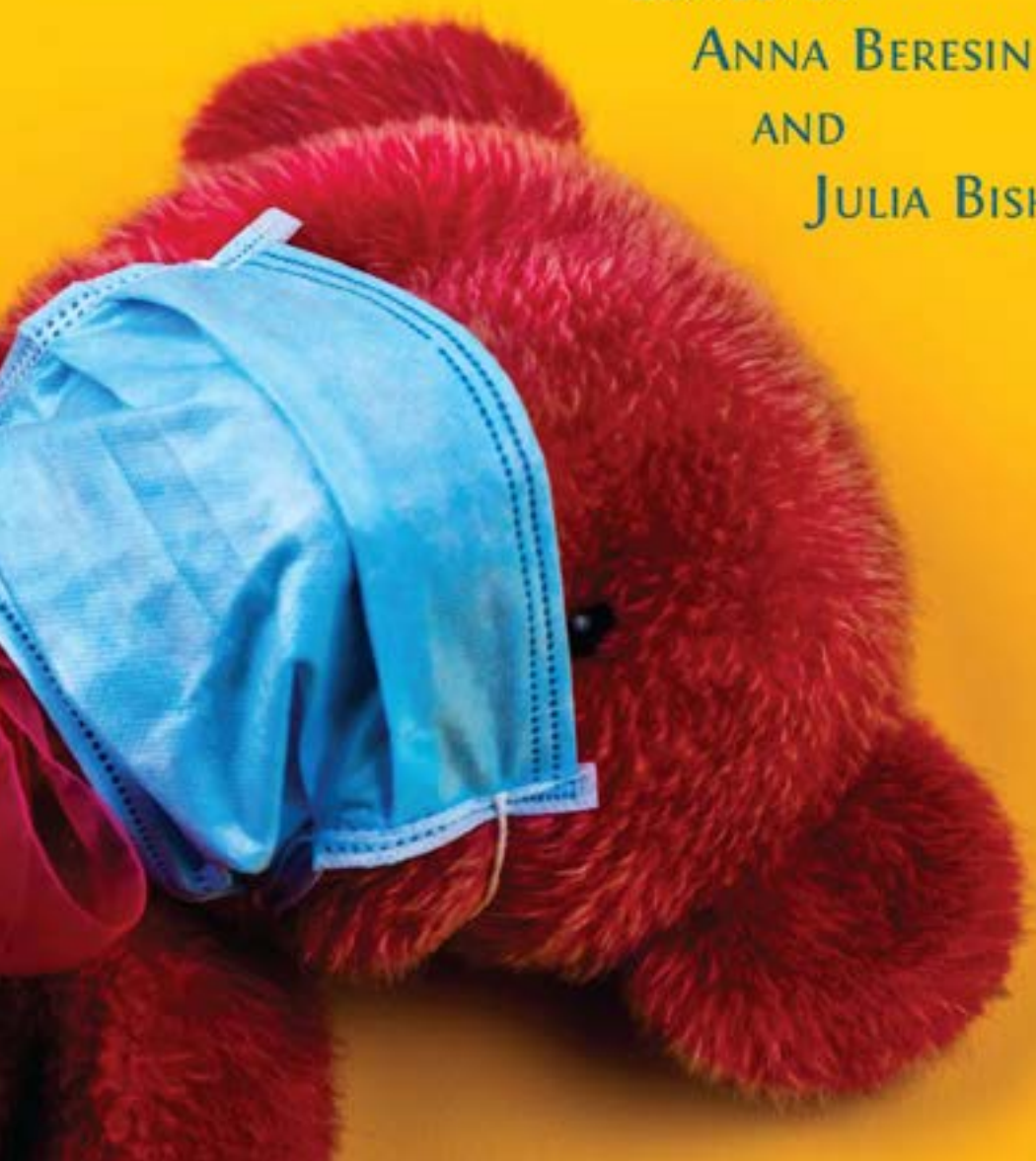
Book Section:
Bishop, J. and Beresin, A. (2023) Introduction. In: Beresin, A. and Bishop, J., (eds.) Play in a Covid Frame: Everyday Pandemic Creativity in a Time of Isolation. Open Book Publishers, xix-xxxii. ISBN: 9781800648913.

https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0326.22

PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

EDITED BY
ANNA BERESIN
AND
JULIA BISHOP



https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop (eds), *Play in a Covid Frame: Everyday Pandemic Creativity in a Time of Isolation*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0326

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0326#resources

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-891-3
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-892-0
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-893-7
ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-894-4
ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-896-8
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-897-5
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0326

Cover photo by Volodymyr Hryshchenko on Unsplash, https://unsplash.com/photos/7JAyy7jLTAk.

