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Found Media:

Interactivity and Community in Online Horror Media

by

Jax Mello

A Thesis

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For the Master of Arts in English

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Student Signature: _____*(signature: Jex Mello)*_____

Thesis Title: Found Media: Interactivity and Community in Online Horror Media

Thesis Advisor's Signature: _____

MA Coordinator's Signature: _____

Being isolated is a common fear. The fear can take many forms, from the fear of being the last one alive in a horrific situation to being completely deserted by everyone you love. This is a fear that has been showcased many different times in movies, novels, and every other piece of media imaginable. Although not always tied to the horror genre, the fear of being isolated is tightly intertwined with many horror stories. Therefore, it is interesting when a horror production goes out of their way to encourage interactivity within its audience. This goes beyond an artist's desire for a creation to have a raving fanbase behind it, which is typically generated through external means from the narrative itself. Instead, there is an as-yet-unaccounted-for subgenre of horror that integrates Found Footage techniques with the specific goal of eliciting interactivity within the audience. I call this subgenre "Found Media." The subgenre's production of interactivity within its audience allows for something rather counterintuitive to the horror genre—the allowance of hope and community in the face of the terrifying events.

Found Media is not necessarily a new concept, as much as it is an as-yet-unnamed genre. A predecessor to Found Media could include epistolary novels. These stories, which take place entirely through letters, ask the reader to understand what they are reading as being a character within the story's point of view. Whether they succeed at achieving this closeness from the reader, depends on audience and the text itself. However, the invitation of a small level of interactivity between the text and the audience is what is important. The story asks the reader to understand the story much more specifically, which, in theory, could incite a deeper connection to the text. Some of the fundamental horror novels operate through the epistolary format, such as *Dracula*. This shows that not this technique for narrating horror is not only a long-standing tradition, but something that has been developed as new forms of media were created. Thus, the epistolary novel is a key predecessor for the techniques that define Found Media.

Found Media relies heavily on an understanding of the Found Footage technique, both in the production of the film as well as aesthetic. Many scholars have already worked to understand the nuances around how Found Footage's style. By looking at their definitions and combining them, we can identify some of the rules of Found Footage. For example, Cecila Sayad defines Found Footage as "display[ing] the raw cutting, elliptical narrative, and grainy, shaky, and precariously framed images that mimic the style of amateur filmmaking, the images are usually introduced by title cards stating that the work we see complies footage shot by characters that have either died or disappeared" (43-44). Neil McRobert places importance on the perceived realism of the project, stating that it "strives to replicate the aesthetic of non-fictional recording in order to heighten the impression of realism" (138). Both of these definitions put great importance on the filming techniques as being definitive of Found Footage. In fact, scholars such as Xavier Reyes contend that "'Found Footage' needs to be understood as a framing or narrative technique marking the product at a stylistic, but not thematic, level" (124). Here, Reyes stresses the difference between the *theme* being Found Footage and the *technique* of the camera being Found Footage. The plot is not revolved around the fact that it is Found Footage, necessarily, but the story is told through the technical guise of amateur.

Found Footage thus relies on four main components. First, notably, Found Footage is a film. Although a textual piece is mentioned in a title card at the beginning of the production, the entirety of the project is film-based. Second, it is meant to have the guise of reality. This is done through the technical aspects of the film: how it is shot and who is doing the shooting. Third, the characters within the film are dead or disappeared. Forth, the person or people who found the footage, aside from the title card at the beginning, are not a part of the story. Now of course there are slight exceptions to this rule, say in Lee and Prowse's 2013 movie *Afflicted* where the camera

techniques are more well shot and the main character does not end up dead or disappeared, ostensibly at least. However, these are rules generally hold for the genre and the techniques on which it relies.

The Found Footage technique began much more recently than some might assume. Sayad, and many other scholars, generally trace it back to the 1985 movie *Cannibal Holocaust* (44). While maybe not the actual first in all of cinema, *Cannibal Holocaust* was highly notable because of the controversial press that accompanied the film. Unlike many Found Footage films that came after, *Cannibal Holocaust* made it a point to attempt to convince the audience going into it that the movie was fully real. While many of the animal and human deaths within the film actually were real, it was also largely staged. Thus, the film forced the audience to reckon with the distinction between the fictional narrative and the reality for the non-actors within the film (Anderson 112). *Cannibal Holocaust* marks one of the first films to knowingly use the Found Footage technique. It paved the way to a much more popular, if not infamous, 1999 movie that is often thought to be the first, *The Blair Witch Project.* This film took the Found Footage concept out of fictional world into our own reality. The director not only marketed the movie as a real distribution of Found Footage of a group of college students but went to the trouble of having the actors go into hiding to give off the illusion that they were actually dead (Unfiction). This set a new precedent within the horror community and from that point forward a boom in films with the Found Footage technique started to be released. Popular films using this technique include the *Paranormal Activity* films (Orn Peli, 2007; Tod "Kip" Williams, 2010; Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2011 and 2012; Christopher B. Landon, 2014; Gregory Plotkin, 2015), *REC* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Apollo 18* (Gonzalo López-Gallego, 2011), *V/H/S* and *V/H/S 2* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, David Bruckner, Tyler Gillet et al.,

2012; Simon Barret, Jason Eisener, Gareth Evans et al., 2013), and *Creep* (Patrick Kack-Brice, 2014). These are just a few of some of the more popular titles that fall under the under the Found Footage category. Importantly all of these films, all follow the rules outlined beforehand about what Found Footage needs to be. Yet Found Footage is not only found in horror films; in fact, it has permeated other media platforms, which develop new styles and approaches to the subgenre.

Found Media

The main difference between Found Footage and Found Media, beyond the expansion of the material which is being found, is the protagonists' active role as an audience to the media as well as the media itself being created with the intent to connect the audience together. Unlike *Paranormal Activity* and *The Blair Witch Project*, wherein the characters themselves are not discovering the material but instead creating it, Found Media encourages an active player role of the protagonist. Commonly, the protagonist will play a guiding role into how the audience is meant to interact with the media. In many cases they are documenting and commenting on their findings in the same way the audience might be. This changes the format from a passive mystery, as the audience is meant to watch something in which they cannot stop and already know the worst has happened. As the protagonist, the audience becomes an active part of the mystery through investigation while still remaining external. In the latter case, there is a necessity for survival, at least in some capacity. It is an ongoing hope that is markedly different than the narratives the genre initially created. Hope, in many ways, might be considered counter intuitive to what the horror genre is about. But instead, it shifts the tone from a horror that is mainly dread to a horror that encourages hope and triumph at the other side. This shift, in addition to the highly interactive nature of Found Media, encourages the audience to investigate with and hope for the protagonist in a way that Found Footage has historically not.

