

A COMPANION GUIDE

Status language, revision records and honest work in progress

THE UNFINISHED

The Unfinished Studio Manual

How to show work in progress honestly, tell an artifact from a proposal from a wish, and keep a record of every revision.

SAHIL TAYAL · SAHILVERSE

Main home: <https://sahiltayal.com/>

From: <https://unfinished.sahiltayal.online/>

Contents: how to read this manual · why show drafts · principles of craft and iteration · a build–test–revise narrative · artifact, proposal, wish · honest status language · publishing in progress · eighteen sample dossiers · the Artifact Status Card · a worked example · reflection questions · sources.

START HERE

How to read this manual

This manual is a companion to the website at unfinished.sahiltayal.online, but it stands on its own. You can read it offline, print the worksheet pages, and use the Artifact Status Card without ever visiting the site.

It makes three kinds of statement, and it labels them so you can tell them apart. That habit is the whole subject of the manual, so we practise it here first.

Label	What it means	Example in this manual
FACT	Something a cited source states. The source is numbered and listed on the last page.	A philosophy reference defines an artifact as an object made intentionally for a purpose [3].
OUR VIEW	An interpretation or working rule. It is this studio's judgement and nobody else has endorsed it.	A status line should say what exists, what will be done, and what is only hoped for.
INVENTED	A made-up scenario used for teaching. It never happened, and no result in it is real.	All eighteen sample dossiers, and the worked example on the status card.

Why show drafts at all

Most public work arrives with its drafts removed. A finished page, product or project looks as if it came out whole. That is pleasant to look at, but it makes three things hard for a visitor: telling what exists from what is only hoped for, learning from the dead ends, and trusting the maker. If every claim is polished to the same shine, a real result and a wish look identical.

There is a public record that finished objects have messy histories. The Smithsonian's online exhibition on craft and the creative process collects letters, writings, sketches, photographs and oral-history interviews from craft artists, and it describes creativity as sparked partly by materials, new information, and even previously rejected ideas [1]. A related Smithsonian selection of sketchbooks describes them as an intimate glimpse of an artist's visual thinking and as showing stages of the creative process [2].

Our view: those pages describe artists and craft, not websites or side projects, so we draw only a modest lesson from them. The lesson is that a draft is evidence of thinking, and hiding it removes some of the evidence. It is not a proof that showing every draft is always wise, as the page on publishing in progress explains.

CRAFT AND ITERATION

Seven principles for work that is still moving

These are working rules for a small studio. They are **our view**. We have tried to phrase each one so that you could test it on your own work and decide it is wrong.

1. Ask a question that can be answered “no”

“Is this a good idea?” cannot fail, so it cannot teach. “Will three strangers say what this label means without help?” can fail by Thursday. The more a question allows a clear “no”, the more a “yes” is worth.

2. Build the cheapest version that could answer it

Paper, pencil, a single page. Cheap versions are easy to throw away, and that makes it easier to hear criticism, because you have not spent a month defending the draft.

3. Write down what failure looks like before you test

Philosophers of science describe testing a hypothesis as deducing observable consequences and then checking them. A passed test lends support but does not prove the idea [5]. A related line of thought from Karl Popper holds that no number of confirming cases proves a universal claim, but a single genuine counter-instance can refute it [6]. **Our view**, and the practical lesson: if you write the failure condition first, you cannot quietly redefine success afterwards.

4. Keep the crossed-out version readable

Cross out, do not erase. The old attempt explains why the new one looks the way it does. On the website, a dossier's first attempt is struck through once the revision appears, and it stays legible on purpose.

5. Change one thing per version

If you change five things and the result improves, you do not know which one mattered. A revision record only teaches if each line says what changed.

6. A failed test is information, not a verdict

The same philosophy entry on scientific method notes that Popper later allowed that responding to a surprising observation, rather than discarding the theory at once, often produced important new insights [5]. Failing a test is an instruction to look closely at what the failure says. It is not an instruction to quit, and it is not licence to rescue the idea by adding excuses.

7. Retire things on purpose

Endless revision is its own failure. Archiving an attempt with a sentence about why it stopped is a complete and respectable ending. The sample dossiers include four archived ones for that reason.

