phenomenology, Japanese philosophy, sociodrama.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

How do we, as designer/researchers, prepare for, step into, and become participants in the contingent and uncertain process of designing with others? What readiness are we practicing within the flexible and evolving conditions that are an inherent part of

collaborative design work? The act of readying ourselves for contingent Participatory Design (PD) has not received much consideration in literature. Here, we present ‘readiness’, and the need for attunement, to contrast with the process-oriented considerations that are often preferred.

This paper continues an examination of design researchers’ reflexive practices in PD, building on influences from feminist theory and anthropology to create critical, theoretically informed ways to consider situated relations between people, technology and design. Our paper is synergetic with several papers that see PD as configured by the people, practices, place and structures with which it is entangled, rather than arguing for universal gold standards for participation ([3][52]). While we contribute to this debate, we also note that ‘it is quickly forgotten how researchers themselves have specific sets of expertise, make judgments and have agendas that they bring as co-participants in design’ ([52]:435). In other words, designer-researchers’ practice is widely recognized as configuring participation, yet the close examination of personal commitments evades reporting due to a legacy that narrowly defines ‘generalizable’ knowledge. Challenging this orthodoxy, we choose to focus on the detail of researchers’ participation and their personal politics of engagement. We do this to provoke thought about practice in others. This means we argue for the value of reflexivity in the only way possible – by being reflexive in our practice, discussing how we use this to situate ourselves and sharing what makes us different, idiosyncratic and irreplaceable, even as we recognize that we are no different from others in being unique. This requires us to experiment with ways to account for, analyze and share knowledge of our practices of readiness, then ask what can be drawn from highly personal accounts to contribute to PD.

A challenge in this writing, then, is how to present highly personal histories and experiences, which are intrinsically not replicable. We choose to avoid generalizations and the abstraction of characteristics that are intrinsically context-driven. Instead, we offer readers a means to encounter themselves more clearly. To do this, we share two individual journeys of ‘attuning’: a personal process of readying that is different in every context (see [29]).

The accounts demonstrate that every encounter is an ethical and political one, informed by long-held commitments and cultural influences as well as in-the-moment dynamics. They show the relations in our choices, where practices and their consequences are highly charged. They show our personal histories and philosophy, manifesting through our preparations to

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affect everything that then happens. These factors are important to disclose precisely because these aspects so often remain implicit.

The early section of the two accounts details the commitments that underpin our practice, not only because we value reflexivity, but to show the derivation of the qualities that we introduce here. It is part of experimenting with ways to share dimensions that are deliberately omitted in PD reporting, to reveal what is ‘under the hood’ of two designers’ practice in structuring future social relations. We draw attention to the wide differences and similarities that two people can bring to a practice that has much in common as participatory practitioners.

In addition, we offer an analysis of preparation for uncertainty as conditions of collaboration in PD become increasingly heterogeneous, unbounded and uncertain [5]. We discuss this in the context of increasing urgency to make futures collaboratively and sensitively as global social, political and environmental challenges become more apparent. In all, this paper intends to make several contributions to PD:

1) We draw attention to readiness as a state of openness to what emerges and responsiveness belying defined tasks. *Readying* is to draw on who we are and what we are doing in situ. We show how deep undercurrents of personal history and experience can surface, when and why, according to the situation in which we are immersed. By exploring how these commitments play out in our actions, we begin to understand our practice better and work with greater sensitivity to others in the design process. In doing so, we also reveal a way of working that approaches uncertainty with more resilience than formal methods are able to do.

2) We interrogate the conventions and entrenched legacies of ‘designs from nowhere’ [48] to encourage experimentation with recounting our whole selves. We demonstrate a way to write about our practices, drawing upon auto-ethnographic approaches. In writing ourselves strongly into the story, we take feminist, anthropological and phenomenological insights on positionality, orientation and reflexivity and make them work practically, not just to articulate our practice, but to shape it in process.

3) We offer concepts of *punctuation* and *poise*, underpinned with the philosophical, epistemological and ontological constructs of their various histories. We propose these features – perhaps two sides of the same coin – as useful concepts with which to think about *practices of readiness*. *Punctuation* is a consciousness of working with and immersing in the flow, gaps and rhythms of change. *Poise* stresses characteristics of self-awareness, of being emplaced and a contemplation of how one is and acts. These concepts are offered as a way into describing immaterial features of practice and as a sensitizing tool to help others consider what readiness in their practice might mean to them.

Before we illustrate the way these concepts speak of our preparation for the complexities of PD, we first ground our ideas of readiness in the literatures that have informed the approaches.

## 1.1 Uncertain Contexts

An extensive analysis of PD studies involving communities by DiSalvo and colleagues ([14]:203) points to the evolving nature of design where ‘needs emerge, design objects change, designers

morph and the design process is continuously reconstructed by all interested publics.’ What Bannon and Ehn [5] call controversial ‘matters of concern’ do not reveal themselves upon demand, and managing different priorities requires a particular type of preparation. Designing with and for groups of people cohering around an issue brings political issues with it ([9][14][33]), which include how values emerge, how they are recognized and negotiated in decision-making [24]. Björgvinsson and colleagues foreground tensions by drawing on Mouffe’s ‘agonistic democracy’ and ‘propose a polyphony of voices and mutually vigorous but tolerant disputes among groups’ ([9]:129) rather than aspiring to consensus-making in their work. Bannon and Ehn [5] question our expectation that consensus is possible or desirable in handling ‘matters of concern’. Heterogeneity and controversy feature in all engagement, but may be largely written out of design encounters by the brevity, functional focus and arbitrary mixing of people in some participatory work. At other times, such as the examples cited, even where there are broadly agreed aims, the nature of inquiry and the relations between the people concerned require us to give tensions due weight.