Found Footage has been a technique used to create a sense of both familiarity and deep fear. The camera allows the audience to become a part of the scene, interacting with the characters in the story in a more tangible way. Found Media expands on the ways that the narrative is allowed to interact with its audience and therefore creates a more dynamic interaction. Why does this interaction matter? Because the groups that form around it are encouraged to become much more attached and dedicated to the narrative. On top of this, Found Media allows for a viewer within the content itself. The protagonist of the following Found Media projects are actively finding and watching/reading the material that classifies them as Found Media. The finding is ongoing. By paying attention to this shift in a horror technique, I contend that horror narratives exemplify a broader progression from solitary stories and toward group experiences made possible through new media.

The first project we will be looking at is a YouTube series named *Marble Hornets*. The second is the podcast *The Magnus Archives*. Both of these projects use important aspects of the Found Footage genre while creating new rules based on the mediums they are in. Both are highly popular within the communities that they gear themselves towards. Their representations of Found Media are in many ways very different from each other. The media choice, for example, sets them apart as well as how they chose to interact with their audience. However, they each use a few key techniques to produce the level of interactivity that defines and distinguishes Found Media. Their use of justification, participation, seriality, and mediation asks the audience to engage with the material through interaction with each other and the narrative itself.

ARGs Transition into Found Media: The *Marble Hornets* Story

Marble Hornets is a part, if not one of the defining projects, of the Found Media genre. *Marble Hornets* is an internet-based web series that took place from 2009 to 2014. The series is

based on the internet created monster called Slender Man. Its creation came merely 10 days after the original mythos of the Slender Man was created on the website SomethingAwful's forums. *Marble Hornets*, along with many other creators, were vital in the spread of the monster's mythos. Based around the idea of a group-made monster, Slender Man became like a kind of folklore story passed down and added to by different people to create the ultimate narrative. *Marble Hornets* production date being so closely tied with the beginning of the creation, on top of the popularity that the series created with 91 million views on their primary YouTube channel, shows the shaping of the monster into what we understand it as today.

The initial setup is outlined easily in the first YouTube video, which reflects the original text that the creator Troy Wagner posted in the SomethingAwful forums. The video, comprised of footage of the outdoors taken from the inside of a car and occasional text, introduces us to the information that the series will base itself on. This, however, is not the only medium in which the series takes place. Although appearing primarily on the YouTube account "Marble Hornets", the project also has a secondary YouTube account "Totheark" and a *Marble Hornets* Twitter account. Through these three means of communication, the story is told and, to different extents, able to be contributed by the audience.

The primary YouTube channel, started by the character Jay, is where all of the main uploads are placed. At the same time, Jay is also in contact with the audience via his Twitter. While it is not exactly necessary to read alongside the videos on the channel, they do provide more context into the length of time between uploads and Jay's mental state throughout the course of the five-year project. As the project takes place in real time, the Twitter is helpful at illuminating the downtime between uploads. The "TotheArk" channel is perhaps the most interesting, as they are videos directed to Jay from a mysterious group of people. They also

provide cryptograms for Jay and the audience to solve. Unlike the Twitter account, this channel is also required to understand the full plot of the series as it goes on as it provides key insight on the antagonists' intentions.

       Marble Hornets is notably one of the first in a series on YouTube to be a part of the Unfiction framework. Unfiction, as defined by Nick Nocturne, is "a form of fictional storytelling that utilizes varying measures of interaction immersion, or multimedia delivery beyond traditional bounds of the mediums used to conduct an experience under the roleplaying premise, 'this is (not) a game'" (Unfiction, 2020). This is part of a larger term called Alternate Reality Games (ARG). Burcu Bakioglu defines this as "are immersive games that blur the lines between reality and fiction by conveying a hybrid gaming experience through online and off-line mechanisms. The gameplay consists of solving complex puzzles that unlock various stages of the game, retrieving clues scattered across the Web or in real-world locations, receiving and making phone calls, and even participating in live events" (Bakiolgu). This framework, broadly, presents itself as living in the same world that the audience exists in. Its ability to feed into believability is one of its hallmark skills that creators using this technique must have. The amount of participation that the audience has within the story is versatile. While some involve players to make phone calls, pick-up real-world items, and participate in activities themselves, others simply involve cracking codes and having brief periods of time in which to communicate with the characters in the game. *Marble Hornets* falls on the scale of the latter, having puzzles within their "TotheArk" channel and some interaction and choice making on Twitter by the audience. However, the difference between Found Media and ARGs is that Found Media uses narrative techniques to create its story while ARGs are largely focused on the physical techniques and ways to interact with the world. This means that a Found Media project can be an ARG but it is

not necessary for it to be one. On the same note, ARGs are not always Found Media, or Found Footage.

The Unfiction/ARG framework helps explain why some of these key differences are being implemented in *Marble Hornets* versus other Found Media. In addition, by examining key features about how the series works, we gain a better understanding of how Found Media operates and its difference between that and traditional Found Footage will be obvious. *Marble Hornets* uses justification, audience, seriality, and its use of multimedia formats to create a unique horror experience that has gone on to be replicated both by big blockbusters and other internet projects alike.

Justification Through Uploading

The original forum post and the introduction video are very similar in language and plot. However, since the story officially takes place within the first video, aptly titled "Introduction", I will quote from the language used in the video. The text of the video reads as followed:

> The following clips are raw footage excerpts from Alex Kralie, a college friend of mine.
> In 2006, Alex was in the process of shooting his student film, entitled Marble Hornets.
> Over the three months that this took place, his film crew complained of his increasing levels of stress and irritability.
> Near the end of shooting, Alex halted production indefinitely and dropped the unfinished project.
> He told me it was due to the "unworkable conditions" on his set, which was less than a mile away from his house.
> I asked what he planned to do with the countless number of tapes he had filled.
> "Burn them."
> Being a film student myself, I hated to see all of his work go to waste.
> And after some coercing he agreed to give them to me.
> Under the condition that I never mention it to him again.
> Soon after, Alex transferred to another school and I haven't seen him since.
> At the time, I was too unnerved to look through the tapes, and eventually forgot about them.
> A few days ago I found them filed away in the back of my closet.

