

4D4 SYSTEM REFERENCE DOCUMENT

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Core rules for building independent games and compatible products.

Written and designed by Aron Pence.

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POWER



COMBO



DAMAGE



ARMOR

THE DICE ARE IN YOUR HANDS.

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- Damage, Strain, Status, defeat, and encounter procedures included here.
- Starter character, ability, and Scene construction procedures included here.
- Open Omen as included here.
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I. PURPOSE AND CORE TERMS

4d4 is a tabletop roleplaying system about choosing an approach, committing finite dice, finding matching results, and deciding what the remainder does to a shared Scene.

PARTICIPANT - A character, independent NPC, creature, object, vehicle, organization, place, or other thing that owns a chart and Dice Pool.

SIDE - Participants currently working toward the same result in one contest.

AGENT - One active person, obstacle, route, hazard, or facet that grants its Scene side one action opportunity per Round. An Agent has its own Axes but normally spends **Normal Dice** from the Scene Pool.

ACTION OPPORTUNITY - One chance during a Round to act, pass, or support or interfere for somebody else. Direct defense and an explicitly triggered personal reaction do not consume this opportunity unless their text says so.

EXCHANGE - One original action, every legal reaction, Help, comparison, and all resulting harm, statuses, movement, and effects. A removal threshold measured "in one exchange" resets only after this complete procedure finishes.

2. THE FOUR AXES

Every character and active game object expresses four cardinal Axes.

NORTH - Power, force, command, endurance, direct pressure, and imposing change.

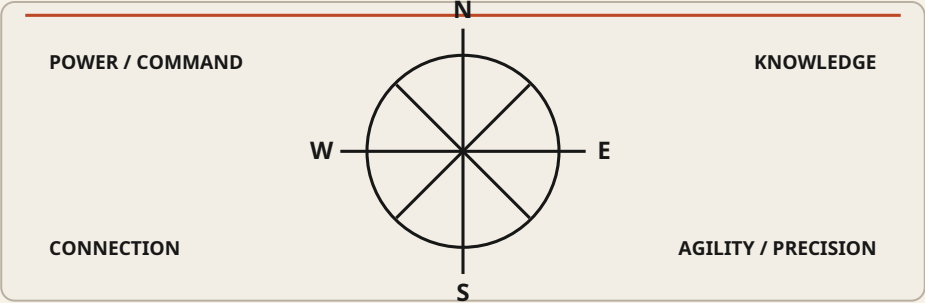
SOUTH - Agility, precision, concealment, timing, speed, and controlled movement.

EAST - Knowledge, judgment, analysis, craft, prediction, systems, and technical understanding.

WEST - Empathy, connection, intuition, persuasion, trust, and social understanding.

An Axis describes an approach, not a personality. A gentle character may use North to make an uncompromising promise. A warrior may use West to understand an enemy's fear.

A cardinal rating is the maximum number of **Normal Dice** that participant may commit when using that approach.



DICE POOL AND COMPOSITES

A character's fixed **Normal Dice** Pool normally equals $N + S + E + W$. Mark each die as Ready, Spent, Strained, or converted into directional Damage.

Composite Axes use the rounded-down average of two neighboring cardinal ratings:

- NE uses $\text{floor}((N + E) / 2)$.
- SE uses $\text{floor}((S + E) / 2)$.
- SW uses $\text{floor}((S + W) / 2)$.
- NW uses $\text{floor}((N + W) / 2)$.

Unless a scoped REPLACEMENT explicitly replaces this calculation, a composite has no independent rating. It includes both component directions for applicable Damage and Armor.

For an untrained specialized action, halve the chosen Axis commitment cap, round down, minimum 1. Ordinary actions use the full cap.

Calculate the cap in this order: printed Axis, Untrained halving, one strongest temporary cap boon, then one strongest temporary cap penalty. The final cap may become 0.

OPPOSITION

A direct defense normally uses an opposite **Axis**:

- N is opposed by S.
- S is opposed by N.
- E is opposed by W.
- W is opposed by E.

Against a composite, the defender chooses either opposite cardinal:

- NE is defended by S or W.
- SE is defended by N or W.
- SW is defended by N or E.
- NW is defended by S or E.

This choice is mechanically meaningful. Abilities may reward, punish, or restrict a specific defensive direction.

