Game Narrative Review

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Your name (one name, please): Ellen Heitmann
Your school: DigiPen Institute of Technology
Your email: ellen.heitmann@digipen.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: December 2022
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Game Title: *Xenoblade Chronicles*
Platform: Nintendo Wii
Genre: JRPG
Release Date: June 10th, 2010
Developer: Monolith Soft
Publisher: Nintendo
Game Writer/**Creative Director**/**Narrative Designer:** Tetsuya Takahashi

Overview

It takes a single glance to see what *Xenoblade Chronicles* is about. Both the cover and title screen feature nothing but a red sword stuck in the grass. This sword, the Monado, is the driving force for the story's entirety.

The world is made up of nothing but two giant titans, the Bionis and the Mechonis. While long dead by the time of the game's events, the titans were previously locked in combat, which now extends to the life that has sprung up on their bodies. The Homs of the Bionis and the Mechon of the Mechonis fall further and further into a cycle of hatred with each battle, as they continue to fear each other and fail to understand each other.

> "Fear robs us of reason. Out of fear we commit terrible atrocities
> and call them acts of self-preservation."
>
> "Fear gives rise to more fear. A never-ending circle of hatred."

The player follows Shulk, the next Homs to live up to the cycle of fear portrayed by these quotes. After a terrifying experience of watching his closest friend get killed by a Mechon, he picks up the Monado with the goal of wiping out them all. The Monado is the only weapon that is effective against Mechon, making it a necessity in battle. It also enables Shulk to glimpse sudden and random visions of the future which guide his path.

 It is only revealed near the end of the game that the Monado is inhabited by Zanza, a god who used the sword to initiate the war and manipulates its wielders to continue it. As

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more is disclosed, the world's true nature emerges. The familiar becomes different, while the different becomes familiar. Everything is an orchestration, and you are the one who's been set up.

Characters

As a game with over ten hours of cutscenes, six major towns, seven playable characters, and four hundred side quests, *Xenoblade Chronicles* has an enormous cast. This section will focus on in-depth examinations of the characters who are the most important in the context of this analysis as opposed to brief profiles of everyone. Characters not included may still be important plotwise and likely tie in thematically.

Those Bound by the Monado - The most central characters to the narrative who are connected by their relation to the Monado.

- **Shulk -** The protagonist. He is a kind and shy eighteen-year-old boy born in a Bionis colony who loves to tinker with machinery. He is the only person capable of using the Monado, which makes him susceptible to Zanza's influence. Zanza ends up like a parasite to Shulk, as he uses the Monado to influence a lot of Shulk's thoughts. However, Shulk is completely unaware of Zanza's existence, mistaking the darker thoughts Zanza gives him for his own intuition and being easily guided by the visions the Monado shows him. As a result, Shulk ends up being manipulated into seeking revenge against the Mechonis despite his usually warm and unthreatening nature.
    - **Fear of the future:** Shulk's visions give him extreme anxiety. He spends so much time worrying about what will happen in the future that he fails to enjoy the present. While he can see the future, he cannot always change it. Any failures eat away at him, and he has trouble talking about his visions with others.

> Shulk
> *"It doesn't work like that. Some things I can't see. Even if I do see someone dying, I might not be able to stop it. I couldn't stop what happened to Fiora."*

- **Zanza -** The primary antagonist and creator of both the Bionis and all Bionis life. He is arrogant, having little regard for the lives he created and talking with an extreme air of condescension. However, this attitude was not always present, as he was shown to have upheld peace and harmony with both the Mechonis and his own people in the distant past.
    - **Fear:** Zanza's status as a god does not make him all-powerful. His existence will eventually fade away if the life he creates is not returned to the Bionis upon death. The previous harmony put himself at risk, as

people evolved past wanting to stay on their birth titan due to good relations with the other one.
  - **Control:** Zanza feared this fate and began to rely on the Monado in order to guarantee his existence. Its ability to visualize the future enabled him to influence and therefore control what would happen, while its effectiveness against Mechonis gave him a shot at wiping out the other titan entirely. However, he failed to defeat the Mechonis and was sealed away. Useless on his own, Zanza used the Monado to manipulate Shulk into freeing himself from confinement and helping him fight Mechonis.