Design by Jeevanjot Nagpal

Introduction

Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop

Teddy bears in windows.
LEGO ventilators.
Corona Tag. . .

Play in a Covid Frame documents everyday pandemic creativity, a record of how children, youth, adults and communities improvised expressively in different places around the world. What emerges is an exploration of the complicated bio-social cultural process of play as framed by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and its phases of lockdown and quarantine from 2020–2022. Our book mainly emphasizes the play of children during this time, although we recognize that play remains important for health throughout the lifespan. For many during the pandemic, access to play became both a public health and an educational crisis associated with extreme isolation. For some, the pandemic offered new opportunities for play.

There are books explaining Covid-19 to young children and books explaining the basic idea that play is important for those who care for children in general. There are studies of how Covid has affected children in health care settings and schools, and how children have been affected behaviourally by loss or by lockdown (Kara and Koo 2021; Alabdulkarim et al. 2021; Sama et al. 2020). There are graphic novels and poetry collections about Covid and picture books with titles like *Momma Can I Sleep with You Tonight? Helping Children Cope with the Impact of COVID-19*. Everyone on this planet of nearly eight billion people has been affected by the loss of face-to-face social time, the removal of public encounters, the increase in uncertainty and the strangeness of the unknown trajectory of the virus. For some, it has been particularly

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0326.22

devastating, with multiple losses of life, income and housing. According to the World Health Organization, a study published in *The Lancet* estimated 1.5 million children have lost a parent, custodial grandparent or other caregiver because of Covid between March 2020 and April 2021 (Hillis et al. 2021). Many traditional avenues of mourning or comforting the ill face-to-face had become impossible. Mental health referrals for children in the editors' home countries of the US and UK have sky-rocketed (Abramson 2022; Weedy 2021). What we have very little knowledge about is *how* children, youth, families and communities have coped creatively and how Covid has appeared in children's play cultures. What happens improvisationally when people are cut off from their normal social networks and the spaces they typically inhabit? How have we used the riskiness of play to help deal with the pandemic's unknowns?

The title *Play in a Covid Frame* references the notion that play is always rooted in some sort of frame. In fact, all knowledge is framed by specific moments in time and geography and is seen through particular lenses. In the following chapters, we find that play in its complexity has been illuminated by Covid, and that children and families have adapted in both traditional and innovative ways. For some in crisis, play may disappear entirely, but for many, play has been a key to emotional and social survival. The sociologist Erving Goffman saw all of social life as reflecting a kind of frame inviting frame analysis and, in a sense, this book is a series of snapshots of social life as marked by the pandemic frame (Goffman 1974).

The chapters that follow range from micro-studies of solo toy-hospital play and Zoom playdates of techno-mischief during quarantine to large-scale studies of families in their communities. The authors are researchers and practitioners in Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Ireland, Japan, Scotland, Serbia, Sudan, South Korea, the United States and Wales. Cultures studied include families from different social classes and different speech communities. The editors sent out invitations to major international organizations involved in play research and advocacy: the International Play Association, the Association for the Study of Play, and journals including the *International Journal of Play*, along with scholarly organizations in psychology, folklore and anthropology. We thank the *International Journal of Play* for allowing

permission to include versions of chapters here from their double special issue on 'Play: Resilience and Vulnerability in Difficult Circumstances' (2021-22), the Royal Anthropological Institute and Folklore Society in the United Kingdom for encouraging our editors' participation in its conference 'Creativity during COVID Lockdown: Life and Renewal During the Pandemic' (2021), and the Play Observatory team for its symposium 'Pandemic Play Experiences: Practices Activities/Objects/Texts' (2022). These conferences served as a scholarly introduction to several of the authors in this book.