BUILD – TEST – REVISE

A narrative of one lap and a half

The loop below is simple on purpose. Most of the skill is in doing each step honestly and leaving a record.

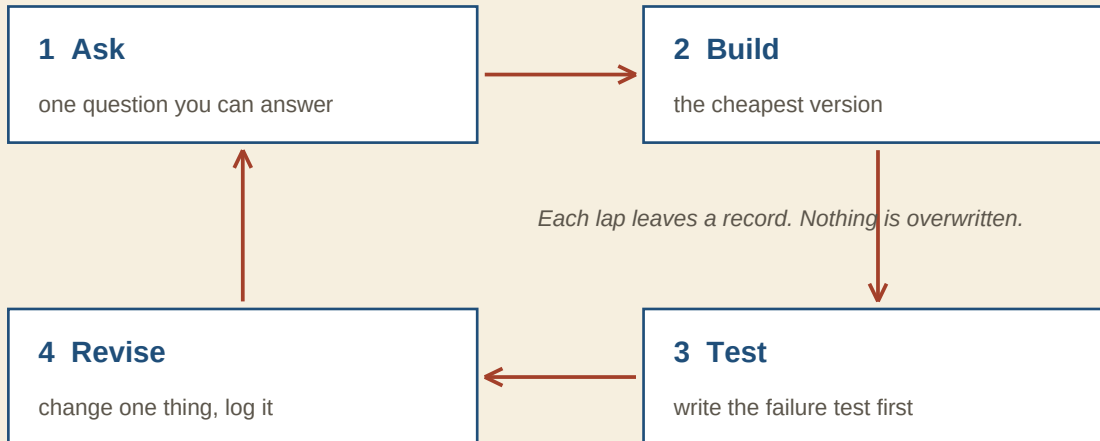


Figure 1. The build–test–revise loop. Four boxes joined by arrows, running ask, build, test, revise, and back to ask. Original diagram by this studio.

INVENTED SCENARIO. Nothing below happened. It is a teaching story.

Ask. Someone running a small shared bookshelf wonders whether a label on each book could show its condition at a glance. They write the question so it can fail: “Can a stranger tell, in ten seconds and without help, whether this item is finished, in progress, or abandoned?”

Build. They stick a green, an amber and a grey dot beside each item. It takes twenty minutes. This is the first attempt.

Test. Before showing anyone, they write: “I will count this as failing if two of five strangers misread a dot.” They ask five people. Three misread amber. One cannot see the difference between green and grey.

Revise. They cross out the dots and replace them with three words, Made, Making, Shelved, and a short line saying what is still missing. The crossed-out dots stay in the record. The log reads: *v1 dots only; v2 added a shape beside each dot; v3 replaced dots with words plus a missing-line.*

Ask again. The second lap begins with a new, smaller question: which of the three words do strangers still misread? The scenario is half-way round its second loop when we stop, which is the honest place to stop. There is no ending to report, because no ending exists in the story. That is a feature of unfinished work, not a flaw in the story.

What this narrative shows

- The test was written before it was run, so the failure was not redefined afterwards.
- Each version changed one thing, so the log explains itself.
- The first attempt was crossed out but kept. A visitor can see why the dots went away.
- The story ends mid-lap. It makes no claim that the labels “worked”.

THREE WORDS

Artifact, proposal, wish

Public projects blur three different things into one confident voice. Separating them is the single most useful habit in this manual.

Word	Test it with this question	What it looks like	How to label it
Artifact	Can someone inspect it today?	A sketch, a paper model, a written log, a photo of a crossed-out draft. Rough counts.	“Here is the sketch.”
Proposal	Is there an action, an owner, and a way to be wrong?	“I will run the flipped meeting sheet once, and change the layout if no decision is named by the end.”	“I plan to... and I will count it a failure if...”
Wish	Is it only an outcome you hope for?	“This will change how everyone shops.” “We should do something about meetings.”	“I hope...”, kept in its own sentence.

Where the words come from, and where we part company

Fact: the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy reports the common view that artifacts are objects made intentionally to accomplish some purpose, and then argues that the boundary is a continuum, with cases that blur along each part of the definition [3]. We borrow only the plain core: an artifact is something made.