Zanza
"It is from me that all life is born. It lives only for me. And it shall be returned!"

- **Klaus -** An ambitious scientist with little regard for danger. Klaus existed well before the events of the game in a previous universe where people still lived on Earth. He sought the advancement of humanity and conducted a grand experiment. This experiment destroyed the world and then recreated it, therefore building the universe of the Bionis and the Mechonis. In this new world, Klaus was reborn as Zanza while the processor used to carry out the experiment became the Monado.

Klaus
"Ridiculous. It's perfectly safe. We are about to bear witness to the birth of a universe. Once, only a god could perform such a miracle. But today, mankind moves one step closer to the divine!"

Beings of the Bionis - Playable characters who grew up on the Bionis.
- **Fiora -** A caring and playful childhood friend of Shulk. She is a fast friend to those around her and has no trouble reading people's personalities. Fiora was "killed" by a Mechon at the beginning of the game, serving as the core motivation for the other characters to seek revenge. However, rather than actually dying, she ended up being transformed into a Mechon, and eventually rejoins the main cast as a playable character.
  - **Fear of being different:** Fiora fears being looked at differently because of her Mechon body. She grew up in an environment where everyone hated the Mechon and Mechonis, and wonders if she would be better off not returning.
  - **Fear of death:** In addition, her mechanical body has limited energy. She knows that she could die any day, and refuses to rest or seek treatment in case she were to die alone while the other characters are still fighting. It

puts her in an extremely difficult position where she simultaneously feels isolated from others and forced to connect with them while she still has time.

> Fiora
> *"I couldn't bear to be alone. What if I leave everyone to go and rest and… something happens? This might be my last chance to be with you all. I'm scared."*

- **Melia -** The crown princess of the High Entia, an ancient race that lives in an empire atop the Bionis. Melia speaks extremely properly compared to the other characters, sporting a fancy vocabulary and posh attitude. This demeanor is mostly due to her upbringing, as she is a sweet, strong, and fun-loving girl at heart.
  - **Fear of prejudice:** While Melia is the princess of the High Entia, she is actually half Homs. As a result, many other High Entia look down on her and believe her unfit to ascend the throne. She initially wears a mask and fully covers her body whenever in public to avoid these comments.

> Melia
> *"If I am to lead the High Entia despite my mixed heritage… If I am to succeed the throne, then I accept what must be done."*

- **Riki -** Riki is the only non-humanoid playable character, being part of a race of round fuzzy creatures known as the Nopon. He is highly energetic and bubbly, often talking about how he was chosen by his village to become a legendary hero. Nopon dialect is also unique, leading Riki to speak in the third person and have broken grammar. Looks can be deceiving though, as Riki is actually forty years old with a wife and many children. He has an incredibly wise side to him, offering comfort and advice to others in a way no one else can.
  - **Innocence:** While Riki is different from the others in not having a major fear, he offers a completely unique perspective. The Nopon race all live on the back of the Bionis, meaning they are away from the world's conflicts and never really see the Mechonis. As a result, Riki ends up being the happiest and most unbiased of the cast, speaking to and viewing everyone equally.

> Riki
> *"When Mechon attack colonies, Riki and villagers know nothing. Just sit in village pon pon ponning about like normal day!"*

Beings of the Mechonis - Characters who grew up on the Mechonis.
- **Egil -** The self-proclaimed leader of Mechonis. He has been alive for several thousands of years, having witnessed the titans' war firsthand. He is resolute and stubborn, insisting that he must destroy the Bionis in order to guarantee the safety and prosperity of his people and refusing to hear any opposing beliefs. He has no remaining followers and stands within the Mechonis capital hoping to restore it to its former glory alone.
    - **Foil to Protagonist -** Egil is essentially a Mechonis version of Shulk. Both characters start off as calm and caring yet become incredibly vengeful after events regarding the opposing titan. They experience the same suffering and motive, but Egil is alone while Shulk has support.

> Egil
> *"Life or death, I care for neither of these. The agonized cries of our brethren resound within my ears. Until they are silenced, I am deaf to all else."*

Breakdown

Meta-Narrative

While presenting as a tale of revenge on the surface, *Xenoblade Chronicles* is an allegory for overcoming fear of the unknown. The story is built upon illusions, constantly tricking the player and characters into viewing things a specific way just to eventually shatter that exact perspective into a new and more open-minded one. The game's conflicts are resolved through learning to embrace the different and unfamiliar rather than being ruled by fear or prejudice. This analysis will focus on interpreting the game's narrative in the context of this theme.