Light ([31]:91) further suggests that it ‘is more important to be attuned to relations and ready for anything in these flexible and evolving circumstances than it is to have an action plan. Thus, one skill is to make an appropriate judgment call on what might and could happen next and decide whether to intervene: to disrupt or to preserve.’ Designers’ embodied knowing shifts from moment to moment, often in response to the intersubjective nuances of the group. The concept of ‘attuning’ has been developed in our previous work where we describe how, as: ‘the unexpected, divergent situation emerges, practitioners have to reassess and modify their systems of knowing-in-practice, allow adjustment to a course of action, change previously held views and build new understanding in the situation that is unfolding’ ([33]:69). Taking this further, we explore sensitivity to relations and ways of ‘attuning’ to invisible, subtle and complex dynamics, and how these are shaped and conditioned by our upbringing, culture and society. This sensitivity is not taught in formal design training, though, arguably, it is a skill central to design facilitation and essential when negotiating ‘matters of concern’.

The growing literature on the need for cultural transformation and the potential of designers to offer collaborative future-making that addresses these ‘matters of concern’ point to the value of cultivating these less apparent skills. However, there is little existing analysis or discussion of how designers and researchers prepare in detail for uncertainty in PD projects. We argue that in order to understand and work with tensions inherent in such practices, we require readiness: on the micro scale, to respond to small moments of intersubjective nuance and to feel a way through; and at a macro scale, to be dexterous and willing to work on turbulent, shifting sands. These practices need disclosure.

## 2 BEING READY

The notion of being ready in design has focused on growing capabilities through design training, such as readiness for students to engage with new ideas. Löwgren and Stolterman ([34]:57)

describe such design abilities as ‘preparing for action’ so that designers can act in new and unique situations and be confident in making ‘good judgment’ that ‘leads to good actions and decisions’. Design situations are characterized by messy, uncertain, indeterminate dilemmas so the practitioner must allow him or herself to ‘experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique’ ([24]:[46]:68). But the contingencies of which Schön speaks are a constraint on the individual designer’s creative process, the embrace of which is the means to spark ideas and resolve dilemmas. These constraints are not the contingencies that accompany going collaboratively into design and trying to elicit the best out of other people. Our sense is closer to Markham’s, when she talks of ‘a multilayered set of inductive and non linear processes’ for which the challenge ‘is stopping at critical moments or junctures in the project to reflect on what one is actually doing so as to: Find a good fit between one’s activities and one’s theoretical premises, balance learned procedure and new contexts, and alter methods of interpretation so to better suit the contingencies of the situation’ ([35]:46).

Elsewhere, there is already a tradition of readying the mind for the unexpected by knowing one’s craft. Sennett ([45]:172), discussing the basis of craft, draws on recent research to conclude that it takes ~10,000 hours of practice in any number of fields (e.g. knitting, meditation) for ‘complex skills to become so deeply ingrained that these become readily available, tacit knowledge’. In the field of neuroscience, ‘action-readiness’ is described as a pattern of dealing adequately with affordances within the ‘sociomaterial environment and the reservoir of abilities in our socio-cultural practices’ so that ‘one is responsive to, or poised to act adequately on an affordance’ ([10]:2-3). And there is work on reflexivity within the PD community (e.g. [41] [47]) and around it (e.g. [43]).

We build on these notions of agility, creativity and openness to uncertainty to further consider ways of responding tactfully to group dynamics through reflexive self-awareness in contingency. Here, hours of practice, ‘mastery’ of technical skill and knowledge can become more than proficiency, taking practice to a deeper level. For example, Suzuki ([49]:61), a celebrated scholar of Zen Buddhism, describes the absence of thought (*mushin*) by comparing the mind to a mirror free from ‘stains’ such as logic, judgment, emotions, self-consciousness, so it is ‘ready to reflect simply and absolutely whatever comes before it’. This level of readiness calls for a presence in the moment, as seen in martial arts and traditional Japanese dance, theatre and ceremonies.

Attempting to understand our practice as we step into new situations requires us to access a depth of insight. Scharmer’s ([44]:6) transformational leadership describes the ‘blind spot’ as ‘the place within or around us where our attention and intention originates’. He argues that addressing the future course of human development requires a scrutiny of the sources from which we operate. This echoes Suchman [47], who asks that designers act with clarity and awareness regarding their positions and avoid intervening naively.

The next section addresses readiness through a discussion of orientations, with attendant cultural and philosophical influences,

and how they respectively manifest in our PD practices. We demonstrate that design research and interventions are culturally located and informed ([6][29]) by acknowledging informal, tacit and explicit ways different origins have shaped and continue to shape and evolve in our work. We start with Ann, a British PD researcher. Here, we introduce phenomenological influences in a ‘Western’ tradition, and a lesser-known theorist of interaction and drama theory, centred in the melting pot of 20<sup>th</sup> century European thought. In describing how these influences have been important to Ann, she shows how decisions may be the outcome of rhythmic shifts and transitions in the flow of a design process, relating this to a strategy of punctuation and poise. Next, Yoko, a PD researcher in Australia, draws on her Japanese background and philosophy informed by Zen Buddhism. Her practice of readiness foregrounds poise and punctuation to create heightened awareness of relational sensitivity, being present in the moment and receptive to emergence and serendipity. In writing our accounts this way, we reveal the heterogeneity of readiness, distinct yet shared, and invite other design researchers to consider their dimensions of preparation. For the sake of discursive tension, we have characterized our perspectives as coming from different parts of the world and meeting in the paper.

### 3 OUT OF EUROPE

#### 3.1 Dramatic Undercurrents

In the design literature, there is a tradition of juxtaposing presence in the moment with pauses in the flow of everyday business so that decisions can be judged and choices made, particularly to be found in expression of professional practice (see Schön [46] for description of reflection in/on practice but also, for instance, Goodman et. al. [18] on designers pausing and discussing criteria for judging compromise and success). The idea of breaking the flow of the task in hand has been borrowed from Heidegger’s [20] distinction between *ready to hand* and *ready at hand*, where the second form results in a ‘breakdown’ or interruption in the fluid accomplishment of the task in process. This phenomenological tradition distinguishes between *being in the moment* and the reflective thought associated with stopping, stepping back and contemplating at a distance. It accompanies a dominant Western scientific culture of detached analysis, contrasting with fluid aspects of design practice. It speaks to a mind-body-world separation, which some branches of (post)phenomenology eschew (e.g. [27]). It is a well-acknowledged form of punctuation.