We recognize that many parts of the world are struggling with basics and the pandemic continues as new variants of the virus emerge. Initially intending to collect a more global portrait of pandemic play, we are therefore still honored to be including the work of so many colleagues from so many different countries. At the same time, we acknowledge that there are many other play stories to be told from around the world and from under-represented peoples, and we hope that they will emerge in due course. That the primary contributions here come from English-speaking countries says more about the networking of scholarship than the true availability of research in the countries that we are missing. Meanwhile, for those seeking more global information about the anthropology of play, we recommend Helen Schwartzman's *Transformations: The Anthropology of Play* (1978), Melvin Konner's *The Evolution of Childhood* (2010), and David Lancy's *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* (2022). Schwartzman speaks of western biases in the description of normative play and Konner reminds us that, for many cultures, 'teaching, observational learning, and play are combined, and in effect, become one process' (2010: 517). Konner suggests that studies of play must be situated in larger studies of cultural practice, as we have attempted to do in this volume. Lancy's book includes a society index from Angola to Yacqui and notes that in communities where food sourcing is the primary activity and labor-demanding, play decreases. We do know that play, like sleep, can disappear in moments of high stress. We hope that this book sparks further study across the globe, documenting diverse pandemic frame cycles.

Play in a Covid Frame is one of the first books to focus exclusively on play during the pandemic. This will likely not be the only pandemic in

our lifetime, however, and the questions it raises are relevant beyond the specifics of Covid-19. How can play help us stay vibrant? How can play help us adapt to new challenges? What distinctive cultural variations have emerged in this time and what creative activities do many groups have in common? How are young people, adults, and communities utilizing objects like toys, along with public, private and online spaces, as tools to deal with the isolation of this moment? When we treat children and young people as creative agents who are able to talk to us theatrically through the things they make and the ways they move, there is much to learn about them individually and collectively. We cannot assume that we know what they are experiencing, or what they need, until we observe them in careful detail like folklorists and ethnographers do.

What Is a Folkloristic Approach to Pandemic Play?

Folklorists study artistic communication—the genres of games, toys, songs, tales, jokes, material culture, festivals and other forms of performance. Folklorists value the oral in times dominated by print and its authority, along with informal means of learning and realization. Folkloristic approaches have been comparative, diachronic and synchronic. They may espouse an ethnographic approach but have an awareness of analogues and connections in space and time. Folklore studies may then take an historical approach, looking at threads of continuity and change, and focusing on 're-creation', the crafting of meaning in this process. They may also take a geographical approach, examining the flow and distribution of specific creative forms and genres, and they may take a cross-cultural or comparative approach. Often, folklorists study pieces of culture that are overlooked, art outside the museum, music outside the concert hall. Steve Zeitlin, author of *The Poetry of Everyday Life*, writes, 'Folklorists work to document, interpret, present, and advocate for forms of cultural expression that society may view as marginalized or insignificant, but which are often at the core of a community's identity and culture' (2021:19). If the folklorists of childhood and of play across the life course offer any wisdom, it is in the genres of play, games, humour, and toys that the strangeness of the adult world emerges.

In the 1950s, for example, Iona and Peter Opie documented children in Wolstanton, England, playing a tag game called Germ, one in Cranford called Fever, and in Wales they played the Plague (1969: 119). In 1968, Jeanne Pitre Soileau recorded this one in New Orleans, USA, also recorded similarly by the Opies in the United Kingdom:

> Call the doctor quick, quick, quick.
> Doctor, Doctor, will I die?
> Close your eyes and count to five,
> 1-2-3-4-5.
> (Soileau 2016: 58; cf. Opie and Opie 1959: 34)

In the 1980s, Vivian Gussin Paley famously audio-taped the play in her Chicago preschool; a four-year-old told another that the bad guys they were fighting were 'wet to death'. His friend countered, 'But if I touch anyone they could come back to life'. 'Back to life, wet to death, back to life!' (Paley 1988: 118). For Paley, children would play with death as a normal existential crisis often related to familial dramas surrounding the birth of a new sibling or power dynamics within social groups. In this book, we offer the paradox of this most unusual time—that we have witnessed the extraordinariness of Covid play as both theme and frame, and recognize that play forms have always reflected existential crises.