Framing a Perspective

Characters from the Bionis deliver the first few lines of the game, stating that the Bionis is "under attack" from "soulless machines" known as the Mechon. The perspective here is important, as this version of the story is not fact, but rather the way the people of Bionis view things. They antagonize the Mechonis and see it as a danger, which is reflected in the game's level design. The starting region of the game is at the bottom of the Bionis, meaning the Mechonis towers over it, with its menacing figure viewable from anywhere.

The protagonist, Shulk, only speaks of this view in a scene where he curls a fist at it and comments that it is "*our* enemy," further influencing the player to view it negatively. In

addition, the Monado being the only weapon that can hurt the Mechon applies to the game's combat system, making them a significantly larger threat than other enemies. All of these elements in the story, characterization, world design, and combat combine to immediately teach the player to fear the Mechonis, while the looming imagery of it remains in the following levels as a constant reinforcement of this perspective.

The Monado is again at the center of this conflict, as having the protagonist's main unremovable weapon be one specifically designed for killing Mechon makes it almost impossible to see them as anything above enemies. However, the perspective towards Mechon is far from the only thing the Monado influences.

Visions and Character Conflicts

The Monado's future visions may initially appear as a pure blessing, as they could theoretically prevent all danger. However, *Xenoblade Chronicles* focuses more on the burden and stress they provide than the benefits. Visions constantly create an environment where Shulk is forced to view futures where the worst-case scenario will happen. They appear every time someone is going to die, giving Shulk the responsibility to prevent it.

The reason visions are stressful is the way they play with both the known and the unknown. Shulk does not know what will happen if he does try to help, but he knows what will happen if he fails to. As a result, he fixates on the possibilities, unable to tell if his efforts will be worth something or if he is going to let another person die trying. He is consumed by fear of the unknown.

The stress of visions extends to the gameplay, creating ludonarrative harmony. Any time a playable character is going to die in gameplay, a vision will appear first showing what will kill them and when. Players can have as few as eight seconds before a vision comes true and stopping them typically requires the use of resources that will need to be charged up. It is also possible to change a vision for the worse, as players could make a strong attack go from targeting a defensive character to targeting a fragile character.

The audio design ties all of these elements together, as changing a vision triggers a different battle song. While players may initially expect an exciting or triumphant piece upon changing the future, the song is stressful. Its uneven melody and off-key notes make the player feel as though they are losing. It is through the design of visions that the player is able to feel the way Shulk does and experience his conflict, as visions fully convey the fear that comes with an uncertain future. However, Shulk's fears are only the tip of the iceberg.

Each playable character has a different premise that ties into fear of the unknown, whether they be the one in fear or the victim of someone else's fear. Shulk fixates on the future and fears its negative possibilities, while Melia and Fiora fear being targeted and looked down on for their differences.

Riki remains the exception, as his home being on the back of the Bionis allowed him to live separated from the world's conflicts and therefore be at peace. The fact that Riki's perspective was possible further establishes that it is not the world itself that is inherently flawed, but how Zanza and the Monado influenced its people to view it. It is only those impacted by Zanza and the Monado who hold the perspective of Mechonis being evil, but that makes up the vast majority of the population.

Breaking a Perspective

With such a negative perspective established towards the Mechonis, *Xenoblade Chronicles* needed to take many steps to make players empathize with it. It achieves this feat through a structure that first familiarizes the player with the titan before putting them directly in the shoes of the Mechon. Immediately upon arriving, the characters fall to the very bottom of the Mechonis and end up needing to climb back up.

While inconvenient, this setup makes the titan feel subconsciously familiar to the player, as it directly parallels how progression on Bionis worked. With both titans, the player starts in a peacefully tucked-away colony at the bottom of the titan before needing to ascend to the head. The Mechonis village also marks the first time the player gets to normally interact with the titan's people which has a big impact on humanizing them, as they all have real personalities, schedules, and quests similar to those of Bionis.