I (Ann) am a female European with the luck of 9 years of post-18 study paid for by the UK state, allowing me to saturate myself in theories of interaction and practice. In my research, the link between theory and action; thought, presence and connection reflects a different aspect of Heidegger’s work – the ‘thrownness’ of finding ourselves in the world. In other words, we are never free of engagement. This idea supports other influences: Moreno’s thinking on spontaneity, the care ethics of interdependence [42] and the positionality of feminist critique (e.g. [15]). Moreno was a Viennese psychologist and the parent of psychodrama, sociometry and sociodrama (collaborative processes to gain insight into social

dynamics, having a diagnostic and/or therapeutic aim: see [www.psychodrama.org.uk/what\\_is\\_psychodrama.php](http://www.psychodrama.org.uk/what_is_psychodrama.php)). Moreno sought to explain what happens when, instead of pausing and thinking, we become adept at responding creatively and openly to situations and to other people around us. This has mostly informed drama work, but speaks to PD practice too (as a social form of design), and particularly my practice, such as running workshops with communities. I was not trained initially in design, but in various types of drama. Both drama and design are practice-based activities addressing processes of change and development, especially educational drama (see Heathcote [19] and O'Neill [39]), which uses experiential learning to create engagement, rather than stressing theatrical aspects. They both raise the ethics of intervention and collective responsibility, linking with my interest in feminist and critical approaches to academic work. I regard all activity as political – implicated in the struggle for greater social justice and mutual understanding – and regard change through grassroots action to be the beginning of change in society. I choose my orientation with a desire to promote ecologically sound outcomes. My projects, on social design or technology, follow these politics, with an application of PD principles and a strong interest in learning and improving.

### 3.2 The Poise of Creative Spontaneity

Moreno speaks to social learning in that he twins spontaneity-creativity and uses this pairing to underpin a theory of therapeutic intervention: 'Spontaneity is the arch catalyzer, creativity is the arch substance' ([35]:105). He argues that *creative spontaneity* comes from extended experiential work and reflecting on group dynamics with others. So, *creative spontaneity* is best regarded as a practice needed to conduct oneself as director in the dramas he proposed, to explore states of mind and/or troubling situations. Through years of experiential learning, psycho/sociodramatists work to develop creative spontaneity as a fluid diagnostic skill.

I particularly value this fluidity and concentrated on learning tools for analyzing social dynamics (sociodrama) and not so much the working of the mind (psychodrama). Much of my training in sociodrama was to learn to be responsive in an intuitive form to what is going on round me, while remaining analytic of process. The role is simultaneously to lead the group in its discoveries (in the present) and to guide the next step (through considering where we have been and projecting into a range of futures). In this, it shares ground with other craft skills. Here, I see a concept like *poise* appearing: an ability to stay with, yet respond beyond, the moment.

*Creativity* is, according to Moreno [35], the end result of a warming-up process whereby a person increases their capacity to be spontaneous. Howie ([22]:np) describes Morenian spontaneity as: 'an unconservable force operating in a person, in the moment, that leads a person to make an adequate response to a given situation or context'. Alongside this, Moreno also considered the limits of attention: 'One activity at a time excludes every other activity; one focus every other focus. He/she warms up exclusively to immediate situations. He/she lives in immediate time' ([37]:61). Moreno suggests spontaneity is framed by what

we are ready for (are warmed up to). Our strategies will be limited to that moment; at their best, picked to be most relevant and guided by information around us as to effect desired outcomes; at worst, stuck in conditioned responses or making knee-jerk reactions to others' 'stuckness' in the moment. His techniques are developed to stop 'stuckness' and produce alternative strategies: to use the limitations of focus to shape options.

The warm-up is crucial – it enables the practitioner to move quickly through ideas, seeing the potential for new combinations of activity and those for which the group has shown a readiness. In this way, the leader is ever ready to warm the group up towards some action, respond to the group's warm up (i.e. readiness) and attune to shifts in the dynamics that allow for deeper reflection, new impetus or sudden changes of topic. Sometimes, as here, the goal of staying fleet-footed is to help participants break out of normal thinking patterns and reflect. In this kind of work, one might identify 'what if' alternatives and 'not yet' opportunities to step out of a flow of *doing* by breaking through norms, critique imaginaries and introducing new stimuli to reimagine the future.

Elsewhere, I have talked about the need to perform new ways of being as designing [31]. 'In imagining difference, something changes in our potential for action and the directions it might take ... We start the confrontation between the fluidity of the mind, where anything imaginable is possible, and the cultural and material choices that already shape possible futures' ([31]:86). One does this by puncturing the present; to harness a sense that things could be other, project forwards to a changed reality and, even in doing so, move towards it. Associative thinking moves us beyond existing bounds to make new knowledge [23]. Sometimes the bounds outside which we move are just our own frames of reference; sometimes they are those of a whole culture, thereby enabling a kind of innovation. Associating ideas and imagining difference require punctuation in our thinking-as-usual. In PD, design can puncture other people's thinking – designing a social process of engagement for others, rather than a socio-technical system as product – so the rhythm is different, the punctuations subtler and the readiness more urgent.

To illustrate this, I now present a project with social activists in which politics became a central motif in how research should be conducted, as well as a topic of interest to all participants. Staying focused on two days of collaborative work, the trickiness of the engagement and complexities in its social structure makes it a good example for looking at readiness in terms of rhythms and the exploration of punctuation and its counterpoint, poise.

### 3.3 Politics in Action – 'There is no We'

In the project reported here, three passionate, strongly-contrasting groups of activists had joined academic researchers to co-devise a project exploring how people understand themselves as effective in taking action on the future of neighbourhoods, communities and issues, i.e. social change. To make this workable, I proposed a tactic of *gentle disruption* to the activists – a form of punctuation using design methods of defamiliarization, surprise and provocation – to mitigate any tendency to become entrenched in rigid political positions.