In the early 1990s, Beresin recorded children creating a spontaneous news programme on a playground in Philadelphia where children warned each other not to go to California 'or you'll get shot'. It was just weeks after the violence emerged in South Central Los Angeles after the brutal beating of Rodney King. The playground was filled with narratives of violence, warnings about travel to other cities and warnings about violence on the boulevard, spurred on by the presence of the author's video camera, an impromptu report of the 'newses' of the day (Beresin 2010). After September 11, 2001, in another Philadelphia playground, one nine-year-old sang to her softly:

> World Trade Center is falling down, falling down, falling down,
> World Trade Center is falling down, Oh-on top of us.
> (Beresin 2002)

Play allows children to repeat things they have seen and heard, retell it and remould it until it makes some kind of sense as a coping mechanism.

And yet some things we encounter make no sense at all, and sometimes it is not the job of play to try and make sense. In order to tackle such a large field, this volume includes perspectives from a range of disciplines beyond folklore and anthropology: psychology, sociology, art history, education, communication, cultural studies, early childhood studies, as well as the perspectives of health advocates, project managers, educators, playworkers, artists, and park, game and toy designers.

Individual children or families are not the unit of study here; it is the play of human beings caught up in the pandemic and affected by its associated regimes, restrictions and consequences. Drawing from folklore, the activity and the talk around the activity is the focus, deeply rooted in its various settings or contexts, whether it be the home, the schoolyard, the street or the park. Unlike anthropology, the place itself is not the primary frame but the cultural context is considered essential as a window into understanding. The activities belong to a place and time, and also reflect our global collective struggle. What folklorists do is to document, preserve and study these play genres as a reflection of the past and the present. Some connect it to archival material, some to oral history and some compare the material cross culturally. This volume does some of all the above within the larger window of child and family study. After such a time of anxiety and fear, of disruption to our normal social networks, of no sleep, of constant reminders about risk, death and loss, play, and the documentation of it in this volume, offers a set of counter-narratives: that we have been cut off and frightened and yet we are very much alive and connected. So, we play chase. And we compose satires. And we run from safety to danger to safety again. We play in forts and under tables. We make things and destroy them. We label things and relabel them, and label them again.

Psychologist and folklorist Brian Sutton-Smith spoke of the 'triviality barrier of play', that somehow the deep and poetic process of human playful expression has to fight for its legitimacy alongside other more respected containers of paradox like art or religion (1997). It is a well-accepted cliché that play is 'fun' and yet play may sometimes evoke surrealism and sad emotions (Axline 1947; Erikson 1975; Freud 1995 [1907]; Klein 1932). Games are as much about failure as they are about success, as meditation can be said to be a form of controlled suffering. Both are a type of practice for the unknown and both can make room for

complex feelings (Juul 2013; Beck 2021). In the complexity of emotions at play, we make emotional space for experimentation, adjustment, renewal and healing. It is hoped that this work demonstrates that in the lightness of play lies a corresponding space for heaviness, and that schools and child care programmes, if they are serious about helping students readjust post-pandemic, will all safeguard time for play and recess.

> Children fearful or not sleeping well? *Make time for play*.
> Children overwhelmed by academic catch up*? Make time for play*.
> Children antisocial? *Make time for play*.
> Need a way to address social-emotional learning on a regular basis? *Make time for play*.

One hundred years of developmental psychology from such divergent authors as Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky point to the absolute necessity of play for children and of the creative forces connected to play itself (Freud 1995 [1907]; Elkind 2008; Piaget 1962; Vygotsky 1978).