After three years and zero contact with Alex, I have decided to look through them.
All the tapes are unnumbered and missing timestamps. Other than taking place in the
summer of 2006, it is impossible to determine the exact order or date of each.
Should I find anything in any of them I will upload it to keep as a permanent record.
("Introduction" 00:00:00 – 00:02:00).

Important to this text, as stated earlier, is the justification that the story provides for its existence. This is something that Found Footage films do in different capacities, however most side on having less explanation as a way to not have the audience question it as much. This is something that Found Media does not believe in. Justification is used both for the reason for the footage existing and why the content would be uploaded in the first place. *Marble Hornets* sets a precedent by creating a situation in which explains why the footage was created at all along with why it is being uploaded to YouTube. This begins the explanation to how *Marble Hornets* encourages its audience to interact with narrative.

The reasons for the camera being out vary, but all are justified within the narrative. First, through the filming of a student film, the footage ranges from filming locations, actual scenes, and behind the scenes clips. Much of the behind-the-scenes footage navigates away from any connection to the film and slips into the second reasoning: Alex's obsession. Half of the clips that the audience sees during the first season are of Alex alone. Although a better understanding is developed as the series progresses, it is obvious that Alex is filming himself due to paranoia and fear of the Slender Man, called The Operator. As the story progresses the camera is again justified due to The Operator inducing memory loss on his victims. This becomes apparent notably in "Entry #17" where, after showing the audience footage of Tim, Alex, and our mediator Jay, Jay states, "But there's something else about [the clip] that really disturbs me. I don't remember any of it ever happening" ("Entry #17", 00:01:32 -00:01:41). This outlines one of the more basic justifications for the camera: to keep a record of what is happening to these characters when they themselves might not remember it. This becomes a large component of the

narrative, especially within Season 2 which revolves around Jay watching footage of himself because he has lost his memory of the 7-month gap between season 1 and 2. Jay uploading it at all leads to another justification that this memory loss offers.

The footage being uploaded is justified through the idea of a permanent record. Jay, as the audience sees very early on in the project, is just as susceptible to the memory loss as Alex and Tim seems to be. As a precautionary measure, uploading the documents allows for a place where the content cannot be lost, erased, or distorted further. Distortion is already quite common within the recording of the tapes themselves, as evidenced in all of the footage that has The Operator in it. The monster's appearance causes the video tape to distort, usually both visually and aurally. The Operator has a visible impact onto recordings of itself when in proximity to it. Therefore, putting the video online contains the video from possible further distortion from The Operator, or other antagonists such as Alex. This is something understandable to the audience even before memory loss becomes a factor. In addition, it falls into a trope within horror media regarding the need to document and bare witness. Jay has already seen things he cannot explain by the time the YouTube videos are uploaded. This is evidenced from the "Entry #1", uploaded the same day as the "Introduction" video, where Jay states "After viewing a couple of tapes and finding nothing unusual, I came across a clip that doesn't fit in with the others" ("Entry #1", 00:00:04). Therefore, Jay uploads the video as a way to validate his own perception of reality after the videos present information that goes against the norm.

This provides to us not only an understanding of the justification for the story but provides the audience with an understanding of how communication and information is going to be given throughout the story. Despite being a video medium, most of our direct understanding of the plot is issued through text. Jay communicates in the present with the audience via text on

the screen and through his tweets. Although dialogue and understanding of the plot does occasionally develop with audio, it is almost never current or directly to the audience. With this being said, text becomes a very important part with how the narrative plays out. Unlike Found Footage, who as Sayad stated usually include a short text at the start of the movie briefly explaining that the footage is real and how it was uncovered, Found Media relies much more heavily on multiple forms of communication with the audience (Sayad). The audio and visual aspects of the YouTube videos themselves are important, just as the outside media is as well. The descriptions for the videos, the Twitter page, and the text within the videos are paramount to understanding the whole narrative.

This distinction between Found Footage and Found Media becomes clear through this examination into justification. *Marble Hornets* does a great deal to present itself as real through justifying its existence. A movie, largely, does not need to justify itself for existing. Found Footage as a technique does what a movie needs to do: draw in an audience to stay for an hour or so. What *Marble Hornets*, and Found Media as a concept, does is draw an audience in to stay for a long time; in this case 5 years. What needs to happen for a piece of media to exist for that long is to make the audience want to be involved. Justifying why the videos are there, where they came from, and why we should pay attention encourage an audience to wrap itself around a project and help it grow. This is similar to the aspects of a good tv show, however the justification adds reality. *Marble Hornets* is not just a piece of media to watch. It is something to interact with, to theorize about and to feel connected to. It asks the audience to ask: what if? What if this really is happening? What if this monster and these people exist? These questions are being asked by the audience because that is what *Marble Hornets* is attempting to produce. It is no accident that the story is so heavily justified. The only way it is able to reach that point is

by creating an environment that feels realistic in our own world. The ability to reach the audience is necessary for its continuation as a project, and justification leads them there.

Creating the Slender Man Myth

To some extent the audience for *Marble Hornets* was built in. Having spawned on the SomethingAwful Forum's there were already curious eyes on the project. But something even more important to *Marble Hornet*'s interactivity derives with the audience comes from the Slender man mythos itself. Andrew Peck describes the monster best as he states:

> The Slender man is a crowd-sourced monster. As users told stories, shared images, and theorized as to the nature of the nascent lovecraftian horror, they also participated in its creation. Each performance added to and subtracted from how the entity was imagined by the group. (Peck, 334).

Slender Man is not a monster that spawned into thin air a fully formed creature. Although given some background by its original author, the monster only became what it is today because of many people's contributions. Being one of the first stories to take place about Slender Man, *Marble Hornets* did a lot to shape the narrative around the monster. With the first few videos on the channel hitting over a 2 million views by todays time, it is not a surprise that the mythos was impacted in a large way due to Found Media's interactivity.