All participants were sensitive to power and politics. Beyond holding diverse views, the activists in the collective also embraced what Gerbaudo [17] calls liquid organising and choreographic leadership. The looseness of groupings was prized as responsive, flexible and emergent. There was concern about the potential damage of examining these aspects, leading to reluctance to document, analyse and publicise. There was also concern about trying to speak for others. So, the group chose not to analyse practice, synthesize findings or speak as a single voice on (what emerged as) diverse, highly contextual, idiosyncratic issues. Instead, the activist participants led events with a collective focus of celebrating social action and acknowledging its variety. I was mandated to lead communal planning and reflection. Out of this grew the phrase ‘There is no We’ for addressing representation, content and authorial voice and the group adopted a policy of juxtaposing ideas to convey meaning – introducing further punctuation. This evolved into a strategy to organise the content for a book with disaggregated authorship.<sup>2</sup>

To generate rich material for the book, the group designed a programme of discussions that avoided scrutiny of tactics, yet allowed for reflection on the intense and challenging nature of sustaining activism. The events brought together some 50 change-makers to explore project themes. A collective of activist and university-based researchers and a production editor then reviewed 48hrs of recorded spoken material from these events, as well as emails, blog accounts and other reflective texts. Then came a two-day workshop to put the book together.

Often in a group there are just one or two people with a strong temperament and interest in process who may dominate tone and agenda-setting. Here everyone was bold, with strong opinions, and the group’s discursive style raised the spectre of two unproductive days of argument without output. Avoiding this hinged on when and how to intervene to keep moving forward.

### 3.4 Sensitivity to Pace and Rhythm

My delegated role was to keep people making decisions. Limited time and budget meant that the intense two-day workshop became the heart of producing the book, during which we had to devise a collaborative work process (see also [32]). This was an interesting business as, despite the disaggregated material, the whole team chose to be involved in every decision on the book’s editing: tone, content, structure and style. People were operating in factions that did not ordinarily choose to talk to each other. Everyone cared about the politics of our interactions as well as the output. All insisted everyone be present and reach consensus for all stages (i.e. there was trust in collaboration, not in delegation). Doing this, we learnt that protecting plurality is a different but equally challenging task to attempting homogeneity and consistency. A special kind of editing process was needed. With much depending on this process, I returned to my experience in sociodrama to look for a tactic that would warm us up to achieve what needed to be

done. I identified a tactic I called *tacking and weaving* to balance action, discussion and reflection for rapid decision-making.

The punctuation of the tacking technique worked to support the unaligned and critical group to make editorial decisions. Running the session, I was forever poised to intervene - listening to mood as well as words - and to shift discussion to another aspect as soon as there were beginnings of disagreement or a slowing of ideas. I was watching for drops in energy, early signs of tension, a need for change in activity (Moreno’s ‘act hunger’) and, of course, if interdependencies meant that it made sense to tackle another aspect first. With more time, arguments could have run their course, but this was an effective way of working within the project’s limits. In other words, punctuation meant I switched fast between topics to introduce a rhythm, and poise meant forever judging the group’s capacity to act productively without interruption from me.

### 3.5 Materials Ready to Hand

Readiness also involved material planning so I had tools at hand. The warm-up began with preparation for arriving (an email with goals and rough schedule). A washing line was set up with sheets of paper hanging from it, which people saw on arrival. The sheets reflected the page-size and quantity that might be used in the book. There were tools for layout like scissors, glue, pens and several rolls of paper for sketching outlines. Such physical artefacts set the scene, providing independent and re-configurable elements ready for use as punctuation. Importantly, there was a printout of all the texts that anyone had identified as valuable to include (though still far too much for the space). This had to be whittled down and its presence signalled the task and its size. Further at-hand material devices included a visit to an art shop to consider the tangible qualities of the book through viewing art books at the size/length that we could afford.

The physical items oriented people while representing choice points in handling decision-making: representing options but not dictating them and so supporting creative spontaneity. While all of these items brought context, their presence as a resource assured me that I had means to punctuate discussion with manual tasks and this allowed me to plan changes in tempo and type of action.

The resulting book embodies punctuation in its plural, visually distinct, disaggregated voices (see: <https://db.tt/lgeP0Uoc>). Texts were chosen to stand next to each other and provide an implicit commentary. Bundles produced by clustering the material into groups of ideas became the organising principle, used as a cross-cutting index to unite scattered texts and provide structure while keeping the politics of juxtaposition alive on the page. As a compromise, descriptive passages for each bundle and some introductory words were interspersed to give the book greater coherence for readers.

### 3.6 Details of Tacking and Weaving

To explain the idea of ‘tacking and weaving’, at outset I suggested the group would move between issues of tone, content, order of content, structure, explanatory features, distribution, audience, visual design, gaps to fill and how to know if the work is finished.

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<sup>2</sup> Ann declares that this account is only one of many possible and reflects her perspective and no other, based on the academic report submitted to funders.

I used ‘tack and weave’ to narrow each option in rotation, rather than deal exhaustively with any one of them. Narrowing moves in one area made outcomes clearer for each other part of the design.

Again, each issue was a resource, like threads lying next to each other in a skein for embroidering. In supporting creative spontaneity, this skein was both the means of keeping things fresh and of staying within specified areas for decision-making: at any point, a different strand could be picked up and brought into play. Elsewhere, I have talked about the skill ‘to make an appropriate judgment call on what might and could happen next and decide whether to intervene: to disrupt or to preserve’ ([31]:86). But how does one know when to intervene and what to do next? I judged that, in this group, it would be better to change more often than risk losing momentum. With a more tentative group, intervention criteria and judgments would be different. Even so, every new occasion requires guesswork based on one’s craft knowledge.

In each case, change of activity was handled with a short, recorded summary of where the collective had reached, a chance for questions and comments and then a change of tack. It proved important to summarize carefully, check and then capture the summary for when the group was no longer together. As the two days went on, these switches started to cycle back to considerations that already had some attention. In each case, the break and the intervening discussions allowed people to continue productively with the revisited thread. This tacking was accepted as an approach and kept things constructive; its punctuation was not noticed as being obtrusive or distracting.