We still do not know what play is exactly, but we know that when it is missing it is a sign of ill health. Brian Sutton-Smith's aphorism 'the opposite of play is not work—it's depression' applies to toddlers and high schoolers, to college students and senior citizens. As D. W. Winnicott wrote, play has much to do with reality, offering a transition from our attachments to our interdependence. Toys and games serve to challenge our thinking, to allow us to puzzle and sort through the illogic of the present. Freud's student Erik Erikson would nod and say that after play we are refreshed as if after a good night's sleep (Erikson 1950; Winnicott 1971). This is true, even in a time of tremendous insomnia.

Covid has been an extremely limiting constraint for some, limiting social time, touch, sound, movement and the visual communication of the human face (Steiner and Veel 2021). Games themselves are artificial constraints and so potentially prepare us for such moments of serious constraint. In games, we limit running around to certain patterns or we use fewer words, like the mini crossword puzzle. Play scholar Johann Huizinga wrote that play is itself associated with its own magic circle, its own artificial limits and boundaries (1938). Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman called play 'free movement in a more rigid structure' (2004;

304). Games and play can be then considered as the ultimate preparation for challenging times and this is true for humans as well as for animals (Fagen 1981; Burghardt 2005). It is also true that for some, the pandemic gave them more time but less geographical freedom, leading to more family time and less peer time, or more time with siblings and less with friends. It is clear that no one scholarly discipline holds all the tools for understanding the complexity of play and the complexity of this time frame. So, this book will turn and turn again to the lenses of sociology, anthropology, folklore, history and psychology as we attempt to shed light on pandemic play.

Adults play; often it appears through the arts and through crafts. We have seen bakeries serve coronavirus-shaped breads, round balls with the characteristic protruding sticks on all sides, like the icon of the virus (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2021). Some have turned to creative ways of decorating and personalizing masks, for example, in some cases donating hand-sewn masks to hospitals and schools. Some museums have hosted art made during Covid, notably New York's Arts Westchester's exhibit, 'Together ApART: Reflections during Covid', featuring diverse art forms. Highlights included Jennifer Larrabee's quilt made from remnants left over from mask making and Rebecca Thomas' inventive flamenco dance recorded at home with a mustachioed broom and bucket faux partner. Thomas danced and played with the motif of cleaning and scrubbing to keep her family safe. These play forms exaggerate the basics—what it means to eat, to cover ourselves, to wash, to move during the pandemic.

Play is the seed of all creativity. The Irish poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama writes:

> The creative is not just a decoration. It's not a luxury. The creative is an element. And 'the creative' doesn't have to mean I'm going to go and write an orchestral suite. It might be I'm going to make a scarf with my terrible knitting, for instance, or a pie, or write a letter. It isn't something to turn to when you've time. It's something that makes time and something that, in a time of constraint, actually allows time to expand. (Ó Tuama, 2022)

Sometimes play creates and sometimes it destroys, making room for new ideas and new creations.

The goals of *Play in a Covid Frame* are threefold: to witness what anthropologist Victor Turner called 'the human seriousness of play',

to document a diversity of human inventiveness during the novel coronavirus and to attempt to crystalize a useful definition of play itself through descriptive portraiture (Turner 1982). If we note what play is and does informally, it may help families, schools and other programmes that work with children safeguard time for play in the future and not confuse it with other similar-looking activities, like organized adult-led recess, art class or gym. Even in solitary play there are cultural frames and the hidden rhetoric of toy or game designers. We cannot help but play in community even when we are by ourselves. As videogame scholar Chris Bateman writes, 'No one plays alone' (2017). Like art, play is fundamentally a form of dialogue (Bakhtin 1981; Bateson 1972), so studying social play in a time of fluctuation in isolation can prove particularly useful as we search for strategies to live together on this planet.