The Mechonis Capital is where the player learns that the Bionis was the initiator of the war. A cutscene allows the player to watch the original assault on Mechonis, which is framed in a way that creates intentional parallels. The player had constantly seen Mechon drop from the sky and invade the Bionis, but now they see mythical beasts from the Bionis descend from the sky to attack Mechonis. Similar camera angles are used to match these similar approaches, which is done to promote further subconscious empathy in the player. While this reveal already shatters countless past conceptions, the gameplay in this segment is what truly makes it impactful.

The capital is a unique level in that it is the only town with no residents. The entire place is completely destroyed and overrun with enemies, making it dangerous to navigate, which the game plays with by putting many objectives throughout it. This level shatters

the player's expectations, as the Bionis equivalent area would be the High Entia empire, a beautiful and regal city full of life with unmatched safety systems. The sound design for the capital has a lot of symbolism as well, as it breaks past conventions of the game. Regional music for the Mechonis areas typically consists of primarily band instruments, while Bionis regions typically opt for strings and orchestra music. The Mechonis' capital is the exception, as it uses strings. This instrumental choice is symbolic of the fact that the capital has lost its identity, now serving only as a reminder of what the Bionis did to it. All of these design choices allow the player to reach a state of empathy on their own without dialogue needing to force it, making the story significantly more believable.

Shulk makes peace with Egil, the Mechonis leader, which is important because of how it is achieved. The two do not forgive each other, which is done to cement that the story is not actually a statement about revenge or anger. Rather, Shulk and Egil realize that they are the same and that fighting is pointless. Both shared motivations in their actions against the other titan, with their differences only being in presentation. This conclusion allows the characters to overcome fear of the unknown in the context of other people, as once others are given a chance, it is easy to realize that they are not so dissimilar or scary. It is a message against prejudice and the true theme of the story.

Zanza - Symbolism, Ties, and Structure

With his manipulation finally overcome, Zanza then comes to light as the actual antagonist, which is important because it forces the player to view the entire game from a new perspective. Zanza had resided inside the Monado manipulating Shulk since the beginning of the story, meaning that his impact can be seen everywhere once given the context. However, the game does not go through flashbacks or explain any specific instances of what he has been doing, leaving it up to the player to find and interpret.

A core example of this idea is a conversation from all the way back in the opening hours of the game. Shulk states that "in {his} head, there are two versions of {him}," one of them saying to stay back and ensure his safety, and the other saying with increasing volume to destroy every single Mechon. This line initially comes off as a simple desire for revenge, but further context heavily implies that the louder voice is Zanza.

The significance of this structure is that Zanza manages to function as a direct symbol for fear of the unknown. Each instance of it in the story can be traced back to him in some way, and his existence is unknown to both the player and the characters until they overcome that fear.

Reversal of the Known and Unknown

Zanza reawakens the Bionis upon returning, impacting the world in a way that lets the gameplay paint the rest of the picture. Mechonis is destroyed and removed from the map, while the High Entia race is transformed into mythical beasts called Telethia.

The importance of these changes is that they turn the known into the unknown. The Bionis was the home titan that the player spent hours exploring and the main characters grew up on, but now those same areas on it are dangerous and unfamiliar. The Mechonis scenery that used to reinforce hatred is now a tragic reminder of a fallen ally. The High Entia empire that used to be a super safe base of operations is now a haunting endgame dungeon. Enemies no longer consist of machines, but of Telethia and otherworldly beasts. The Bionis spiritually succeeds the past role of the Mechonis as a new icon of the unknown, letting the player directly live in the Mechons' old perspective.

The world's changes, while already impactful from a physical perspective, are extremely significant symbolically. The player has just overcome their skewed perspectives about the world and learned to understand Zanza's impact on it, and the changes that follow reflect the world's unbiased nature. Zanza was driven into fear by the limitations of his power, so naturally, the world he created ended up being a reflection of that fear. It led to eons of prejudice, pain, hatred, misunderstandings, and terror, and in its most raw and exposed form, it is a dangerous place refusing to permit the life of anything other than Zanza and the Monado itself.

Characterization as a Thematic Symbol

While Zanza fully encompasses the idea of fear of the unknown, the playable characters encompass the beauty of accepting differences and uncertainty.