### 3.7 Analysis

The aim of my account is to show punctuation as a tactic: even the use of ‘gentle disruption’ as a phrase presages changes of state in a managed way. *Punctuation* and *poise* help to consider ‘tacking and weaving’ in terms of general continuities and discontinuities of moving collaboratively towards a design goal. In these collective situations, a moment of not intervening is a decision not to act; it is a prolonged readiness for the moment when it is fitting to move to a new state and it is a working-up and warming up to that feeling. Of course, no one can ever tell what would happen if paths had been followed rather than abandoned. In appreciating this, I was able to manage choice points with more confidence: there is no right answer, only the flow of interactions. What we can aspire to is a rhythm that includes all voices and helps people to achieve what they can do together. As practitioners, we know the concentration and attunement to process that shifting gear requires. I would argue that managing these shifts relies on the poise that underpins the fluid shaping of process, intensified for the group because of its characteristics and the shortness of time. The poise of readiness helped manage this process: paying respect to participants, offering care for their ambitions and staging events that allow ambitions to be met. My readiness aspired to evolve a process that engaged everyone, make a space where it was safe to listen and be heard despite contrasting views, record progress and decisions as made, and allow people to feel productive.

We succeeded in producing the basis of a book during the two days. Nonetheless, it may be a weakness that, in the workshop, the

group did not consider interpersonal relations except to agree how to work going forward. Perhaps success with planning came from avoiding this topic; perhaps it was a missed chance to discuss another layer of difference. Having deliberately brought together social activists of various types – from direct action to non-confrontational – it was to be expected that they would differ on the degree of confrontation they would welcome or even tolerate about their own practices and those emerging in the group. The collaboration process began with setting ground-rules, but, by the time of the workshop, it was clear that different characters required more or less discussion of social process, especially any friction. This aspect of agonism is less explored than the plurality of voices and views that such an approach entails. In a different provenance and social structure, a different set of choices would face the group and more time might have been devoted to social process rather than decisions about making. Yet, for two days, the approach of deliberately punctuating held the group in a structure that led to a productive, even innovative, collaboration.

## 4 A PRACTICE WITH ROOTS IN JAPAN

### 4.1 Preparing to ‘Enter’ and Cross Thresholds

Zen Buddhism evolved through philosophical developments that explored pluralism, impermanence and inter-relatedness [49]. This influence is strongly evident in the Japanese notion of *Ma* (間), which means ‘in-between’ or ‘between-ness’. In Japan, these profound ideas are enmeshed with the pragmatic of the everyday and shaped by activities that are tacit, colloquial and quotidian.

My (Yoko) Japanese background informs relations, encounters and what preparation and readiness mean to me: a form of poise in ‘entering’ the everyday. This notion of ‘entering’ is to have a heightened sense of crossing over thresholds. There are highly ritualized practices like preparations for entering a house, an occasion, a relationship, a season or a sacred place. For example, preparation for visiting a host is to embody respectful greeting by bringing a thoughtful gift, anticipating their inconvenience, and finally taking off one’s shoes to step over the threshold of their home. Similarly, when entering a Shinto shrine, visitors pass through a *torii* gate that demarcates sacred grounds. Rituals for preparation involve washing hands and mouth and wafting incense smoke to ‘cleanse’ one’s *kokoro* (body-spirit-mind) in readiness to open up to being enveloped and permeated by awe, mystery and wonderment of the gods [25]. This preparation requires *kokoro* to be clear and open (*mushin*), like a mirror free from ‘stains’. The *torii* gate signals a preparation for this mutual entry of awe and wonderment. This means if one enters the grounds in haste and mindlessness, one would only encounter the same state at the shrine. On returning to Japan, usually fresh off a long-haul flight, I try and do a short detour to visit my local shrine. It is a ritual to anchor me to my roots and renew a cultural practice.

These are various forms of ritual for entering into and creating relationships and such ingress into different contexts is not regarded casually. A great deal is at stake, like embarrassment, disrespect or poor fortune, if such preparations are not undertaken,

paving the way in which relations, actions and outcomes play out. Extending this, entry into seasons and life-stages is marked in Japanese culture by festivals, ceremonies and public holidays, to help orient people's passage through time and space, and to create a sense of belonging in the world [50]. *Hanami* is to celebrate as well as contemplate impermanence by seeing cherry blossoms scatter in the spring wind. Illustrated in the quotidian examples are multiple dimensions of preparedness, from habitual acts that anticipate an encounter, to being present in the moment and being receptive to what might emerge. These practices are said to derive from the Zen teaching of *ichigo ichie* ('one opportunity, one encounter') to treasure every moment as a once-in-a-lifetime occasion to highlight one's full participation in a transient experience. These teachings are fundamental in my life and how I 'enter' and nurture relationships, even though I now live and work in Australia. It is a way of knowing the world(s) from intimacy and inter-relatedness (i.e. from within), rather than a knowing that starts with references outside of oneself ([11][25]).

#### 4.2 *Ma*: Punctuation and the "in-between"

My heightened awareness for readiness and entry into spaces and relationships is a sensitivity to *Ma*. Design, including many creative practices, has co-evolved with *Ma* in Japan, which is evident in its theatre, art, poetry, architecture and more [12]. While *Ma* is a colloquial term in Japanese, its evolution is heterogeneous, inflected by Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Shinto.

*Ma* has always been part of my practice, and my writings on *Ma* have explored ways to articulate its profound philosophical and spiritual depth in PD and co-design (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). My argument for making *Ma* relevant in design necessitates a political framing, especially as design is already dominated by Euro-centric origins that privilege certain modes of knowing and being [16]. Similar politics are observed elsewhere: scholars like Law and Lin [28] have been exploring 'Chinese-inflected STS' to contest conventions embedded in Euro-American STS that reproduce particular modes of knowing while displacing others. Similarly, *Ma* also challenges dominant conventions. It foregrounds dimensions of relationality that are harder to 'evidence' or capture, yet, I argue, are significant when designing with people, because attuning to *Ma* is to be sensitive to in-betweens. In-betweens are constituted by absence, emptiness and nothingness (*Mu*). *Ma* enables *Mu* (absence) to be noticed as an interstice, white space, a pause, etc. Pilgrim ([40]:259), a scholar of art and religion in Japan, refers to *Ma* as 'pregnant nothingness' to suggest its boundless potentiality and imagination. This *Ma* could be considered to function like punctuation, such as a bracket ( ) or an ellipsis ' ... ', that activates a way of sensing what is not there in a sentence. Such devices also create in-between spaces, opening up meaning and invitation to the reader or listener to sense other layers as part of the totality. In other words, rather than taking punctuation to mean stopping or breaking continuity with a deliberate interruption, punctuation informed by *Ma* could be seen as an orientation towards sensing absence. Like an empty bowl, ready to receive content [26], the affordance of punctuation lies in this potential of emptiness.