Fact: the same encyclopedia's entry on practical reason describes an intention as an attitude with a “world-to-mind” direction of fit, one that aims to bring the world into line with it, and describes agents as treating earlier plans as defeasibly fixed constraints on later deliberation [4]. **Our view:** that is why we ask a proposal to carry an owner and a test. A proposal is the public form of an intention, and a plan is only worth the commitment behind it.

Our view, not a sourced finding: the specific three-way split of artifact, proposal and wish is this studio's own working tool. No source cited here uses it.

Where the distinction breaks down

- **The edges are fuzzy.** A sketch of a proposal is itself an artifact. A written plan is an artifact that describes a proposal. The labels apply to the thing you are pointing at in one sentence, not to a whole project.
- **Wishes are not the enemy.** Plenty of good work starts as one. The fault is presenting a wish as if it were a result.
- **“Unfinished” can become a shield.** A label cannot stand in for effort. This is our judgement.
- **Some drafts should stay private.** See the page on publishing in progress.

HONEST STATUS LANGUAGE

Say what exists. Say what you will do. Keep hopes separate.

Overclaiming rarely starts as lying. It starts as tense: “we are building” becomes “we built”, “we plan to test” becomes “we tested”. Rewriting in the right tense is the cheapest honesty upgrade there is.

Instead of...	Try...	Why
“We launched a new system.”	“There is a one-page paper prototype. Nobody outside the studio has used it.”	Says what exists and who has seen it.
“It works.”	“It passed the one test we set, which was... We have not tested...”	A pass supports an idea but does not prove it [5].
“People love it.”	“Two people tried it. One said...” (only if they actually did)	A count and a source beat an adjective.
“Coming soon.”	“Next step: run test 2. No date is promised.”	A date you cannot keep is a wish in costume.
“We failed.”	“The method failed. The question is still open.”	Separates the question from the attempt.
“Inspired by research.”	“This page [link] supports X. The rest is our guess.”	Points to a specific claim, not a vibe.

The four stage words used in this manual

Stage	Meaning inside a dossier	Website word
Idea	A question exists. Little or nothing has been built.	Question
Prototype	A rough version exists and is being revised.	Prototype
Public artifact	A version has been put in front of someone and a test result is recorded, in the scenario.	Tested
Archived attempt	Work has stopped, and a sentence explains why.	Archived

These stages describe where an *invented* idea stands inside its own scenario. They are not claims about real projects.

PUBLISHING IN PROGRESS

How to publish work in progress without claiming things that did not happen

A checklist you can run before posting anything unfinished.

Before you post

- **Label every claim.** Next to each sentence ask: is this an artifact, a proposal, or a wish?
- **Use the right tense.** Past tense only for things that have happened and that someone could check.
- **Name the weak spot.** One visible limitation makes the rest more believable.
- **Keep numbers honest.** If you did not count it, do not give a number. “Some” is fine.
- **Do not invent social proof.** No made-up quotes, testimonials, partners or dates. If an example is illustrative, say “illustrative” beside it.
- **Link to the exact page.** Cite the specific page that supports a claim, not a homepage.
- **Say what you are not claiming.** One sentence is enough.

Cases where you should wait, or share less

Our view. Publishing in progress is a choice with conditions, not a duty.

- **Other people could rely on it.** Medical, legal, safety or money guidance should not go public half-finished without a very clear warning, and often not at all.
- **It contains someone else's private information.** A draft that quotes a person, shows their home, or reveals their situation is not yours alone to publish.
- **You would not stand behind it.** If you would be embarrassed to be held to the sentence, rewrite the sentence.
- **It makes a sharp claim about a real person or organisation.** Check it carefully, and consider keeping it out of public view until you have.

When you publish an unfinished page, say so at the top, say when you last changed it only if you really record dates, and keep a visible log. A log beats a promise because a reader can check it.

EIGHTEEN SAMPLE DOSSIERS

Eighteen invented dossiers, abridged

Every dossier here is invented. None describes a real project, launch, test or result. Each follows the same six steps. The first attempt is struck through where a revision replaced it, and remains readable. Eight of them appear in full on the website. The rest appear only in this manual. Where a dossier says “if revived”, the next step has not happened and is stated as a proposal, not as news.