The fiction may make one defense impossible. State a visible limitation before dice are committed.

3. TURNS AND ROUNDS

A Scene proceeds through Turns. A Turn may contain several Rounds.

ROUND START - Resolve effects before Combo refresh. Ready Spent **Combo Dice** not denied by those effects. Resolve effects timed during or after refresh.

DURING THE ROUND - Every participant and active Agent receives one action opportunity. It may act, pass, or have already spent that opportunity supporting or interfering. A newly created or transferred Agent takes its controller's place for entry timing. If it enters on or after that controller's opportunity, it counts as having passed this Round unless a printed Effect grants an immediate ability-created opportunity; that opportunity uses the shared action ceiling.

ROUND END - Resolve end-of-Round Triggers and Fades. Discard held Stragglers. Begin another Round while at least one side has Ready **Normal Dice** and a meaningful action it chooses to attempt.

TURN END - The Turn ends after a Round when no side has Ready **Normal Dice** it can and chooses to use, when the Scene ends, or when an explicit effect ends the Turn. Move every remaining Ready **Normal Die** to Spent before refresh. **Power Dice** keep their current state until their refresh. A Turn-ending ability must say so, allow any printed reaction, and carry a WATCH or RED FLAG warning.

TURN REFRESH - Resolve effects before Normal or Power refresh and record every denied or replaced refresh. Ready eligible Spent **Normal Dice**, return eligible Strained dice to Ready, then Ready eligible Spent **Power Dice**. Resolve effects timed during or immediately after refresh, then ordinary start-of-Turn Triggers. A refresh denial must operate during that refresh; it cannot wait until after the die has become Ready.

ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

An action normally commits at least one Ready **Normal Die** up to the chosen Axis cap. The actor declares intent, approach, Axis, and at most one active Skill or Power before rolling.

There are no separate interrupt rules. Every active response outside an action opportunity is a Reaction with a printed Trigger and Timing. The target side may make one direct reaction through one eligible participant or Agent. Other eligible participants may support or interfere once when the fiction permits.

Direct defense and an explicitly triggered personal reaction do not consume the participant's action opportunity unless their text says so. Supporting or interfering consumes that opportunity: a participant that already acted cannot later make ordinary support or interference that Round, and one that already supported or interfered receives no later proactive action.

A participant may make direct defensive reactions throughout a Round while it has dice to spend. A reaction normally requires at least one Ready **Normal Die** unless an explicit Power or exception says otherwise.

Process a reaction using the same cancellation, Pattern, payment, and division procedure. A participant enters the exchange's one reaction sequence once. A PRE-PATTERN checkpoint uses that entry and replaces the participant's later ordinary checkpoint unless a valid SECOND ENTRY says otherwise. Ordinary reactions wait until after the acting roll's division and leftover 3 and 4 effects. Help is chosen only after every reaction resolves. A reaction never opens a reaction to itself.

Reactions contribute retained Clusters and eligible Help to their side but do not inflict ordinary Margin harm. Ordinary harm belongs to the original harmful action. A reaction may still cause harm, movement, a Status, or another result when its printed Effect says so.

When one roller controls several effects at the same Timing, that roller chooses their order unless a definition fixes it. Across different rollers, resolve effects modifying the pending action before the original action's Effect. The 4Caster settles any remaining true tie and keeps that ruling for the Scene.

4. ASSEMBLING A ROLL

1. Commit at least one Ready **Normal Die**, up to the chosen Axis cap.
2. Optionally commit Ready **Power Dice**, whether or not a Power is being activated.
3. After declaring one active Skill or Power, optionally commit eligible Ready **Combo Dice**.
4. Roll applicable directional **Damage Dice** automatically.
5. Against an incoming action, roll applicable **Armor Dice** automatically.

Committed Normal, Power, and **Combo Dice** become Spent. Damage remains Damage. Armor is persistent and normally has no Ready or Spent lifecycle.

Power Dice enter the contest. They may form Clusters, become Stragglers, contribute tie value, and satisfy typed Power requirements.

Combo Dice only help pay the one declared Pattern. They never form Clusters, become Stragglers, or contribute tie value.