*Ma* manifests most clearly in my co-designing because *Ma* enables me to attend to silent dynamics, embracing the oblique and serendipitous nature of communication in its multi-varied forms **Error! Reference source not found.** In other words, being sensitized to *Ma* reminds me I am always in the 'middle of things' [8], shifting and transforming as part of the transience of life. *Ma* brings attention to one's emplacement always in-between, in the heterogeneity of designing, among the immaterial and the non-human where boundaries are deliberately made blurry. Thus, when considering readiness through *Ma*, it means a state of being in-between moments, spaces and dimensions. *Ma* resists any notions of 'stepping outside' as removal, detachment or discontinuation. Rather, being always in-between, 'entry' and readiness means further intimacy and engagement, bringing forth a heightened aliveness and complete saturation in the moment **Error! Reference source not found.** *Ma* brings awareness to the invisible forces and influences that shape everything in the flux and flow. Taken this way, it is harder to be secure in one's position or to 'fix' it in any way, when it is always shifting according to relational contexts and conditions. This fluidity, ambiguity (and the constant becoming of the situation, trajectory and the designer) feature strongly in my practice.

In summary, readiness informed by Zen Buddhism is the poise of 'entering' and crossing thresholds, such as space, time and relationships, in respectful ways to heighten one's full participation in transient, everyday encounters. Similarly, *Ma* activates a way of sensing punctuation – the invisible dimensions and absence that constitute our world – to emplace us always 'in-between' moments, spaces and dimensions.

#### 4.3 Building a Sovereign Relationship

My practice over the last four years has focused on working with Aboriginal people to contribute towards Indigenous Nations' self-determination and governance.<sup>3</sup> I am part of a design and media team at RMIT University and we have been collaborating with prominent Wiradjuri Elders, leaders and researchers to film conversations, expressions and cultural gatherings and to design media-rich systems and strategies of engagement to celebrate and practice Wiradjuri sovereignty. Such events assemble a variety of people including Elders, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in tertiary education, arts and cultural practice on Wiradjuri Country or 'off' Country in Melbourne.

The politics of this project are complex. For example, we use a contested term, 'sovereignty', through invitation by our Indigenous colleagues Larissa Behrendt and Mark McMillan and follow their pioneering work of transforming Australian society based upon recognising Indigenous people as sovereign [7]. Their work reframes colonial notions of sovereignty that emphasise

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<sup>3</sup> *Indigenous nationhood in the absence of recognition: Self-governance strategies and insights from three Aboriginal communities* is an Australian Research Council funded three-year project (2014-2017) that brought together three Aboriginal nations (Gunditjmarra from Victoria, Ngarrindjeri from South Australia and individuals and groups from the Wiradjuri in NSW) with Australian and international researchers from seven universities (<https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/our-research/jumbunna-institute-indigenous-education-and-research/our-3-0>).

state, authority and borders to premise Indigenous peoples as sovereign who have never ceded their land, rights and identity. This means any relationship in Australia is based upon recognising Indigenous sovereignty and respecting Indigenous laws, land, languages and cultural practices that have existed long prior to colonisation.

Re-framing sovereignty in this way is thus political and significant because it means building a sovereign relationship with Indigenous people. Being neither Australian nor Indigenous, I have learnt what this means by seeing my own sovereignty within my ontology – my Japanese language, customs and cultural heritage – and foregrounded this in building relationships with Indigenous people. For example, when a Ngarrindjeri Elder asks about ‘my mob’, which is a common Indigenous greeting to identify kinship and geographic ties to orientate connections, I respond to this question as a Japanese woman to introduce stories of my family, history of migration and ancestry. During formal ceremonies, I have often been welcomed as a Japanese person. Foregrounding my culture and who I am is thus central in this work – not just a designer researcher from ‘nowhere’.

Readiness here also features as poise – a composure to ‘enter’ and bring my whole-self to this relationship. This means to clear away (*mushin*) preconceptions and distractions of *kokoro* (body-spirit-mind) to being mindful of my own orientations, habits and reactions. This is an on-going effort. With every invitation to meet Wiradjuri people or visit their Country, I aim to ‘enter’ respectfully over a threshold, bringing my cultural sensitivities to the occasion. I declare the ‘Acknowledgement of Country’ before a public talk, to respect whose land I am on. To me, this acknowledgement and crossing thresholds is no different to my cultural rituals of entering a host’s home or a sacred place with respect, humility and reverence for the people, customs, materials, knowledge and non-human agents I encounter. As I reflected elsewhere; ‘When an Elder teaches me weaving as a practice of Indigenous sovereignty, my nimble fingers learning this technique evoke my grandmother’s hands that stitched kimono for all her children. When I am invited on their Country on field trips, interview or document their events; I am also emplaced. We sit by the foreshore of Murrumbidgee River enveloped in warm sunshine, feel the light river breeze and listen to the call of native birds. In my own way, I locate the feeling of connectedness to this country’ ([2]:227). I am not Indigenous, Australian or ‘white’, so my reference points to know how to be in a respectful sovereign relationship with Indigenous peoples come from a cultural practice of knowing from ‘within’ and learning to speak ‘nearby’ [11], instead of ‘for’ or ‘about’, to give partial accounts of our encounters. This has enabled me to work across difference, and as importantly, respect boundaries and exclusion where knowledge, practices and places are not open to ‘entry’.