This engagement could largely be unimportant to the idea of Found Media, if not for the impact that this creates within an audience. Not only are they participating in a unique and interactive story line, but they are also witnessing the creation of a mythos. They are participating in extending a digital folklore, as Joe Ondrak suggests. Ondrak analyzes how stories like Slender Man are spread online and argues that the collective impact of knowledge changes the narrative into being a new form of folklore. Important to our understanding of

audience impact, Ondark writes, "The view of social media and Web2.0 spaces, however, significantly underplays the impact that they have on shaping a narrative and a reader's interaction with it" (168). Audience is highly involved within the production of the narrative of *Marble Hornets* regardless of whether the interaction that the players participate in affects the narrative at all. The creator, Troy Wagner, may not have implemented anything that the audience posted about, although that is debatable itself, but the audience kept the community alive and thriving. They were the ones that created art, stories, and myths to create a lore that integrated even further into reality. In that way, the audience were the ones who actually created the reality of the piece. All of the important justifications that *Marble Hornets* produced for their story helped encourage the fandom to continue to spread the belief past online.

It is notable to say that this audience participation was not always a great occurrence. The prevalence and unreality of the mythos was what led to the now dubbed "The Slender Man Stabbing" in 2014 (Yang). Certainly, there is always risk when the line between fact and fiction gets veiled. Andrew Peck recounts an interview he did following the stabbing where he explained this phenomenon as "enacting an aspect of a legend cycle in real-life" also called ostension (15). Peck also focuses on the fact that this is a rare occurrence, as opposed to something that is often the case with stories that get linked with reality. Ondrak speaks to a similar point in his article when he states that, "It then functions and gains its effectiveness in being scary by taking advantage of the sincerity required for those platforms to function and the assumption that digital text consumed through them has its roots in the thoughts and experiences of a real person" (167). What Ondrak points to, by highlighting the word choice of "sincerity" here, is that the audience is meant to believe in the work because it is a product of spaces that, especially at the time of *Marble Hornets* creation in 2009, were filled with authentic lived

experiences. The danger, then as evident by the tragedy that occurred in 2014, is the mythos

spreading past the audience that acknowledges and understands the piece as fiction, regardless of

how they interact with it.

This dark divide, however, does not discount the importance of *Marble Hornets* and other

Found Media projects. The Found Footage technique has, historically, been a dangerous game of

reality and unreality. In cases such as *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Blair Witch Project*, their

attempts to present the material as real has gained negative reactions from the public. What

remains important here about *Marble Hornets* is that the audience plays a bigger role within

Found Media then with standard film. In the case of *Marble Hornets*, the audience is able to and

encouraged by the project itself to interact in a way that spreads the mythos and elongates how

long the series is able to be enjoyed. Although a common aspect of many other types of media,

especially television series, this is rare in the Found Footage community. Even in Found Footage

series, such as *Paranormal Activity*, there is not the interactivity level both within the movies

themselves and outside of it that could allow it to fall under our definition. Thus, firmly placing

it outside of Found Media despite the integration of another important aspect of Found Media,

seriality.

The Five-Year Project: Seriality's Influence on Narrative

It would be inaccurate to say that Found Footage has not performed levels of seriality

throughout its use. *American Horror Story* used the Found Footage technique for the majority of

its content in its sixth season, "Roanoke." As a television program, the show indeed was shown

over the course of time in separate parts. However, *American Horror Story* is hardly defined

through its being told over the course of time, aside from the suspense that grows from having to

wait a week to see what happens after. Take away the time breaks, which is now entirely

possible through the series location on popular streaming services, and the show acts just as one long movie. However, taking *Marble Hornets* out of its temporal context destroys an incredibly important aspect of the project. This is a main tenant of how Found Media is created to interact with its audience and further its appeal.

Sean O'Sullivan outlines the specific aspects a serial narrative should have to label itself as such. These include iteration meaning definitional repetitive aspect of the project: *Multiplicity*, meaning both the inclusion of more than one entry and the encouragement to review the serial to absorb all of the information; *Momentum*, meaning the ability to encourage the plot forward through each episode; *World building*, meaning the ability to expand the world and rules in which the narrative operates; *Personnel*, meaning the attention to and introduction of characters throughout the narrative; and finally, *Design*, or how the serial constructs itself to be presented serially (O'Sullivan 53-59). All of this covers the things that a successful serial project needs to have. While *Marble Hornets* fulfills all of these rules, it also showcases a temporality of "real time chronological progression," that O'Sullivan does not account for. I contend that this is an important form specific to Found Media.

In order to keep its illusion of realism, *Marble Hornets* makes great pains to present itself in real time. Unlike a typical series, the characters do not simply cease to exist once the cameras are turned off. Jay, most notably, interacts through social media at a semi-regular schedule, both through posting his own thoughts and interacting and responding to his audience. For example, during Season 3, Jay curated a slightly audience-geared search of an antique store where he hoped to find clues. This happened between Entry #52 and #53, wherein the audience was understood to know that Jay was attempting to find the character Tim. With the antique store being his only lead a series of updates take place as Jay examines the location. The lead up into

this audience interaction was a series of tweets. He writes, "Back in the downtown area. The store that Tim walked out of when I saw him is always closed when I'm here. No hours posted either" then, "Store's still closed. I looked through the window, and it seemed like an antique store of some kind?" and finally, "Accidentally slept late today. I think I'm going to try and go back to that store really early soon and just wait for someone to show up" (@marblehornets). All of these are posted on different days, realistic to the time that Jay would be attempting to go to an antique store. More importantly, these moments play out in between the videos. Film is not the only way in which we know our characters do things.

The stakes of this are enormous. It has long been within the world of fans only that the in-betweens of narrative events are able to be accounted for. While not every moment is able to be presented, the characters are shown to interact in the world we live in. From a horror standpoint, this helps further compel the audience into being scared. If the characters are interacting as if they do indeed live in the same world that allows them to create posts on social media, then the monsters within them could also exist. Therefore, Marble Hornets uses the real time chronological progression to keep the audience engaged and interacting with the main character as well as the other audience members. Jay's interaction with the audience asks for the audience to make a connection over time to Jay. It also allows for the audience to speculate together, not only in response to Jay's tweets, but through the realm of Twitter broadly as well.

