Reading Multimodal Texts Through A Narrative Theory Framework

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Abstract: Narratives are traditionally associated with the printed word. On the other hand, when visuals are introduced in a classroom context, the printed word often tends to be left out of the discussion with most attention focused on the illustrations. For multiliteracy development and a deeper understanding and appreciation of multimodal texts, the reading of such texts could entail a process where learners 'mirror' print texts and illustrations simultaneously. This paper examines the changing landscape of literacy teaching and learning in ESL and EFL classrooms. It discusses the nature and key issues related to reading multimodal texts. It also introduces a binary-reading process in which multimodal texts can be analysed through a modified narrative theory framework. It defines the various components of the framework and demonstrates application, ultimately addressing the subject of what constitutes appropriate and effective literacy pedagogy for changing times.

1. INTRODUCTION

When visuals are introduced in an ESL or EFL classroom context, often the printed word text gets ignored and attention is focused on the illustrations found in multimodal texts. By the same token, when narratives are introduced to learners, the illustrations often take a backseat. This is not surprising as the term narrative is commonly associated with the printed word (Bearne, 2003; Chan & Chia, 2014). Perhaps in the search for a deeper understanding of multimodal texts and development in multiliteracy, the reading of these texts can be a process where learners 'mirror' read words and illustrations (word-sign integration) simultaneously. This is done via a binary-reading process we call the *modified narrative theory framework*. As underscored by Anstey and Bull (2006, 2010) and Simpson (2004), oral and written narratives are used as ways of talking about and investigating literacy and literacy development. Picture books and stories can be used to introduce learners to ways of processing print and non-print information simultaneously – a skill which could prove useful for the learners in the future. This paper discusses the issues surrounding the reading multimodal texts. It proposes that multimodal texts be analysed through a modified narrative theory framework. It defines the various components in the proposed framework and concludes with sample questions and application of one component of the framework on a multimodal text.

2. BINARY-READING: NATURE AND ISSUE OF CONCERN

According to Lankshear and Noble (2003), texts that learners encounter in the 21st century are often multimodal. Unsworth (2011) defines multimodal texts as those that have more than one 'mode' of communication. As such, they can sometimes be problematic and affect the development of deep understanding in learners because they convey multiple meanings (Jewitt, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). This is further supported by de Silva Joyce and Gaudin (2007, 2011) who stressed that clarity and understanding in spoken and written narratives are important ways in which human beings organize their lives and experiences. They do this in speeches, conversations, interviews, medical histories, novels and films. Often these meanings have to be negotiated, hence being fixated on one correct answer is a thing of the past (Serafini, 2013). In light of this, the proposed framework for 'new' literacies development (Marsh, 2005) advocates that the narrator, characters, action, time, setting and plot in the print text be 'read' in unison with the accompanying illustrations. This would enable a richer 'reading' of the text as the interpretation 'moves'

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(Clandinin, 2013) from one mode to another during the binary-reading process. There are two underlying features to this framework which impact learners and develop deep understanding and appreciation of multimodal texts. They are the presence of a multi-dimensional 'relational space' and practice of 'reflexivity' during the reading process.

'Relational space' refers to the 'realm of the between' (Keats, 2009) which learners negotiate when reading the visual and word print components of a multimodal text. When a picture book is read, many complex issues arise in relation to the movement between the visual-spatial modality and the traditional linear form of texts. Anstey and Bull (2004) argue that the process of reading a multimodal text is not static. The interaction between the learner and text occurs within multiple contexts simultaneously (Stein, 2008). That is, the purpose, social and cultural context of learners and text producers and the immediate situation in which the text is being read must be taken into consideration. This convergence of modalities, contexts and purposes blend several temporal and relational spaces, enabling the learner to 'see' different perspectives and levels of meanings from specific segments in a multimodal text. According to McAdams (2006), exploring this 'space' via the reading process supports the study of identity formation and identity practices. Thus, an exploration of this 'space' would encourage learners to gleam valuable insights and takeaway 'stories' which makes meaning about their lives, memories, experiences, histories and background. In addition, Bamberg (2011) and Freeman (2011) highlighted that learners negotiate with and relate to 'otherness' and 'differences', thoughts, beliefs and practices which they do not subscribe to in their existence within this 'space' during the reading process. As such, this encourages learners to explore different dimensions and think about sensitive and controversial concepts and ideas which they would not usually be involved in or dwell on.