Normal and Power results fill eligible untyped Pattern requirements before Combo results. When either could fill the same untyped requirement, assign a surviving Normal or Power result first. Combo fills only eligible untyped requirements left afterward. Typed requirements still require their named die type.

CANCELLATION AND PATTERNS

Resolve a roll in this order:

1. Roll committed Normal, Power, and **Combo Dice** plus applicable Damage.
2. Each Damage result cancels one matching Normal or Power result chosen by the injured roller.
3. Resolve printed PRE-PATTERN reactions timed before Armor.
4. Roll applicable Armor. Each Armor result cancels one matching Normal or Power result chosen by the Armor owner.
5. Resolve printed PRE-PATTERN reactions timed after Armor.
6. Check the one declared active ability Pattern. Assign surviving Normal and Power results to eligible untyped requirements before assigning Combo results.
7. Pay the Pattern.
8. Discard Combo results from the contest.
9. Divide surviving Normal and **Power Dice**.

Every Pattern symbol requires a distinct die. One die cannot pay two requirements or two abilities.

SPEND removes used Normal and Power results. TRIGGER leaves them in the contest. **Combo Dice** are already Spent either way.

An ability's Effect resolves at its printed Timing. Its Pattern is still checked and paid at Steps 6-7 unless the ability explicitly replaces part of the roll.

5. CLUSTERS

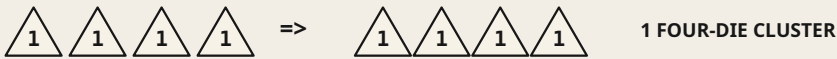
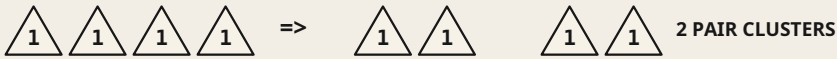
A Cluster contains two or more surviving Normal or **Power Dice** showing the same face. The roller chooses how matching dice are divided.

Each retained Cluster counts as one Cluster regardless of size. Its tie value is the sum of every die inside it.

- 3,3 is one Cluster with tie value 6.
- 3,3,3 is one Cluster with tie value 9.
- 1,1,1,1 may be one four-die Cluster or two pair Clusters.

A large Cluster has stronger tie value. Several smaller Clusters create a higher Cluster count.

Only dice remaining after cancellation and SPEND may be divided. A die used for one Cluster cannot also become a Straggler.



STRAGGLERS AND HELP

Surviving dice not placed in Clusters become Stragglers.

LEFTOVER 1 - Hold it until the Help step, then spend it to add one Help Cluster to one of the holder's own rolls. A newly rolled 1 may help the roll that produced it.

LEFTOVER 2 - Hold it until the Help step, then spend it to add one Help Cluster to another participant's roll.

LEFTOVER 3 AND 4 - Resolve the active Scene's declared primary 3 or 4 effect after division unless a printed reaction occurs first. One Straggler creates one primary effect.

A Help Cluster adds one to Cluster count and has tie value 0. It does not satisfy Patterns or count as a rolled Cluster unless an effect explicitly says otherwise.

All sides finish reactions before anyone chooses which held Stragglers to spend. Spending a held Straggler consumes no action opportunity. Held 1s and 2s expire at Round end.

COMPARISON AND MARGIN

After reactions and Help, compare total retained Clusters.

1. The side with more Clusters wins.
2. If tied, compare the sum of dice inside retained rolled Clusters.
3. Help has tie value 0.
4. If still tied, the defender holds.

Margin is the difference in Cluster count. Winning only by tie value produces Margin 0.

For a successful non-harmful action:

- Margin 0: the intent happens narrowly.
- Margin 1: the intended result happens.
- Margin 2: the result is strong and gains one reasonable extra.
- Margin 3+: the result is exceptional within the established fiction.

An ordinary harmful action inflicts declared Damage or Strain equal to the original action's Margin. Printed effects may add or replace harm.

6. THE FIVE DICE TYPES

NORMAL DICE - The finite core Pool. They become Spent when committed and normally refresh at Turn refresh.

COMBO DICE - Extra Pattern-only dice. They require one declared active ability, never enter the contest, and refresh each Round.

POWER DICE - Full special dice. They may join any roll, enter Clusters and tie values, and satisfy typed Power requirements. They refresh at Turn refresh.