The Lens and Mediation

When it comes to the media aspect of *Marble Hornets*, many of the video techniques fall in line with what Found Footage films and television s do. Technically, the videos themselves are usually composed of shaky handheld footage, or stationary shots where the characters are not interacting with it at all. This technique establishes that everything we can possibly know about

what is happening on screen is from the camera itself. All of the information is presented to us, even if its hidden or in the corner of the screen that we're not as likely to look at. Adam Hart captures this idea up nicely: "Viewers of a modern horror film might be better understood as at the mercy of the film itself. They are insistently mad aware of not being in a privileged position of knowledge about the diegetic world" (74). Diegetic, which Hart uses here, refers to the internal world created by the story. The key point of this idea is that the camera operates as the only key into the world of the movie. This is where *Marble Hornets* presents an entirely new level of interaction through its expansion of media outside of the audio/video constraints.

Let us take the blocks of text that surround many of the videos we see. This, inherently, breaks the laws of what we understand to be Found Footage. Namely, that there is a mediator who is witnessing the videos with it. This, then, gives the audience a separate understanding of what these videos are telling us. Take, for example, "Entry #27" which is the beginning of season 2. The video starts black, much like how most of the other videos do. Usually, this leads into the entry number before beginning the clip. Instead, rhythmic thumping begins to play and then a scathing alarm rings out. We watch Jay begin to examine the room he is in. In a typical Found Footage film, that may be all the information we are directly given. The next scene would, likely either be dialogue between characters informing us what happened or a continuation of the scene of the character frantically becoming more confused. Instead, we receive a block of text giving us frank information about what the past footage meant and what we are supposed to take away. The text reads:

It's been 7 months since Entry #26 was posted. This morning, I woke up in a hotel. I don't know how I got there. The past 7 months are completely missing from my memory. I don't know the area I'm in at all. I don't know where the camera strapped to me came

from either. I talked to the front desk and apparently my room was only booked for one

night. I decided to extend the stay while I got my bearings. I'm going to lay low the next

few days. ("Entry #27" 00:00:00 – 00:06:14)

On the surface this information is not necessarily anything the viewer could not have gotten with

context clues. However, it provides important contact with the audience itself. This is not just

text on the screen to describe to a displaced audience. Instead, it is a direct line of

communication between Jay and his audience of witnesses. It is meant to be a communication

direct to the active viewers who have been anxiously watching the YouTube and Twitter

accounts waiting for updates. Therefore, the text provides a closer look into both the level of

communication that Jay is wanting to give and his mental state.

Since the text itself is still, technically, in a video, it could be more convincing to look

into the Twitter profile. Between season one and season two, meaning just before Entry #27 was

uploaded, there were five tweets made from the Twitter account @marblehornets. Three consist

of images uploaded using TwitPic, an application made during the time when Twitter did not

allow images to be directly uploaded. The first, a grainy orange and green colored picture of the

words "Smile For The Camera" and an accompanied drawing of a camera, along with a symbol

that series was known for called the Operator symbol. The next contains a picture of known

antagonist to Jay, the entity fans have dubbed "Masky," next to a wall of tally marks and another

Operator symbol. This was a code, although not as complex as others, that indicated that the 23rd

would be the upload date of the next season. The final is another code, the letters MVnKbE

seemingly scratched into picture of a forest with two prominent cut down trees in the middle.

The following tweet is back to text reading "Changed my password. I didn't post those pictures."

The final tweet reads "Entry #27 will be posted soon" (@marblehornets).

What all of this does is present something unique about what the Found Media technique allows. Its distribution of content through an alternative media provokes a closer bond between creator and audience. As Hart suggests, the audience is not meant to feel the same level of railroading that a typical horror film uses. The text itself brings a closer link to the reality of the situation that Jay is supposedly living it. Watching the video and then hearing Jay's commentary on it allows the audience to know that Jay is an active participant in the reality and not just a passive viewer who cannot be helped. On the Twitter side, it is realistic to see an account be hacked and for content to be posted[1]. It is realistic to hear from the user by their choice and by their pace. The codes are to be broken in real time to help Jay and the viewer reach a better understanding of what is going on in the world. All of this ends up producing a layer of realism and hope within the audience as they attempt to navigate the world with him. The distribution of narrative through alternate media continues through our next project as well.

"Ceaseless Watcher, Turn Your Gaze Upon This Wretched Thing.": Understanding *The Magnus Archives*

Within the last 10 years, podcasting has overtaken the audio medium. It is no wonder that horror would begin to be produced and transformed via this area as well. While certainly not the first podcast to breach the horror genre, *The Magnus Archives* (*TMA*) presents itself in a wholly unique way. Much like *Marble Hornets, TMA* is a Found Media project. *The Magnus Archives* was started in 2017 by the creator, writer, and voice actor Jonathan Sims. The podcast takes place under the pretense of an archivist, Jonathan, attempting record, and add order to, a very disorganized archive of paranormal sightings. The archives consist of statements made by people

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[1] On April 4th, 2021 a hacker took control of the @marblehornets Twitter account. They consequently deleted all tweets and renamed the account. Twitter is in the process of working with Troy Wagnar to bring all of the tweets back from their archives (@whatatroy). Citations for tweets used in this article were made before the account was compromised.

who have survived through, at least up to the point of recording, encounters with the unimaginable. The podcast presents itself as a tape-recording, and Jonathan is not actively aware of the audience that is listening. The narrative of the show, then, relies entirely on the podcast and does not use any external sources in order to tell the story. The story, in this way, does not fall into the ARG category like *Marble Hornets* does, however this does not take away its importance as a case study of Found Media.

On the surface, it would seem that the recordings themselves might be the Found Media. They are, after all, recordings of a person who, as the story progresses, slowly becomes enraptured in something evil. The audience for the recordings themselves are theoretically the students at the archive, the future archivist, and, most specifically, the Watcher, which is the godlike embodiment of the fear of being watched. While the story does end in a tragedy for Jonathan, like many Found Footage projects, the podcast itself is not the Found Media. Instead, much like Jay in *Marble Hornets*, Jonathan is performing the role of mediator between the audience and the Found Media. He is presenting to us written and recorded statements that he is recovering and attempting to make sense of. The paper and tapes that he finds are the Found Media.