#### 4.4 Readiness for turbulent futures

The project’s broader and collective aim of Indigenous self-determination and celebration of Wiradjuri sovereignty cannot be achieved as simply as aligning concerns in order to achieve political mobilization. The work is nested within Australia’s

colonial history of Indigenous cultural extinction and current government policies that do not recognise Indigenous sovereignty. It is politically fraught. The following text reveals the emotional turbulence that can arise from these cultural gatherings. It is quoted this way to reflect another layer of politics of writing about this collaborative work, to avoid speaking on behalf of my Indigenous partners and research colleagues [51] and to recognise the co-authors of the collaboration:

*Individuals are subject to personal inquiry and often made to prove or explain their aboriginality, invariably through ‘white’ constructs, to a ‘white’ audience (Heiss 2012). This is frequently an impediment to identifying and therefore gathering as a cultural group. Physical attributes, cultural knowledge and geographic location all become examined as measures of an Indigenous person’s compliance with the colonial construct of ‘the aboriginal.’ It is common for Indigenous people to feel the pressure of non-conformity to dominant ‘white’ notions of the authentic ‘aboriginal black’. Indigenous people themselves can also be influenced by these measures. For example, community members living a perceived notion of aboriginality on Country, strong cultural knowledge and direct familial connections can, at times, combine to create a position of power which can be used as a means of intimidation or exclusion of citizenship from less culturally aware citizens (Black 2011). These measures of ‘blackness’ are compliances to ‘white’ notions of what ‘blackness’ should be. This is not simply the execution of cultural knowledge or expertise, but rather the prosecution of ‘white’ measures by Indigenous people (Purcell 2002). These measures or frameworks are at times prosecuted by Indigenous people towards other Indigenous people. Knowledge or adherence to these frameworks can denote power in the holder. Indigenous people can engage in critiques of authentication, which can include claims that, ‘I’m more “community” than you.’ This notion of community as a combination of being on Country and in frequent direct contact with prominent cultural people, becomes a measure of power which is deployed as delegitimizing citizenship, and therefore as a means of knowing citizenship ([1]:9-10).*

This quote reveals how the trauma of colonialism is felt viscerally for many, impacting on how people identify as Indigenous. In designing mechanisms to engage, celebrate and practice Wiradjuri sovereignty, this is the on-going, invisible and significant condition of my PD work. This means my readiness is not about ‘good judgment’ and strategies of decision-making to act in new situations, emphasised in professional design ([34][46]). Readiness as punctuation, inflected by *Ma*, is a way for me to be sensitive to *absence*, attuning to *what is not* articulated explicitly or made visible. Someone’s hurt, fear, anger, frustration and confusion or tension in a group needs to be felt. I am constantly practicing to be ready to accept and accommodate such emotions. I sense these as gaps-in-between – pauses, glances, undertones and atmospheres – that can fall out of a conditioning in design that often highlights action, privileging explicit, vocal and visible expressions. It is precisely in these nuanced, silent moments that delicate relationships are forming or transforming.



Weaving became a key feature in many of these events. Led by Wiradjuri Elder and master weaver, Aunty Lorraine Tye and Linda Elliott, an artist and curator of Wagga Wagga Art Gallery ([52]:6), weaving and yarning provided cultural safety, healing and connecting for people to gather ‘both in the physical sense of collecting, making, working with traditional “yarns” and metaphorically in the ways of talking together as everyone worked with their hands and minds at the same time’. Moments of weaving were often enacted silently.

One could say that these moments are also ‘material’ that constitute relational and participatory designing, yet such liminal ambiguous in-betweens can be ignored or brushed over when there is pressure or eagerness for action, resolution and outcome, which are usually expected in design. Nonetheless, rhythm and flow is created relationally by the movement of the group and acting or not acting when the situation invites. This sensitizing often requires a shift from design that emphasizes analytical, selective, subject-centred awareness towards receptiveness to the in-betweens of dynamics, heightening my awareness of totality beyond the moment of an encounter.

#### 4.5 Analysis

This work requires long-term effort in enabling systemic, political and infrastructural mechanisms for change. For me, readiness is not called upon only when facilitating workshops, participating in a gathering or visiting a community. In fact, such activities, objects, spaces and encounters collapse into an on-going configuration ([5][9]) and *Ma* helps to emplace myself in-between each of these. As touched on earlier, Zen Buddhism’s teaching of *ichigo ichie* as readiness is to fully participate in transient experience. Seen this way, readiness takes place on multiple and continuous dimensions, from the *poise* of ‘entering’ relationships, respecting boundaries, crossing over thresholds, anticipating turbulence, appreciating moments of encounter as a heightened aliveness and complete saturation in our transient journey. *Punctuation* helps me to sense the immanent, incremental details of transformation that can be hidden by their very nature of being silent, intimate, layered, ephemeral, dispersed and serendipitous and intuited through feelings and bodily encounters in relation to other things and people **Error! Reference source not found.** Similarly, my positionality is shaped by the encounters, relationships and emotions of the research. Thus, it is not fixed, but created relationally, necessitating a practice of surrendering to emergence and serendipity, suspension of judgment and opening up to the kinds of relationships that I might create or change, as well as being changed by such relationships. This is a constant readying to being fully present.

*Ma* as between-ness is a way for me to foreground inter-relatedness and seek overlaps and common ground as a celebration of different sovereignties, rather than removing or hiding our backgrounds. Immersion in confronting and tempestuous issues requires a constant readiness to embrace uncertainty and discomfort to stimulate the discovery of the unknown that a more analytical, planned and predicted process would not. I cannot accompany Aboriginal people in the long,

contentious, societal transformation of Indigenous self-determination unless I make space for ‘entry’ for conflicting feelings, experiences and imaginings, and the awe and wonder of their Country to permeate my being. In doing so, I can further cultivate inter-relatedness to mutually explore connection to culture and the kinds of relationships we want to create in our journey forward.

#### 5 RICH CHARACTERISTICS OF READINESS

In the previous sections, we have described two fluid processes of engagement, showing how our readying worked to help us in our connecting, our being-with and being-present-to. Despite their differences, paying attention to others and the mood in the room is common to both accounts. Not acting is as important as acting. We cannot show how things might have run differently with other preparations because we are the sum of our practice, context and inspiration [32]. Readyng is not a skillset or range of methods. This is why, instead, we have shown how traditions and emphasis in accounts can differ. In some respects, our practices are closer than we have painted them here. The efforts we make to listen actively, to be receptive and cultivate trust in others are qualities we share in our practices. In both cases – in the analysis of a two-day event and the account of 4 years of collaboration – we take our practices of readiness seriously to help us encounter others and perform work together. We have used *punctuation* and *poise* as concepts to help us reveal this.