DAMAGE DICE - Converted Pool dice representing persistent harm. Applicable directional Damage rolls automatically and cancels matching Normal or Power results.

ARMOR DICE - Persistent defensive dice. Applicable Armor rolls against incoming actions and cancels matching Normal or Power results.

Open special dice are the default. A Bound die is imposed by its source, 4Cast, item, or ability. Binding is a restriction, not an automatic benefit. Do not offer Open and Bound dice at the same cost as equivalent choices unless Bound is required by the source or carries a printed compensating benefit.

DAMAGE, STRAIN, AND DEFEAT

Each point of Damage converts one die in the fixed Normal Pool into a directional **Damage Die**. Damage remains until healed. It rolls when its direction is the chosen cardinal or a component of the chosen composite.

When **Damage Dice** equal or exceed the fixed Pool, a living character dies by default. A compatible game may use incapacitation, capture, transformation, retirement, or another stated defeat rule.

Strain is temporary pressure. Each point sets aside one Ready **Normal Die** until Turn refresh. If no Ready **Normal Die** remains, excess Strain is ignored.

Strain does not lower an Axis, reduce the fixed Pool, convert into Damage, or persist after Turn refresh unless a specific effect replaces that procedure.

Persistent weakness should use a Status. A commitment-cap penalty does not alter the printed Axis, composites, Pool, Damage capacity, Encounter Axes, or XP unless it explicitly changes a rating.

STATUSES

A Status is a named persistent rule state with pips or another recorded value.

Every Status should state:

1. Name and optional subject or direction.
2. Pip range or other value.
3. Scope.
4. Trigger.
5. Exact effect.
6. Fade or ending.
7. Stacking and conversion.

Skills grant competency while Statuses record temporary positions. Hacking training is not erased by defensive software. A successful intrusion could instead apply HACK [SYSTEM] (1), while ICE reduces that Status.

Status conversion is valid design. An ability might trade 2 HACK for 1 EXPOSED if both Status definitions and the conversion timing are clear.

Useful generic rules tools include the non-Status directional operation BOOST [AXIS] and Statuses such as WEAKENED [AXIS], EXPOSED, HACK [SYSTEM], HIDDEN, and ICE [SYSTEM]. A setting must define their exact effects and Fades.

7. SCENES, SIDES, AND AGENTS

Every independent thing with its own chart has its own Pool unless explicitly defined as an Agent or facet sharing another Pool. It may be hostile, neutral, friendly, or uninvolved.

Agents belonging to one Scene side share the Scene Pool. Each Agent has its own Axes, one action opportunity per Round, any named abilities, and separate removal conditions.

Encounter Axes are the sums of active Agent Axes. They measure the roster for encounter evaluation. They never become one Agent's roll cap.

Example: a captain and three crew each have N2. The Encounter Axis is N8. Each Agent still caps its own N action at 2.

A newly created or transferred Agent takes its controller's place for entry timing. Entering play or changing control does not reset any shared ability-created action ceiling. If the Agent enters on or after that controller's opportunity, it counts as having passed this Round unless a printed Effect grants an immediate ability-created opportunity under that ceiling.

Harm against an Agent changes the shared Pool and is attributed to that Agent. Damage attribution persists until healed or until the Agent leaves the situation. Strain attribution lasts for the current Turn and clears at Turn refresh. A ONE EXCHANGE threshold checks only the current exchange. An ACCUMULATED Strain threshold checks the current Turn's attributed Strain. Every reusable Agent prints separate Damage and Strain removal thresholds and labels each threshold ONE EXCHANGE or ACCUMULATED.

Removing an Agent removes its later opportunities and Axes, but does not heal Damage already created in the shared Pool.

BUILDING A SCENE

Record:

1. Immediate pressure and visible stakes.
2. One or more valid endings.
3. A shared Scene Pool or independent Pools.
4. Active Agents and Axes.
5. Agent abilities and removal conditions.
6. One primary effect for leftover 3.
7. One primary effect for leftover 4.
8. Any clock, Status, route, or changing pressure.
9. What failure changes instead of stopping play.

The 3 and 4 effects should create information, danger, opportunity, movement, cost, or changing position rather than repeat ordinary Margin.

A Scene ends when its fiction reaches an ending, not only when its Pool is exhausted.