As stated in West (2013), the 'relational space' is a methodological, epistemological and political 'mind-field'. By engaging in this 'mind-field' or multi-dimensional 'relational space', learners look into both the 'cultural story' and 'personal story' of humanity within themselves and their community. Wiebe (2013) defines 'cultural story' as a process which deciphers the purpose and meaning of significant events and memories in peoples' lives and the communities they live in or interact with. This is usually examined from a distance and in reflection and hindsight and through the passing of time. Whereas, 'personal story' is viewed as mundane and daily conversations and actions where people continuously practice, 'test' out and reinforce their identity and belief system. It is also often, current and contextually-situated. Thus, a learner's engagement in the multi-dimensional 'relational space' during the binary-reading process is likened to examining human existence from both a macro and micro perspective. According to Clandinin and

Rosiek (2007), when looking at human existence from a macro perspective, concepts, ideas and thoughts can be simultaneously, regulated and/or controversial and sensitive. On the other hand, a micro perspective can be based on simplicity and triviality. In short, reading is more than just an alphanumerical recognition and autographical process, in order that the resonance of deep understanding can be surfaced, the process must activate the examination of intangible, invisible and contesting or just ordinary cultural sources and practices. This process negotiates the 'empty' space which ironically is not so empty and in fact, is fraught with uncertainties. Failing to explore this 'space' implies that 'rich' insights and learnings and multiple dimensional perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) would be easily marginalized, discriminated upon or even, lost.

The binary-reading process advocates the practice of reflexivity during reading. When applied to a multimodal text, the learner would not only be required to examine the visual-word link as standalone entitles and dualities but also 'read' them against evolving contexts, situations, cultures and belief systems. As stated by Clandinin and Huber (2010), it is a process with built-in 'actions' of re-thinking, reconsideration and reflection. That is, reflexivity triggers an inward and outward, backward and forward, upward and downward 'rhythm' during reading that will result in the construction of 'new' knowledge. This 'new' knowledge has the potential to reveal the learner's intellect, mindset, emotional maturity and his position and relationship with the larger community and world around him (Bailey, 2009). Implications to this is that the reading process becomes extremely 'active' and dynamic (Leavy, 2013) as the learner is empowered and mainly unrestrained from engaging with a multimodal text in any dimension or sphere and yet, the struggle over 'power' within the multidimensional 'empty' space is negated. Often, in the context of text production (Etherington, 2004), the struggle over power and surfacing the 'voice' or dominant discourses in a text takes prominence over meaning and development of deep understanding. The built-in practices of reflexivity offers the freedom to explore and puts to question and perhaps, even an end to humanity's perpetual desire to have or find ultimate truths over most matters. Reason being, it is accepted that when multimodal texts are read across different social, political and cultural landscapes, they do not carry the same meaning and should not be expected to do so (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). Thereby, accepting learners pre-understanding, acknowledging that learners bring their lived experiences, culture and background (Bourdieu, 1984) into the reading process and ultimately, creating a sense of authority and ownership over the text.

The premise that the learner is central to acknowledging and 'legitimizing' his own interpretation of multimodal texts, is a key challenge in this proposed framework. Bhatia (2011) and Juzwick (2010) caution that learners must always aim to surface the hidden

'stories' within the 'relational space' that is between the visual-word text and not create them out of nothing, while remaining true to the importance of openness and shared 'authorship' between the author, illustrator and learner. As pointed out by Bamberg (2008), it is important to focus reading as a process of uninterrupted construction that is situated within a context of social relationships and integrate them with the wider world. In this perspective, social context refers closely to the learner's understanding of self and his/her relationship with his/her family. The wider world refers to the learner's understanding and relationship with his/her community and the world at large. As such, this reading framework is anchored on the cultural, political and social identity of the learner and situating them in differing contexts. According to Hammack and Pilecki (2012), it has the potential to bring about social and political transformation. Daiute (2011) further added that the challenge is to make use of the reading process developmentally, work out issues and concerns and transform social, cultural and political tenets to identify new and even, different possibilities of existence. Thus, to ensure 'legitimacy' or transparency, learners pre-understanding of the specific components of the framework before the reading process, for example the role and responsibilities of the narrator, characters, action, time and setting depicted in both the visuals and printed words in a multimodal text and how they symbiotically work with one another against the backdrop of visual-word integration during the reading process are crucial.