No. 01 • PROTOTYPE • INVENTED SCENARIO

The Honest Shelf Label

Question. Can a shelf label show finished, half-finished and abandoned without explanation? **First attempt.** ~~Three coloured dots.~~ **Constraint.** Colour fails for colour-blind visitors and photocopies. **Criticism.** Amber could mean almost done or quietly stalled. **Revision.** Three words, Made, Making, Shelved, plus a what-is-missing line. **Next test.** Ask five strangers to read a label aloud and note which word they misread.

No. 02 • PUBLIC ARTIFACT • INVENTED SCENARIO

The Recipe Card With a Failure Column

Question. Can a recipe card keep the mistakes as well as the successes? **First attempt.** ~~An “Oops” box at the bottom.~~ **Constraint.** It must work with flour on your hands, and optional boxes get skipped. **Criticism.** “Oops” reads as a joke, so real fixes become jokes or vanish. **Revision.** Rename it “Next time” and pre-print three prompts: too much, too little, too long. **Next test.** Cook once reading the notes and once ignoring them, then write one paragraph on what changed.

No. 03 • IDEA • INVENTED SCENARIO

The Walkers' Bus-Stop Map

Question. Would a map drawn by people who walk to the stop show what the official one omits? **First attempt.** ~~A blank map and a pencil.~~ **Constraint.** Everyone draws differently, so nobody else can read it. **Criticism.** It may become a complaint wall and excludes non-walkers. **Revision.** Draft a six-symbol key first: shade, step, puddle, steep, bench, well-lit. **Next test.** Two people draw the same route using only the key. Compare.

No. 04 • PROTOTYPE • INVENTED SCENARIO

The Pocket Glossary for a Hard Chapter

Question. Can a glossary written by the reader teach more than the one at the back? **First attempt.** ~~Copy the book's definitions onto one card.~~ **Constraint.** Copying is not understanding. **Criticism.** Own-words definitions could simply be wrong. **Revision.** Write in your own words, then add a check line with a page reference. **Next test.** After a week, cover the card and explain five terms aloud.

No. 05 • ARCHIVED ATTEMPT • INVENTED SCENARIO

The Repair-First Wardrobe Log

Question. Would logging repairs make someone less likely to buy a replacement? **First attempt.** ~~A notebook page per garment.~~ **Constraint.** Logging took longer than repairing. **Criticism.** It measured effort, not savings, with no baseline. **Revision.** A tally tag sewn into each garment (never built). **Next test.** If revived: one month with tags, one without, counting purchases only.

No. 06 · PUBLIC ARTIFACT · INVENTED SCENARIO**The One-Page Meeting**

Question. Can one sheet end a meeting with one owner and one next step? **First attempt.** ~~A template: agenda, notes, actions.~~ **Constraint.** People filled the notes and left actions blank. **Criticism.** The order made notes the main event. **Revision.** Flip the sheet: decision and owner first, as a draft the group edits. **Next test.** Run two meetings, old sheet and flipped, then ask attendees to recall the decision.

No. 07 · ARCHIVED ATTEMPT · INVENTED SCENARIO**Sound-Walk Postcards**

Question. Can a postcard carry a written score for listening to a street? **First attempt.** ~~A sketched route with “listen for...” lines.~~ **Constraint.** Streets sound different at noon and at night. **Criticism.** Without a recording, heard and imagined are indistinguishable. **Revision.** Add a time of day and a heard/imagined tick per line. **Next test.** If revived: two walkers, different hours, compare ticks.

No. 08 · IDEA · INVENTED SCENARIO**The Reading List That Argues With Itself**

Question. What if each recommended book came paired with the strongest disagreement? **First attempt.** ~~Two columns: For and Against.~~ **Constraint.** Serious opponents are hard to find; weak ones mislead. **Criticism.** Pairing implies two sides when topics have several. **Revision.** Replace Against with Tension: one unresolved question and where to look. **Next test.** Make one pairing by hand for a book you know. Ask a friend which question they would chase.

No. 09 · IDEA · INVENTED SCENARIO**The Seed Swap Ledger**

Question. Could a plain ledger help neighbours swap seeds without anyone being left out? **First attempt.** ~~A shared sheet listing who has what.~~ **Constraint.** Seeds go stale and people forget what they listed. **Criticism.** Only people who read the sheet can join in. **Revision.** Add a “last checked” column and a paper copy by the door. **Next test.** Ask two neighbours to find a seed using only the paper copy.