Thus, *TMA* provides us with a different understanding of how the Found Media process. Although audience plays a looser role in direct interaction with the story, the mediator role is an important aspect of how the narrative is meant to be understood. The mediator is not the only audience in this story, however. There are even more internal characters that act as audience in different parts of the story, not to mention the recording device itself. The seriality within the story, much like *Marble Hornets*, is both an internal and external feature. Although we are not entirely meant to understand the story as taking place in real time, the story progresses only

through the passage of time. All of this contributes to *The Magnus Archives* attempting to produce a level of interactivity within the audience, even when it is not necessarily interacting with them directly

The Process of Recording to Live

The Magnus Archives begins by making sure the audience understands why the recording exists. The first episode starts dissimilar to how most of the following episodes do. Most episodes for the first few seasons start with a succinct introduction. Take episode 2, for example, which states: "'Statement of Joshua Gillespie, regarding his time in possession of an apparently empty wooden casket. Original statement given November 22nd, 1998. Audio recording by Jonathan Sims, Head Archivist of the Magnus Institute, London' ("Do Not Open"). The first episode, however, introduces the cast, the institute, the statements, and most importantly the justification. Among Jonathan's rambling a few key components stick out. The institute's purpose is "dedicated to academic research into the esoteric and the paranormal." Jonathan's newly acquired job is due to "replac[ing] the previous Head Archivist, one Gertrude Robinson, who has recently passed away." His position is to organize the statements in the archive due to the statements being "handwritten or produced on a typewriter with no accompanying digital or audio versions of any sort." Finally, and most importantly, digitizing the files has so far been problematic due to "significant audio distortions" when attempting to record on his laptop ("Anglerfish").

From this the audience can understand both why Jonathan is reading the statements and why he is recording the information. His job begins and ends with his digitizing of the statements within the archives so that he is able to record thousands of untitled paper files into a neat digital space. In the process of this he is also supposed to record down and look into the statements that

he is given. Both new and old statements are to be reviewed by someone in order to understand if the paranormal events that occur in the statement are actually true. As the institute's reason for existing is to assess and understand the paranormal, these public statements are incredibly important for documenting past and current experiences of people who have dealt with our greatest fears.

The justification then goes into why Jonathan needs to continue his recording past the point when he begins to understand the institution is much more sinister than he originally thought. Starting in season four, Jonathan discovers he has become an avatar to one of the entities, entities being the embodiments of fear. The Watcher, the fear of which Jonathan has become an avatar, has by that point taken control over Jonathan. This adds an even better justification for the continuation of reading statements, as Jonathan now requires the knowledge from these statements to sustain himself. This is made most obvious in episode 107, "Third Degree" where Jonathan audibly grows weaker. He states, "I, I don't really know what to make of any of this. I'm, uh, I'm confused, I'm, I'm dizzy, I, I think I saw the police officer from Chicago again, in the station where I was talking to Rebecks. I… I'm not… feeling well…" followed by a click of the recorder turning off. The next thing we hear, following the recording turning back on, is Jonathan saying "I, I, got a letter, well, an envelope… it's, it's a statement. There's, there's a note, "to tide you over," and, uh…" ("Third Degree"). As the reading continues, Jonathan becomes more revived, his voice gaining emotion and strength with every word. By the end he is completely recovered. Thus, the act of reading and recording because necessary to his survival. This justifies why the episodes are being continued to be made. It becomes not only his job but his livelihood.

What separates how *Marble Hornets* and *The Magnus Archives* justifies itself also showcases just how alike they are. *TMA* uses its justification to not only begin the narrative but continues to develop it as the plot becomes more complex. Found Media creates its plot around the illusion of reality. This is for the hope that the audience will, therefore, become more connected to the narrative through a real-life participation. Whether that makes the product ultimately scarier is subjective, however these narratives are made with the intention of being scarier because it could exist in real life. Although *The Magnus Archives* does not present itself as firmly within our world as *Marble Hornets,* there is the same level of dedication to understanding why the recordings are being created. The beginning gives us a man attempting to do a good job at a career he is very clearly interested in. As danger and death start to compile on itself and Jonathan, his ability to escape disappears as he becomes fully ingrained into the necessity of recording data. The recordings are continued to be made because they must be in order for Jonathan to survive. This asks the audience to form a deep connection to the characters though justification alone, without the necessity of dipping into our world fully.

Horror Podcasting and the Act of Mediating Information

As podcasting is a relatively new piece of media, the term being coined in 2004, the format is still experimenting with its presentation of horror (Wrather 44). The most popular example of a horror podcast is *Welcome to Night Vale*. Although not Found Footage, or media, the podcast relies heavily on presenting itself through the mask of realism. This show does this by presenting itself as a radio show of a small town wherein the audience is able to learn of the new laws, comings and goings of the residents and anything else that the eccentric host, Cecil, wants to present to them (Hancock). In her analysis of the show Danielle Hancock points to *Night Vale*'s use of the radio format to increase discomfort. She writes, "Cecil consistently

appropriates and subverts local radio's familiar qualities to forge a radio presence that is oddly discomforting in its intimacy" (Hancock 222). The key word here being the 'intimacy" that is created by the direct line through the radio persona to his audience. Despite Hancock pointing to this as a way of creating unease in the audience, it produces something that *The Magnus Archives* does not: comfort. As disturbing as the intimacy is, *Night Vale* produces something that is capable of being lulled into security. This on top of the true unrealism that the show goes into, with its discussion of improbable things like the erasure of Wednesday and a five headed dragon running for mayor (Hancock 221). From the very beginning the show escorts you into a fake town, with fake rules, and asks you to sit down and relax awhile. Although the concepts are on the surface horror-themed, they do not encourage a very intense level of fear due to the intimacy.

　　The Magnus Archives produces the opposite effect through thanks to the mediation of the Found Media through the main narrator. While Jonathan has a soothing voice and is generally a relatable empathetic character, he is also the main voice for the horrific stories that are told over the course of the uploads. Different from the role of Jay in *Marble Hornets*, Jonathan is the voice of the terror. The audience begins to associate Jonahan's voice with the terror they are hearing. This is made even more noticeable through his change of tone while reading the statements. In as early as the first episode, "Anglerfish" an obvious switch in tone is made between his reading of the statement and his concluding thoughts. Quickly it goes from "I haven't quit smoking, but I do find that I take a lot more taxis now if I find myself out too late" to "Statement ends. The investigation at the time, and the follow-up we've done over the last couple of days, have found no evidence to corroborate Mr. Watts' account of his experience" ("Anglerfish"). Even by reading the words themselves, the tone is evident. The justification for this, through text alone, would be the difference between authors. But hearing the text read by the same person and the

tone being shifted so easily from terror to a monotone unimpressed version of the events produces a disquieting effect.