3. BINARY-READING: UNDERSTANDING THE VARIOUS COMPONENTS OF THE FRAMEWORK

Chan and Chia (2014) graphically represent and define the key components of the framework as follows:
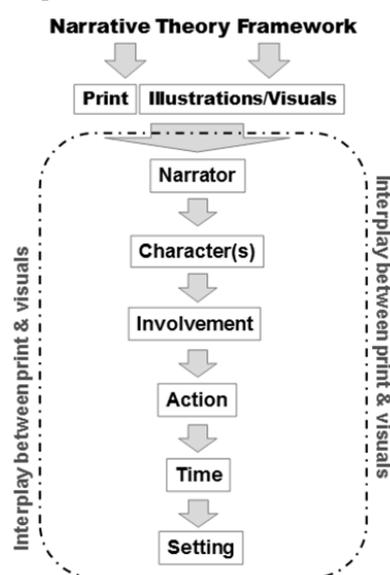

Figure 1. Framework to reading multimodal texts (Chan & Chia, 2014)

In this framework, the binary-reading process is enacted against the backdrop of a multimodal text (visual-print integration) (Serafini, 2012). Multiple levels of meaning and development of deep understanding is brought to surface as the learner explores and negotiates the 'relational space' between visuals and the printed word through examining the core components of the framework during reading (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). The core components in this, reading multimodal texts via a modified narrative theory framework are represented by the narrator, character(s), actions taken, time and setting as depicted in the multimodal text (Rose, 2011). During reading, 'word cues' and 'visual cues' from each of the components are considered and reflected against a learner's cultural, social, political identities and world view (Lankshear & Noble, 2003). Ultimately, the practice of reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) which is built into the reading process stimulates and encourages a learner to clarify, interpret and hybridize thoughts, beliefs and ideas about oneself and the world around him. This results in the co-construction of new learning, information and knowledge for each component in the multimodal text.

In the binary-reading process, learners when 'unpacking' and negotiating the narrator's component probe and question the role and impact of the narrator as the narrator unfolds his or her 'experiences' in the story. This is further supported by the 'actions' of surfacing the narrator's identity, deciding on whether the narrator speaks from the first, second or third person and position and assessing the narrator's reliability. A first-person narrator can be the main or a minor character that describes what he or she sees, hears, does, experiences and remembers. For the latter, he or she is also known as an unreliable narrator who has a limited or possibly mistaken view of what is occurring. There is the third person narrator labelled as the omniscient or the all-knowing narrator who speaks in the voice of the author, beyond main characters and fills gaps in information. Split narrators or multiple narrators where there are separate narrators, one narrator for the printed word and one other narrator for the visuals/illustrations are also possible. Finally, learners have to pay particular attention to whether the narrator has been depicted equally in both the visuals and printed words in the multimodal text and discuss their opinions regarding the depictions.

In this framework, learners explore the distinctive roles and positions and modes of depicting different characters. Their traits and relationship with each other are also focused on as the story evolves. Characters can be portrayed in human or other forms. They have intentions and motivations that authors depend upon to drive a plot forward. Most fictional stories consist of more than one character. The main character is labelled as the protagonist. There can of course, be more than one of them. Other characters that contribute to plot development are known as helpers. Their key purpose is to help main characters fulfill their goals. Finally, there is the antagonist who plays an opposing role to main characters. He or she tends to rely on others to overcome the main

characters. In a pure word text, the author has to construct characters through descriptions, however in picture books; an alternative source of information about characters is portrayed via illustrations. That is, to add 'depth' or 'richness' to the text, characters can be portrayed at odds with the textual description. Thus, impacting learners and affecting their responses as they tackle the duality or multiplicity of meaning that are emitted from the 'relational space' in the text during the reading process.