No. 10 · PROTOTYPE · INVENTED SCENARIO**The Lending Shelf Receipt**

Question. Can a slip in each borrowed book show who has it and when it returns? **First attempt.** ~~A pencilled name inside the cover.~~ **Constraint.** People forget to write, and handwriting is unclear. **Criticism.** A name in a book is a privacy leak for some. **Revision.** Use a first name or a nickname chosen by the borrower. **Next test.** Borrow three books with the slips and see whether any come back unmarked.

No. 11 · PUBLIC ARTIFACT · INVENTED SCENARIO**The Stairwell Notice Board Redesign**

Question. Can a notice board be arranged so urgent items are noticed first? **First attempt.** ~~A tidy grid of equal-sized notices.~~ **Constraint.** Everything looked equally important. **Criticism.** A tidy board hides what has expired. **Revision.** One “this week” column, and every notice gets a take-down mark. **Next test.** Ask three residents what is urgent right now and compare with the board.

No. 12 • PROTOTYPE • INVENTED SCENARIO**The Two-Minute Handover Note**

Question. Can a note of five lines replace a long handover chat? **First attempt.** ~~Free form handover notes.~~

Constraint. People wrote what they remembered, not what mattered. **Criticism.** Five lines may omit a rare but

critical detail. **Revision.** Fixed prompts: what is running, what is stuck, what is next, who to ask, what I am unsure of.

Next test. Hand the note to a colleague and count the questions they still ask.

No. 13 • ARCHIVED ATTEMPT • INVENTED SCENARIO**The Sunday Pantry Inventory**

Question. Would a weekly inventory reduce duplicate purchases? **First attempt.** ~~A list written each Sunday.~~

Constraint. It took longer than shopping did. **Criticism.** A list that is not trusted is not used. **Revision.** A photo of the shelf instead (never tried). **Next test.** If revived: compare two weeks of purchases, one with photos.

No. 14 • PUBLIC ARTIFACT • INVENTED SCENARIO**The Plain-Words Menu**

Question. Can descriptions in plain words help diners choose faster? **First attempt.** ~~A rewritten dish list in simple language.~~ **Constraint.** Plain words can read as bland. **Criticism.** Shorter descriptions may hide allergen information.

Revision. Keep allergen notes on the menu as their own printed line. **Next test.** Ask diners to pick a dish in ten seconds and note the questions asked.

No. 15 • PROTOTYPE • INVENTED SCENARIO**The Teach-Back Flashcard**

Question. Does explaining a card aloud help more than rereading it? **First attempt.** ~~A card with a term on one side and the definition on the other.~~ **Constraint.** People skipped the aloud part when others were present. **Criticism.**

Explaining badly can feel like learning. **Revision.** Add a prompt to record one thing you could not explain. **Next test.** A week later, test only the terms marked “could not explain”.

No. 16 • IDEA • INVENTED SCENARIO**The Tool Library Sign**

Question. Could a sign tell neighbours that tools are available to borrow? **First attempt.** ~~A handwritten sign on a gate.~~ **Constraint.** A sign does not say what is available. **Criticism.** Nobody knows who to ask or how to return things.

Revision. A short list of tools plus one named contact method. **Next test.** Ask two neighbours what they would borrow and how they would ask.

No. 17 • PUBLIC ARTIFACT • INVENTED SCENARIO**The “What I Dropped” List**

Question. Does a weekly list of dropped tasks make priorities clearer? **First attempt.** ~~A list at the end of each week.~~

Constraint. It felt like a list of failures. **Criticism.** It may encourage dropping everything hard. **Revision.** Write one line on why each item was dropped, and one on what stays. **Next test.** After four weeks, check whether the same item keeps being dropped.

No. 18 • ARCHIVED ATTEMPT • INVENTED SCENARIO**The Flip-Side Timetable**

Question. Could a timetable printed on both sides show a person's whole week? **First attempt.** ~~Weekday on the front, weekend on the back.~~ **Constraint.** Few people turned it over. **Criticism.** The back became a hidden half. **Revision.**

One side only, with weekends in a narrower column (never made). **Next test.** If revived: ask five people to find a Saturday event in ten seconds.