This discomfort is made even more obvious in the fifth season. The world, at this point in the narrative, has been taken over by The Watcher, along with the other embodiments of fear. In a world where everyone left alive is being tortured by their selected deepest fear, Jonathan is forced to bear witness due to his connection with The Watcher as its avatar. The result of this is Jonathan having a compulsion to produce a statement from everything he bears witness to. As opposed to the statements in the archives, Jonathan himself is producing and recounting the fears. This begins in episode 163, "In The Trenches." The horror of this situation is evident from Jonathan's partner, Martin, who grows more and more distraught as Jonathan begins spewing a statement uncontrollably. To which Jonathan responds, "There's so much, Martin, and I know all of it – I can – see all of it, and I – it's filling me up; I need to let it out!" ("In The Trenches"). Jonathan goes from simply reading the statements, to reading them to sustain himself, to being unable to help producing statements. Jonathan has quickly become a character that is meant to make the audience worry about, if not fear. Thus, there it does not produce a calming effect, like *Night Vale* attempts to create.

This is a different way of producing a similar effect to what *Marble Hornets* does. While Jay performs his role of watching the tapes and then giving the audience his reaction before or after, Jonathan is the voice in which the audience experiences the material. It is through Jonathan's mediation that the stories are able to be heard at all. Statements are also occasionally mediated through other character is working in the archives and a similar effect is produced however a more tangible effect comes from listening to the stories told by the archivist. What makes this different from typical Found Footage is not only through its mediation, but from the

retelling of the story through a voice that isn't the original occupants. Like Jay, Jonathan is attempting to find the truth within all of the statements and is relaying this to the audience.

There is the question of who the audience is within a podcast that is not attempting to present unreality into our own world. Jonathan perceived audience are the students in the institution, his successor, or the Watcher. The audience who listens to the podcast—although not relevant to the world within the podcast—plays an equally important role of listening to the documented experience. Many horror stories, no matter what format, discuss the need for the survivor to record their experience. *The Magnus Archive* plays on this by making it the most important theme of the show. Although not explicitly understood by Jonathan, the act of witnessing both through himself and the audience of the tapes is extremely important both within the plot of the podcasts and for the act of horror. Jonathan, then, is the most important audience member in the story. His need to read these accounts to sustain himself suggest that his participation in the witnessing of horror allows for a catharsis. It is, after all, through Jonathan's witnessing that he is able to help stop some of the horror and death in the world. But by doing so it also changed him entirely. Witnessing is both an act of salvation for others and destruction of the self. Through Jonathan's mediation he is mediating the existence of evil within this world, even at the cost of himself.

Solving a Mystery Over Time

Much like M*arble Hornets, TMA* is produced serially. The show started in March of 2016 and ended on March 31, 2021. The show was created with this end goal in mind, with breaks between seasons accounted for within the plot points that take place. While *TMA* does not provide the same level of real-world time frame as *Marble Hornets*, the necessity of the seriality of the project remains the same. *TMA* is not a piece of work that could take place in any other

format than a serial project. Mariam Durrani, Kevin Gotkin, and Corring Laughlin make a compelling point about the possibilities of seriality in podcasting. While analyzing the popular series *Serial,* they came to understand the episodic nature to be exactly what drew listeners back every episode. They state, "Clues and their serial renderings are what compel us, journalists and academics to continue in the inquires to which we devote ourselves" (Durrani et. all. 3). From their understanding it was the episodic nature and the allowance of the audience to try and connect the pieces drive aspect of the serial format. Although they specifically only account for academics and journalists, it would make sense for any inquiring minds to attach themselves to projects that do this.

This idea of seriality allowing for theorization and discussion is prevalent in *TMA*. This is most noticeable in the first season when the lore of the world is just beginning to be fleshed out. A subtle mechanic of this is the introduction of characters that can be connected by the audience as information slowly is told through different statements. Take for example the avatar The Distortion, originally known as Michael. The first introduction of this character takes place in episode 8 "Burned Out." This is just suggested, however, as no name or real description of Michael other than "all the bones are in his hands" ("Burned Out"). This becomes something that the audience then becomes on the look out for, until finally making a connection to a figure in another statement, episode 26 "A Distortion." The hands of the creature are described as "stretched and inflated by the distorted light, until they were almost the size of the rest of the torso. The fingers were long and stiff, and seemed to end in sharp points" ("A Distortion"). This is a connection that Jonathan, who usually is the one to point out these connections, misses. But for those who have been following the series closely and, like Durrani suggests, "devoting" themselves to the material, they are rewarded. This is a connection that is only achieved through

the serial nature of the project. The what-ifs that each episode produces then gets rewarded through continuing to discover, along with Jonathan, the connections between the wicked things in the world.

What the seriality of the series allows for is a connection to the real time chronological connection. Despite the link to current times being delayed compared to the interactive *Marble Hornets*, *TMA* provides a way to keep the audience engaged through its use of connections. Even if the story is not progressing as obviously in real time, the audience is experiencing the same process as Jonathan by having to fit the pieces they are given together. It is this experience of puzzle work and connecting threads that makes Found Media what it is. The audience perceives the events in real time because they are attempting to analyze the information given to them in tandem with Jonathan—to the point where many listeners make connections that Jonathan does not automatically see and are able to anticipate narrative beats of the story. This does not detract from the experience but instead amplifies it by creating joy and excitement when theories are proven right. Even failure comes with excitement over what this new information does to change the theories. Seriality, then, allows for audience engagement even without the need to interact directly to the characters within the story itself.

The Recorder as a Character

As *The Magnus Archives* presents itself entirely audibly, it operates differently than *Marble Hornets*' exploration of multimedia forms. However, this does not diminish *TMA*'s power as a Found Media project. There are two parts to examine when looking at *TMA*, how the different forms of media within the world itself operate; and how the distribution media, i.e. the podcast format, operates to create an entirely different experience for the audience and the horror genre.

What makes this use of the tape recorder interesting is how it replaces the use of the camera or other multimedia way of recording the information. In this case, the tape recording works very intra-diegetically. Kjetil Rødje defines this term in relation to camera work in Found Footage. He states that "cameras operate as actors, both in terms of performing a role as 'real' recording devices and in terms of affecting other entities within the films as well as the films audience" (Rødje). In place of the camera, the recorder instead works almost like an entire character of its own. Although *TMA* does not have the same connection to the audience that *Marble Hornets* does, it produces a connection through the recorder as a player. This becomes evident especially through the transitions that the recorder goes through during the production.