The term action describes what the characters in multimodal texts carry out in order to further their motives and plans. Actions are events that drive the narrative and occur when a character makes a choice and decision that involve reactions and consequences. The way actions are put together forms an important part of what can be described as the narrative structure. In most multimodal texts, like picture books, an important element of the narrative structure is seen by the way the worded text and visuals interact. This is often depicted via changes in colour, size and position of characters and presence of action vectors which are indicators that drive the plot forward. Thus in multimodal texts, actions can be shown as well as written about. That is, illustrations or visuals support learners understanding of the worded text in a multimodal text by filling in the supposed 'empty' gaps and providing visual clues or cues to what is occurring. This visual-word combination structure not only advances the reading process but also motivates and generates interests in reading (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Ultimately, by partaking in this reflexive reading process, learners question, clarify, reconsider and reflect on their belief systems and world views and even possibly, generate 'new' learnings and insights about the text, themselves and others.

In this framework, learners explore whether time is chronological, simultaneous or unstable and shifting and perhaps, even 'transcending' spheres of influence in relation to plot development. The time that a story last is an important way of controlling how the plot unfolds. The pace in which the plot unfolds is dependent upon the number of events or action that has been packed into the story. As such, the time covered by the unfolding of events in a story can be long or short. Lengthy descriptive passages will slow down the advancement of the plot. Whereas, breaks in the midst of a smooth flowing narration can expedite occurrences and 'force' events to move along, quicken pace and possibly bring 'excitement' to the story by making it, 'action-packed'. In short periods, though complex explorations of motives can be limited, much events or action can still be packed in to that short span of time. On the other hand, main characters can evolve and change over extended periods of time. Thus, a learner's key takeaway from examining the time component of the framework is to realize how the authors choice and control of time is purposeful and aimed at affecting and changing his understanding and deep appreciation of the multimodal text.

The setting is the place where characters and events unfold or actions play out. It encompasses time, place, traditional or contemporary set-ups and can be detailed, complex, skeletal, abstract, familiar, exotic, realistic, fantastical or a combination. The key purpose is to bring learners on a journey of exploration, mainly an adventure into the affective and moral-ethical domain, to have them emotionally 'charged' and bring to surface an interplay of moods, feelings and sense of fairness and justice as they engage in the 'relational space' and enact reflexivity. Ultimately, the various components of the framework enable learners to examine, analyze and evaluate their cognitive and affective and moral-ethical domains. They 'feel-for' the characters and occurrences or action in the multimodal text, while 'secure' in the knowledge that authors are 'controlling' these components with the purpose to impact and affect learners in certain ways. This will either reinforce learners existing beliefs or broaden and change mindsets through new insights and outcomes as learners continue to engage in different types of multimodal texts.

4.   BINARY-READING: QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE THE COMPONENTS

The following are example of questions for exploration which relates directly to each of the component in the proposed framework for reading multimodal texts.

A. **Narrator -** *This component focuses on 'telling' the story.*

Example Questions for exploration: Who is the narrator? Is he or she represented as the first, second or third person? How does the role and position of the narrator affect learners/readers? Does the narrator play a major or minor role in the development of the story? What do you, the learner/reader expect him or her to be? Is the narrator fulfilling learner/reader expectation? Why? Is the narrator reliable or unreliable? Why do you, the learner/reader, feel this way? Explain. Has the narrator been depicted in the illustrations? How is the narrator depicted? Did you, as the learner/reader, expect him or her to be depicted in this manner? Rationalize. How does the depiction of the narrator through the printed word differ from that of the illustrations? Is there a difference? Why?

B. **Characters** - *This component focuses on the 'players' or 'actors' in the story.*

Example Questions for exploration: How are characters in the story depicted? What is the age group of the main characters? Estimate their ages. Why are their ages significant? Identify the protagonist, antagonist and helper in the story? What is unique about them? Explain how they relate to the story or drive the plot forward? How do adults and children interact? How does this interaction affect the learner/reader? How are characters profiled and positioned in the illustrations? Why? Are the illustrations drawn or painted? How do the illustrations affect the

target group of learners/readers? Do specific colours align to certain characters? Explain. How does the depiction of characters through the printed word differ from that of the illustrations? Is there a difference? Why?