Following the metaphor of the frame, the book is divided into three sections: landscapes, portraits and shifting frames. Landscape chapters focus on larger projects, with a particular emphasis on the built environment or playground. Portraits contain smaller-scale case studies, sometimes as small as a single toy or as large as play in a specific town. The third section raises new questions by studying hybrid play in different forms. Specifically, our landscape section begins with Julia Bishop's examination of Covid-themed chase games as they emerged in the pandemic, largely as evidenced through the eyes of adults on Twitter. Živka Krnjaja and Nevena Mitranić look at 'play as the common space' in the Serbian lockdown. Holly Sienkiewicz, Jenn Beideman, Beatriz LeBron, Shanielia Lewis, Emma Morrison, Lydia Rivera and Dina Faticone describe a 'resident-driven play-based agenda' in Rochester, New York, addressing Covid interventions there. Maria O'Dwyer, Carmel Hannan, and Patricia Neville focus on social class and play access during Covid in the Republic of Ireland. Pete King points to how adventure playgrounds in the United Kingdom responded to both Covid and the first lockdown there, while Mitsunari Terada, Mariia Ermilova and Hitoshi Shimamura document facility management of Covid restrictions in a youth centre complex in Japan. This section contains wider lenses.

The portrait section includes Katriina Heljakka's study of plush toys as 'objects of resilience' during Covid in Finland through the intergenerational display of teddy bears. Anna Beresin chronicles the

pandemic as frame, theme and provocation as families searched for communal play spaces in three different communities in the US city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There is a sense of ambiguity here, as many families denied the appearance of the virus in their children's play but acknowledged that their children were constantly playing 'going to the doctor'. Caron Carter offers parents' perspectives on their children's friendships during the pandemic in England, highlighting a sense of loss and their renewed understanding of children's social worlds. William Renel and Jessica Thom recount 'disabled-led play' and advocacy during Covid in England with their programme *Touretteshero*. Nicolas Le Bigre toys with Covid play innovations and vulnerability in Scotland, offering a nuanced look at improvised cultural offerings, from 'Clapping for Carers' to chalked botanical signage. Suzanne M. Egan, Jennifer Pope, Chloé Beatty and Clara Hoyne bring us findings from the Play and Learning Early Years (PLEY) Covid-19 Study in Ireland. Like these authors, Pool Ip Dong addresses the play of young children but this time in South Korea. Many of the portraits focus on toys and crafts during Covid, balancing both the specificities and the universals of pandemic play. The section finishes with John Potter and Michelle Cannon's photo essay excerpted from the Play Observatory which documented a range of children's play experiences during Covid-19.

The shifting frames section opens with Martha Radice's study of 'Yardi-Gras' in New Orleans. (No, Yardi-Gras is not a typo.) Judy McKinty, Ruth Hazleton and Danni von der Borch describe children finding 'new ways to play' during the pandemic in Australia. Beresin returns with a microanalysis of techno-mischief during a Zoom playdate. Yinka Olusoga and Catherine Bannister problematize the complexity of children's masking during the pandemic, sharing personal accounts of mask decoration and identity play. We finish with Heather Shirey's 'Art in the Streets: Playful Politics in the Work of the Velvet Bandit and SudaLove', representing Covid-related graffiti art in the work of two artists, one from the San Francisco Bay area in the USA and one from Sudan.

Young people's art appears in specific chapters but also forms a montage at the end of the portraits and shifting frames sections, highlighting young people's direct participation in curating their own documentation. Following the model of Robert Coles' works *Children*

of Crisis (1967), *The Moral Life of Children* (1986a), *The Political Life of Children* (1986b) and *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1986c), *Play in a Covid Frame* honours not just the words of children, youth, adults and communities but their designs, their bodily intelligence. In conclusion, Beresin and Bishop flip the title and examine 'Covid in a Play Frame', making connections between play theory, folklore and public health, as we examine the pandemic not just as one episode but as an ongoing global challenge. Concrete suggestions for those who work and play directly with children, youth and adults are offered as a postscript, created collectively on Zoom with the contributing authors, a virtual conference designed to meet new challenges and meet each other.

It is hoped that this book will demonstrate youthful sophistication at play along with familial innovation during the pandemic, and remind us to safeguard time and public space for exaggerated playful activity and art. We who write, study or work in play, or who aim to keep our lives playful, must shift our understanding of play's importance in community life, as play remains a most trivialized topic of study in all fields and a most sidelined activity in most countries' public schooling. Play moves into open spaces, coming out of restricted ones. In this spirit, *Play in a Covid Frame* has been made open access by design, as free as possible.

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