The podcast is ostensibly recorded with a tape recorder. Begin any episode of the 200~ episodes and a click is the first thing you will hear. The first thing the audience is aware of is that it is being recorded. Along with the audio distortion that comes from a recording on a physical tape, the first episode makes it quite clear that everything we hear is prerecorded. Jonathan says, "I plan to digitise the files as much as possible and record audio versions, though some will have to be on tape recorder, as my attempts to get them on my laptop have met with… significant audio distortions" ("Anglerfish"). With this we are given the groundwork to understand how the recorder is meant to work. At first, as Jonathan says, the recorder is meant simply to be a tool to digitize files as a way to clear up the mess of files left all over the Archive. The first role, then, is not exactly a full rounded character yet. The recorder is simply an object, although necessary because of the inability for Jonathan to record the statements through any other method. Although it is the viewpoint in which the audience receives all of its information it does not do anything else at this moment.

Later, the recordings go from professional business to spying and secrets. Starting on episode 41, the usual format changes as after the recording of a statement the tape clicks to alert us the end and then clicks on again with Jonathan providing a place for his own separate documentation. He states his intentions quite clear for the listener saying, "this supplement, which will chronicle my own investigations" ("Too Deep"). The supplement is in reference to the addition of Jonathan's spying at the end of a typical statement. The tapes then serve a double role as both witnessing the statements of the civilians who have experienced something with the entities and providing a solitary space for Jonathan to record his own thoughts. The tape recorder starts to develop more fully in the eyes of the audience through this. It is not only the recorder of information, and the lens through which we hear it, but also a recorder of secrets—information that only Jonathan and the recorder are aware of. This becomes even more complicated as the recorder starts to record things without anyone else pressing record. This becomes evident in episodes like "The Eyewitnesses" where the recorder turns on in the middle of a conversation between the characters Tim and Martin. Clearly intended to be a private conversation, the recorder and therefore the audience become active listeners to the conversation. The end makes it clear the recorder turned on itself as Martin calls after Tim saying. "Tim? Tim, did you turn the reco–" before promptly turning the recorder off himself ("The Eyewitnesses"). The role of the recorder allows for the audience to understand what is happening without any of the living characters knowledge about it. Its goal to absorb information is so strong that the recorder has to switch itself on.

Through these transitions the recorder stops becoming just an object that the story is being told to and through and instead an active participant within the narrative. *The Magnus Archives* created this mechanic as a way to have the audience form a deeper connection between

the audience and the narrative solely through the recording device. For all intents and purposes, the information is only given to the audience. Even Jonathan is not explicitly known to listen to the recordings, although all of the characters eventually become aware of the recorder beginning to turn on and off of its own accord. Important here, with the recorders inter-diegetic nature is that despite being stuck in a sole medium, the audience does not feel less connected to the media. The role of the recorder is to connect the audience and it succeeds in doing so, therefore the multimedia nature such as through *Marble Hornets* becomes unnecessary.

The Hope Inherent in Interactivity

Found Media is a complicated way of telling a story. It involves, in many ways, much more consideration from its author(s) than a typical Found Footage story would. But it is because of this dedication to the work that something truly unique is able to be experienced. While *Marble Hornets* and *The Magnus Archives* present their stories in extremely different ways, from media use to technique to theme of the stories themselves, they unite in their dedication to bring the audience into their story. Found Media is not just about scaring the audience, although that is indeed one of the goals. It is about creating an audience-orientated experience through every step of the project. From their complex consideration of their justification to the types of media the first step comes from making sure the audience is able to follow along and connect to the characters within the story. It is not just the result of the project, but instead it is the entire goal to create an environment of interactivity between the narrative and the audience. Whether it succeeds or not may depend on the specific audience member, however the narrative goes out of its way to attempt to produce this affect.

The most important part of the definition as Found Media is what these projects say for what is to come in the future of horror. The answer to that may seem strange, but instead of

increasing the terror in the world these projects set out to breed connectivity and hope. Horror is no longer an isolated experience that has to be overcome alone. The trope of every character dying like in a Found Footage doesn't work within the format of what Found Media asks for. The inclusion of a mediator asks the audience to not only put their trust into someone else, but to allow them to understand that they are not alone in their horror. The serial nature of Found Media allows for a greater connection to be built, both within the fan communities and with the characters themselves. The technique simply would not work by producing a standalone film. These projects want the characters to participate in a long, complex dive that the audience is welcome to join. Taking of the characters hand creates a comfort, even during the worst of the horror. Jonathan and Jay may die during their progress into finding the truth, but their deaths come to allow a brighter hope for the future. Hope is allowed for by the interconnectedness of the characters within the stories. In Jay's case, he is succeeded by two characters who the audience is meant to have grown a connection to over the series. Therefore, Jay's death provides some hope for the two remaining cast members. Jonathan also is killed by the end of *The Magnus Archives*; however, it is through his sacrifice that the world is able to return back to its previous form. He is also succeeded by three characters whom the narrative attempted to produce a sympathetic effect for. Therefore, the blow of his death is lessened through the hope of the future for the world and these characters.

Found Media is a niche, specific genre. Its intertwining of technique and plot is what sets it aside as a completely different subgenre within horror. It is not only possible but likely that Found Media projects existed before either of these two projects. The label helps to identify a genre that has been in public view for a long time and allow it to be discussed further in the future. Found Media's insistence on interactivity and community within a genre that is markedly

about isolation and distrust makes it an interesting and exciting genre to look into. *Marble Hornets* produced itself with the intent of being interactive and succeeded by making a lasting impact on creating a legacy for an internet created monster. *The Magnus Archives* produced its podcast in this specific way in order to create a fan community that would attempt to put all of the clues together to discover the big reveals right before it happened. All of this is done collaboratively both within the project itself and the audience it creates, with hope that there is a way to overcome the terror that exists in our world. Not through a single narrative, but through the continuation of a story through multiple people. Whether that means writing on forums a proper way to leave Slender Man's wrath or by writing about the stories that could take place after Jonathan's ends, hope is achieved in the communities the narrative generated.

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