C. Action - This component focuses on the major events and occurrences in the story.

Example Questions for exploration: Do actions just occur? Describe what actually happened in the story? How do these actions forward the plot? Was the action expected? Explain. What are the key roles of characters in the action? Does each character make a choice or a decision or is he or she simply flowing along as the actions unfold? Why? How does it affect the learner/reader? How are actions depicted in the illustrations? What impact does it have on leaners/readers? Is the action separated into words and visuals? Identify the action vectors which are pushing the story along? Are they effective? Why? What type of narrative structure does the printed word and the illustrations depict? List the various stages. Are there missing stages? Why are they missing? What should be added? Explain.

D. Time - This component focuses on the length of the story.

Example Questions for exploration: What is the length of the story? How does the length of the story impact the learner/reader? Explain. List the different action stages as the plot unfolds and match them to the timeline of the story. What insights can a learner/ reader surface from this? Explain. How does time affect character development? Explain. How does time affect the exploration of motives in the story? Explain. How is the role of the narrator affect by time? Explain. Do the illustrations contribute to the way time is depicted? How so? Why? How does the depiction of time through the printed word differ from that of the illustrations? Is there a difference? Why? Explain the significance.

E. Setting - This component focuses on the locality and environment of the story.

Example Questions for exploration: How does the printed word locate time and place? What impact does it have on learners/readers understanding and appreciation of the text? Are the settings familiar? What is the impact? Do the illustrations locate or advance the actions in the plot? How so? Explain. Are the illustrations on setting contemporary or traditional? Why? Is the settling detailed or minimalist in nature? What is the significance? Explain. Are the illustrations framed? Why? Explain the impact on the learner/ reader. How does a change in colour or a lack of colour contribute to setting and mood? What emotions are generated? Why? How is setting affected by the length of the story? Explain. How do characters in the story affect setting? Explain. How is setting used to signify advances in plot? Explain.

5.   BINARY-READING: SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF ONE COMPONENT – CHARACTER

Chan and Chia (2014) demonstrated the application of the framework on a picture book entitled, *Mog the Forgetful Cat*. The children's picture book is authored and illustrated by Judith Kerr (2006). The following is a sample analysis of Character from the proposed framework on the book.

TABLE I. SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER

Character(s)	
Printed Word	**Illustrations**
How are characters depicted, i.e. human, animals, fantasy, machines, etc.? The characters, Mog, Nicky, Debbie and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, are depicted realistically. They are just like any other ordinary young family going about their daily lives and having to handle a cat that tends to get herself into a lot of trouble.	**How are the characters depicted in the illustrations, i.e. in profile or three quarters or full length, etc.? What is the impact?** The characters, Mog and the family members, are often depicted in full and different poses and in varied sizes, i.e. some as close-ups and some further away (long or medium shots), etc. The larger close-ups enable the reader to read the inner-most thoughts and feelings of these characters. They also cause readers to 'feel' for them. The smaller and more distant depictions give readers a full picture of exactly what the narrator has described regarding these characters and 'pushes' the unfolding of the story along. In short, the visuals/illustrations depicted stir readers' imagination and keep readers curious and engaged.
What is the age group of the main characters? What are their ages? The children, Debbie and Nicky, are between the ages of 5 to 8 years. The parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, would probably be in their late twenties and early thirties.	**Are the characters shown from face-on or from the back? What is the impact?** There are face-to-face visuals/illustrations depicted between, e.g. Mog and a dog (the enemy), and between Mrs. Thomas and Mog (at the kitchen window), Mog and Mr. Thomas (the television scene), Debbie and the lion (in her dream), and Debbie and the police officer (as the statement is being taken). Each of these face-to-face scenes depicts different emotions and enriches the story as it unfolds. In the face-to-face scene between Mog and the dog, the visual/illustration sends the message that Mog is in trouble, the dog is going to chase after her and even possibly hurt her. The face-to-