With Zanza turning the High Entia into Telethia, Melia learns that her status as a half-blood High Entia will prevent her from transforming. While initially frowned upon, her differences eventually make her the hope for her people. With Fiora having a Mechon body, she ends up being the first to understand and communicate with people from Mechonis openly. Her differences gave her a new perspective that promoted peace and eventually extended to the rest of the characters for a better world overall. With Shulk having been mentally exhausted from seeing and fixating on the future, he begins to understand the joy of just living life as it comes and appreciating its surprises.

The Significance of Perspective

The most impactful part of this characterization from a thematic standpoint is the way that nothing physical about the characters needed to change in order for their progressions to occur. Their conflicts are rather resolved by looking at things differently. Shulk's visions, Melia's half blood-status, and Fiora's Mechon body all end up being either their greatest strength or teaching them more about the world once they overcome their negative feelings. In other words, it is all about perspective.

Perspective is the central motif used by *Xenoblade Chronicles* to convey fear of the unknown, which pairs well with the game's use of illusions. Learning to fear different people or unfamiliar things about the world creates the illusion that they are bad, as shown by the Mechonis and the character conflicts. However, these illusions are again just a matter of perspective, as the different and unfamiliar elements always have a positive side that can be seen as soon as fear is overcome.

The game's final beat fully encapsulates this motif, as Shulk states "{he doesn't} know what the future holds. But that means {he} can imagine the possibilities." This exact line could have been used earlier in the game as a negative or stressful statement, but a different perspective allowed it to become an exciting positive.

Strongest Element

The use of the ludonarrative to convey perspective in *Xenoblade Chronicles* is undoubtedly its greatest strength. The level design, combat system, and music are all used masterfully to frame the story in meaningful ways that allow the player to experience and overcome the game's conflicts at the same pace as the characters.

As discussed in the breakdown, the way the Mechonis, Shulk's visions, and the late-game Bionis in particular are portrayed makes them a lot more significant. It is through experiences like these that the player is able to feel and align with the different characters' perspectives, which elevates the story to a more personal level. In addition, this approach makes the game's many plot twists more impactful, as personal interpretations by the player are often proven to have been traps.

Zanza's reveal is central to this idea, as once again, it forces the player to accept that their entire experience thus far was a setup. The decision to not explain the specific instances of Zanza's impact then gives the player the agency to develop their own unique perspective of the story. The entire game used its ludonarrative to frame the player's view towards its illusions, and then the player gets the chance to apply what they have learned and form their own opinion of what was actually going on. This idea enhances the themes, as it is through overcoming fear of the unknown as represented by Zanza that not only the characters and titans but the entire story can be seen for what it truly is.

Unsuccessful Element

While having one of the strongest premises of the main cast, Fiora's character falls flat on execution. Her story of becoming a Mechon and dealing with both being looked at differently and the idea that she could die at any time makes for an incredibly thematically potent setup, but the game instead focuses on her relationship with Shulk.

Even when Fiora brings up fearing her impending death, it is normally in the context of saying she wants to live to "be with Shulk just a little bit longer." Her dependency on Shulk makes her underwhelming as a female lead, especially considering the fact that the game already opened with her being fridged.

Lastly, the conclusion to her arc can be seen as contradictory to the game's core themes without additional context later provided in an art book.

The ending cutscene takes place in a time skip after the events of the final boss where Fiora is shown to have gotten her Homs body back. This resolution can appear contradictory considering the game has continually encouraged characters to embrace their differences and she just reverts back to how she was before instead. However, *Xenoblade: The Secret File - Monado Archives*, the aforementioned art book, has a short story explaining that her body was restored by crossing over the technology between Bionis and Mechonis people. This context allows her conclusion to fit perfectly from a thematic standpoint, but it again is not mentioned in the actual game.

Highlight

The highlight of *Xenoblade Chronicles* lies in its final boss sequence. Since Zanza has been tied to all of the game's conflicts, the final battle against him is personal for every playable character. It introduces new and meaningful elements to the gameplay and audio that represent their growth throughout the story. While this alone already makes the battle significant, the atmosphere and following reveal allow the game to end with a strong message on the real-world significance of its prejudice-based conflicts.