TAKE-HOME TOOL

The Artifact Status Card and revision record

Make one card per idea and keep it beside the work. Fill it in pencil. Print it, or copy the fields into a notebook. The card is meant to be changed, so cross out old entries and keep them readable.

Idea (a few words)	
Today's date, only if you keep dates	
Stage (circle): Idea / Prototype / Public artifact / Archived attempt	
Question I am trying to answer (it must be able to fail)	
What exists right now that someone could inspect (artifact)	
What I will do next, who owns it, and when I will change course (proposal)	
What I only hope for (wish)	
Failure test, written before the test is run	
Biggest weak spot I can name	
What I am NOT claiming	

Revision record

One line per version. Say what changed, why, and what the test showed. If you did not test, write “not tested”.

Ver.	What changed (one thing)	Why	Test result / not tested

WORKED EXAMPLE

The same card, filled in

INVENTED SCENARIO. The card below describes an imaginary idea. No test was run, no person was asked, and no result exists.

Idea	A flip-over sign for a shared noticeboard that shows whether each notice is still current.
Stage	Idea. (A sketch exists; nobody has used it.)
Question	Can three strangers, shown the sign for ten seconds, say which notices are expired?
Artifact (exists now)	One pencil sketch on paper. Nothing else.
Proposal (next step, owner, change of course)	I will make a paper mock-up this week and show it to three people. If two of the three cannot say which notice is expired, I will change the design before building anything else.
Wish	I hope neighbours will check the board more often. No evidence for this yet.
Failure test (written first)	Fewer than two of three people identify the expired notices correctly.
Weak spot	Three people is a very small sample. It can catch a design that is badly confusing, but it cannot show the design is good.
Not claiming	That any board has been built, that anyone has used it, or that it will change behaviour.

Revision record for the example

Ver.	What changed	Why	Result
v1	Sketched a flip-over sign with a green and a red side.	First attempt.	Not tested.
v2	~~Green / red~~ replaced by the words Current / Expired.	Colour alone excludes colour-blind readers (reasoning, not a test).	Not tested.

Notice what the card does not do. It does not report a result, because there is none. Its honest status is “idea, with one sketch and one planned test”, and that sentence is stronger than a vague “prototype in progress” because someone could check it.

REFLECT, THEN CHECK THE SOURCES

Reflection questions

- Pick something you have made public recently. Which sentences about it are artifacts, which are proposals, and which are wishes? Did the tense match?
- What is the cheapest thing you could make this week that could answer your question with a clear “no”?
- Where have you quietly redefined success after seeing a result? What would the failure test have said beforehand?
- Which of your drafts have you hidden because they look unfinished, and what would a visitor learn from seeing them? What could go wrong if they did?
- Is there something you should archive, with one sentence on why, rather than revise again?
- Which of this manual's rules do you disagree with? Write the strongest case against it, then see what survives.

Sources and further reading

Each link goes to a specific page. The note says what that page was used for in this manual. Links were checked when this manual was prepared, and pages may change. The three-way split of artifact, proposal and wish, every sample dossier, and the status card are this studio's own work.

[1] **Craft and the Creative Process**, Smithsonian. <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/craft-creative-process>

Used for: craft documented through letters, writings, sketches, photographs and oral-history interviews; creative process sparked partly by materials, information and previously rejected ideas.

[2] **Sketchbooks: Curators' Choice**, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

<https://www.si.edu/spotlight/sketchbooks-curators-choice>

Used for: sketchbooks described as an intimate glimpse of an artist's visual thinking and as showing stages of the creative process.

[3] **Artifact**, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/artifact/>

Used for: the common definition of an artifact as an object made intentionally for a purpose, and the continuum problem at its edges.

[4] **Practical Reason**, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/practical-reason/>

Used for: intentions as attitudes that aim to bring the world into line, and plans as defeasibly fixed constraints on later deliberation.

[5] **Scientific Method**, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-method/>

Used for: testing a hypothesis by deducing observable consequences; passing a test supports but does not prove; Popper's later view on responding to surprising observations.

[6] **Karl Popper**, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>

Used for: falsifiability, in which no experience verifies a universal proposition but a single genuine counter-instance falsifies it.

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