Character(s)		Character(s)	
Printed Word	**Illustrations**	**Printed Word**	**Illustrations**
	face visual depiction of Mrs. Thomas and Mog indicates that Mog had shocked Mrs. Thomas as she was cooking and caused her to spill the pot of beans. The face-to-face visual/illustration between Mog and Mr. Thomas shows Mr. Thomas' frustration with Mog for resting on top of the television set and blocking his view while he is trying to watch a fight. The face-to-face visual depiction of Debbie and the tiger in her dream highlights her fear of the tiger and emphasizes the gravity of the bad dream. The face-to-face visual between Debbie and the policeman shows their pride in Mog's heroic action.	state that there are watch-dogs, not watch-cats, and that Mog would receive a medal. This minor character brings Mog's story and/ or 'heroic' act to a climax and conclusion to the story.	and enhance the story. The visuals/illustrations depict the cat as rather harmless and simply cute and adorable, the two children as sweet and innocent looking and the parents are portrayed as kind and patient or most tolerant, to the point of offering the burglar a cup of tea though they have been frustrated by the repeated problematic antics of the cat.
Identify the protagonist, antagonist and hero/heroine. What is unique and special about them? Explain how they relate to the story. The main protagonist is Mog, the forgetful cat. Mog is unique and special because she does not set out to do mischief or to create trouble. Due to her fuzzy mind and forgetful nature, she acts on her instincts without much consideration for consequences. Nicky and Debbie, the children, could be seen as the other protagonists in the story. They protect, love and forgive Mog for all the problems she causes to them and the family. The antagonists in the story would be Mr. and Mrs. Thomas and the burglar. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas become upset with Mog and would repeatedly exclaim, "Bother that cat!", whenever Mog gets into trouble. Even the burglar said it when he was surprised by Mog.	**How are the characters depicted, i.e. comic, manga-styled, caricature, realistic, impressionistic or fantastic? What do you think, as reader/viewer, is the purpose of the illustration? What is the impact?** The characters are depicted in comic/realistic style. The key purpose would basically be to draw readers into the story, ensure they are not distracted by a lack of familiarity or have to spend much time deciphering unfamiliar signs and symbols associated with the depicted visuals/illustrations. With this depiction, the reader would be able to almost immediately integrate the reading of the printed text with the support of the visuals/illustrations, which enhances and deepens readers understanding and appreciation of the story.	**Is there a helper? What is unique and special about them? Explain how they relate to the story.** There is no helper in the story.	**Do specific colours align to certain characters? What does this mean? What is the effect on the reader/viewer?** The colours used are stereotypical. That is, the cat is grey striped and white to emphasize that she is common house breed. The children are depicted in bright colours, e.g. red, orange, yellow, etc. to emphasize the innocence, brightness and happiness of children. The parents appear as ordinary people living ordinary lives in their shirt and tie and dress and apron. The colours do not make readers feel uncomfortable. The reader does not become suspicious and fearful of the characters and their intentions. This helps readers comfortably enter this ordinary world of the Thomas' home.
		How do adults and children interact? How does this interaction affect you, the reader? The adults and children are set up as antagonists and protagonists. When the adults get upset with Mog, the children are relentless in their defense of the main protagonist Mog e.g. "It wasn't her fault", "I think you look nicer without a hat" etc. As a reader, the interaction sends the message that Mog has protectors and defenders, even though she has the tendency to get into trouble. This provides a safe environment and there is an expectation that there will be a positive conclusion to the story.	
Who are the minor characters? What is unique and special about them? Explain how they relate to the story. The minor character in the story would be the policeman. He has a special role because he redeems Mog, the main character, when he highlighted that Mog is a remarkable cat and went on to	**Are the figures drawn or painted, etc.? How does it affect the target group of readers/viewers? Is it suitable for the age group? Why?** The visuals are drawn and painted in full, and yet, subtle colours are exemplified. It is a children's picture book and the visuals (as depicted) will attract		

6. CONCLUSION

The paper addressed the subject of what constitutes appropriate and effective literacy pedagogy for changing times. It examined the changing landscape of literacy teaching and learning with the aim to advance pedagogical practice and deepen meaning – making and understanding for learners and practitioners in a classroom context. It discussed the nature and key issues of concern related to reading multimodal texts through examining the concepts of multi-dimensional 'relational space' and the actions of 'reflexivity'. It proposed a binary-reading process in which multimodal texts can be systematically analysed via a modified narrative framework. It explained the various components of the framework, proposed questions which supported analysis and demonstrated application on a multimodal text.

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