First of all, the fight takes place in space, which has previously only been seen in dreams and flashbacks. Upon approaching Zanza, the player walks past Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, and the moon. This atmosphere sets up a mystery, as the characters do not know what the solar system is and the player does not yet know the context of it. It implies the game has a deeper connection to the real world, giving players room to contemplate before and during the upcoming fight.

The fight itself is unique from every other battle in the game in a few ways. First, visions are fundamentally altered. They do not appear randomly but require a quick time event to

see. In other words, visions are optional for the first and only time in the game. As Shulk states, "what's important isn't whether you can see the future or not," but the perspective you approach it with and the choices you make.

The change in visions is symbolic of Shulk overcoming his anxiety now that he has stopped fixating on them, which is expanded on by this encounter also being the only one where the stressful vision music does not play. No matter how many times the future is changed, the music goes uninterrupted. Lastly, Zanza is the only boss encounter in the game with a fully unique song, which helps drive home Zanza's uniqueness thematically. While the different types of people you fight throughout the game are all similar enough once fear is overcome, Zanza is the exception, as he is an icon for that fear.

Upon defeating Zanza, Klaus's experiment is revealed, which is the payoff for the galactic set piece as well as a key factor in establishing the game's real-world significance. Zanza, the character who ends up being the catalyst for all prejudice and fear in a world that initially didn't have it, is revealed to be from earth. This ending can be interpreted as a commentary on how xenophobia is not a part of human nature but rather an unnecessary issue learned from bad influences and close-minded perspectives.

Critical Reception

IGN - 9/10
Keza MacDonald states that *Xenoblade Chronicles* is "one of the freshest and most innovative Japanese RPGs of the past decade." She says the game has tons of imagination put into its monster and environment design and that it is full of "thoughtful little touches that make it such a pleasure to play." Her final verdict is that it is "proof that there are always new ways to tell a story," with its main drawback being technical limitations.

RPGamer - 5/5
Alex Fuller comments that the story is "exceptionally well told and superbly paced, always building upon motivations and previous events." He praises the environment and character designs, while his main complaint lies with lip sync issues during cutscenes. Overall, he believes it is "up there with the best of the console generation as a whole."

EGM - 3/5
Andrew Fitch had a less positive reaction to the game due to "frustratingly dense party AI," "inventory management" being "a mess," and other gameplay issues. He had a dislike for some of the "MMO-style" aspects of the game, which lowered his enjoyment despite believing the narrative has "improved by leaps and bounds since the days of *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga*." He overall states that the game is "a deeply flawed epic that still deserves a look from all role-playing fans."

Lessons

Ludonarrative can be used to heavily influence a player's perspective
While cutscenes and text can tell a compelling story, effective use of a game's ludonarrative can expand upon how the player actually perceives the story in a variety of ways. It can make twists more shocking or make sudden changes more believable while also helping the player identify more with the story as a whole.

Surface-level conflicts can make an underlying main conflict more interesting
Hiding the main conflict behind other conflicts can increase its impact as players will discover that the story has more to it than they originally anticipated. The presentation and sense of discovery can add a new layer of meaning and memorability to something that is otherwise less significant.

Music and clever sound design can tell a story
While often used for establishing tone or just to be enjoyable to listen to, music can be an effective storytelling method even without lyrics. Different types of instruments can be used symbolically while the timing of certain mood-shifting pieces can work as a psychological metacommentary on how characters feel.

Allowing players the chance to make their own conclusions can increase both long-term story impact and game replay value
Not explaining every last detail, especially in the context of plot twists, can increase long-term enjoyment by encouraging meaningful repeat playthroughs. Players can find lines that they originally interpreted one way to have a whole new meaning upon knowing the full context of the plot, which gives a sense of discovery and satisfaction.

Summation

Xenoblade Chronicles conveys a powerful message about fear of the unknown and the negative impact it can have on one's mentality towards their life, themself, and others. It uses clever framing to influence the player into first falling into and then overcoming negative perspectives, painting an overall positive message about acceptance and the joy of life's nuances. It is worthy of analysis for how well it combines a plethora of narrative tools in its world design, audio design, combat mechanics, and layered dialogue to truly make the player *feel* the weight of its story and themes. It was through this game's narrative that I was able to improve my own perspective of both the future and life itself, taking each day as it comes and finding happiness in the little things.

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