Heterogeneity of theories, philosophies and practices runs through these accounts because we are embedded in our research. We caution not to erase difference in favour of any replicable method, technique, technology and process that trends in PD research (or pitch our accounts against one another in dualistic generalizations, e.g. East vs West). It requires a reflexivity to bring the situation of ourselves as ‘knowers’ into an epistemic frame and critically interrogate the social relations within which we, as ‘knowers’, seek to know how knowledge is produced [38].

We have chosen accounts in which the durations differ and this difference in scale shows how such accounts may be given – with the granularity of facilitation or with greater meta-reflection. Beyond the constraints of writing a paper, our choices appear in our language, our orientation and degree of intervention reflecting our worlds. We are accounting ourselves as already implicated within a group of people who are cohering, articulating and addressing issues and their consequences. To us, *this is being ethical*, to tell what we can about the relationship between readyng and acting in our practice. At all costs, we are avoiding the presentation of an impersonal, a-cultural ‘designer’ and their methods. Our choices do not come from ‘nowhere’ [47].

We acknowledge that such personal and situated practices of readiness require a further level of abstraction to contribute to PD discourse. As designer-researchers, we are encouraged to engage in reflexive analysis by colleagues in anthropology and feminist theory to create critical, ethical and theoretically-informed work. The analysis here addresses this call. It does not present learning that can be directly reproduced, but contributes to a discussion of the role of reflexivity, by sharing reflection on personal practice

as insightfully as possible and showing the two of us in the process of making sense of what we have learnt. We offer this for others' scrutiny. In addition to our accounts of readying, drawn directly from this practice of reflecting, we have worked together over several years to identify further analytic constructs that can be construed broadly enough to describe both our practices and all our readying: punctuation and poise. These concepts offer a way for all of us to consider how we enter the orbit of others in PD.

### 5.1 Punctuation and Poise

Punctuation and poise are thus offered as intermediate knowledge objects that sit midway between broad level theory and specific instances. Like Höök and Löwgren's [21] 'strong concepts', we do not claim theoretical universality. Instead, we present readiness through punctuation and poise because these concepts are useful as analytic tools to give texture and rhythm to the broader argument of designer readiness. These concepts augment and contrast with notions of reflection-on-action [46] where we step out, pause, review and analyze work at a distance, as seen in a traditional design studio. The concepts are valuable because rhythms and granularities are different in collaborative designing, especially where the outcome is to be societal change rather than a material product. Such work is never less than embedded with the people with whom changes are to be found and made. With this distinction in mind, we offer a summary and definition of our terms to support the many possible approaches to readying for design in contingent, evolving and un-bounded conditions:

*Punctuation* in Ann's story is a change of gears, seen as 'tacking and weaving'. Finding rhythm can enable emergence of multiple perspectives, allowing one to compare paths, disrupt configurations, recognize hidden undercurrents, open new directions to reflection, or invite decision-making. Punctuation in Yoko's practice is an orientation towards absence, to sense the gaps-in-between flux and becoming, and bring forth a heightened aliveness in complete immersion and presence in the moment. Both see *punctuation as an attunement to working with and immersing in the flow, gaps and rhythms of changing*.

*Poise* for Ann is a point of composure on a path of creative spontaneity. It is an endless moment of balance and anticipation, when tools are at hand, options seem inviting, and constraints and opportunities settle into new formations for action. It appraises situations, including one's own and others' intentions, before choices are made. Poise for Yoko is a respect for thresholds: only to 'enter' into spaces, places and relationships with invitation. It is also sensitivity to existing structures and dynamics and a willingness to embrace turbulence and uncertainty. Here, *poise shares characteristics of self-awareness, of being emplaced, and a contemplation of how one is and acts*.

### 5.2 Design and Contingency

If we were simply to follow a plan, there would be no need for readiness – we would be ready as soon as we picked up our notes. But no one is automatically ready for contingent encounters and their variability. In valuing heterogeneity, we are abandoning the need to follow any dominant scripts dictating what PD practice

ought to be. We expect there to be off-plan forays and elements of uncertainty even where scripts are tight and expectations certain. While there may be broad vision and mission in all our design and research, shared and agreed upon by our partners, 'matters of concern' [5] such as the political motivations discussed in these accounts do not manifest neatly upon demand. The 'agonism' of factions in Ann's story, and a delicate process of healing in Yoko's, show how co-ordination and communication of agreed visions requires sensitivity and attunement. How these visions surface unscheduled (rubbing up, colliding with or falling out of cracks) indicates the politics of change. In other words, preparation is not limited to tasks *before* fieldwork (or community events or facilitated workshops). Rather, being ready is a state of dealing with contingency in participatory design as it happens.

The commitment made to partners, to communities, to public funding bodies and other stakeholders requires us to show care. In making our work public (as a requirement of funding or as a necessity for making social change), we expose everyone to potential scrutiny and criticism. The emphasis we give to preparation and readiness is precisely because the risks and stakes are very high. Stepping willingly into (and intervening in) these situations may make these projects precarious. The ethics of when and how to try and learn together about undercurrents, however painful, are no clearer than the procedure for enacting these discussions. Paying attention to our readying practices honours the uncertainty of these encounters while offering the best chance of a mutually beneficial outcome. Our blending of the personal and the theoretical includes efforts (at making space) to accommodate the unknown and the unpredictable because the pathway as well as the impact of design is impossible to anticipate before embarking, especially when designing in highly-charged and political contexts.

## 6 CONCLUSION

At a time when reporting in PD is emphasizing technology and methods for making it, we have re-directed the focus towards how design researchers ready themselves for the kinds of encounters where conflicting realities, cultural norms and interests complicate the work. We discuss what can be learnt by turning our gaze upon practice, readiness and reflexivity. We offer two concepts – punctuation and poise – to catch something of the rhythm of how we participate in collaborative activities. We have shown how these terms can be useful in nuancing accounts of our experience. Drawing on our cultural, philosophical and, thus, epistemological traditions, we speak of phenomena that can only be experienced directly and, in one case, translating the untranslatable by writing Japanese notions in English. Writing in this way recognizes our designing as a phenomenon of the cultures in which it occurs and situates the designer more responsibly and responsively, not only 'somewhere' [48], but firmly in the room with others.

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