Allied, neutral, and hostile independent sides keep separate Pools. Attitude determines whom they support or oppose; it does not merge resources.

CHARACTER CONSTRUCTION

A starting character normally has:

- Four cardinal Axes.
- A fixed Normal Pool equal to their cardinal total.
- Two setting-appropriate Skills.
- One Power.
- Equipment and permissions appropriate to the setting.

A recommended starting array is N3, S3, E3, W3 for a Pool of 12. A setting may offer shaped arrays with similar totals.

An Axis describes how a character acts. A Skill grants broad competency in a Category and may contain signature moves. A Power changes a rule, permission, or law of the setting but grants no adjacent competency. Equipment grants fictional permission and may carry explicit rules.

Do not require every setting to share gear, recovery, defeat, economy, or advancement structures. Those are important spaces for setting design.

SKILLS, POWERS, AND ABILITIES

A Skill signature move and an active Power should state:

- Category or exact Power exception.
- Active or passive Mode.
- Axis and action or reaction use.
- Pattern and SPEND or TRIGGER.
- Timing.
- Requirements and costs.
- Target, range, area, and duration.
- One executable Effect.
- Counterplay, Fade, recovery, or ending.
- Important interactions and a risk label.

An active Power normally requires a typed Power result such as P1 or P x1. A passive Power occurs when its conditions are true, but cannot pay the same die or resource twice.

BASELINE effects are bounded. WATCH effects swing with timing or combinations. RED FLAG effects change action count, end Turns, bypass broad counterplay, create permanent resources, or multiply broad effects.

Risk labels are editorial review, not mathematical prices.

INTERACTION SAFEGUARDS

- A participant gains at most one additional personal action opportunity from abilities per Turn. Unless its source says otherwise, it may Act or pass but never help or interfere. In one Round, at most one ability-created opportunity resolves across that participant and all controlled ability-created Agents. Every action or support opportunity taken by an ability-created Agent counts, including an ordinary Agent opportunity in a later Round. Entry or control change does not reset the ceiling or bypass ordinary entry timing. Check Requirements at declaration and activation.
- A participant enters an exchange's reaction sequence once; an early checkpoint replaces ORDINARY. Only an APEX and RED FLAG SECOND ENTRY grants one named later checkpoint after an earlier reaction. It creates no new reaction window, never answers a reaction, and mandatory Passive Triggers do not consume entry unless printed otherwise.
- Each flat-Damage packet states direction, Armor applicability or bypass, and multiplier. For each recipient copy, an Armor result cancels one acting result or prevents 1 point from one eligible packet, never both. The same result cannot be reused by a copied or repeated Effect within that activation; only a later independent activation or later Status Trigger is new. Combine only packets sharing direction, Armor rule, and multiplier. Assign Armor, reduce, then multiply.
- A return cannot restore its own activating die or Cost during the same Turn. Per Turn, a participant may benefit from one ability-caused Combo return and one ability-caused Power return unless an APEX exception says otherwise. A delayed return reserves that entitlement when created; an empty release does not restore it. A die returned Ready cannot pay, trigger, or become the target of another reserve-return Effect in that exchange.
- Until an exchange ends, conversion output cannot satisfy a Requirement or Gate, pay a Cost, trigger a Passive or Status Trigger, or become conversion input. Blocked Triggers are suppressed, not delayed. An APEX and RED FLAG CASCADE is one atomic two-conversion line: recheck both steps and caps before removing input; intermediate output exists only as the exact second input, resolves no Apply text or Trigger, and leaves no excess; final output remains locked. CASCADE unlocks no other role and creates no reaction window.
- Once per Round, the first application that actually increases DRAINED pips moves one Ready **Power Die** to Spent if available. That increase uses the event even when no Ready **Power Die** is available; an at-cap application neither moves a die nor uses the event. Reapplying AXIS-LOCKED with the same Axis adds pips to its cap; a different Axis replaces both Axis and pips. Distinct BACKLASH [Axis, Harm] pairs remain separate, but the affected participant chooses only one eligible pair to trigger from a roll.

8. ENCOUNTER RATING

Published baseline Scenes assume three starting characters.

One character share is one participating character's fixed Pool, normally 12 dice. For each character above three, add that character's share to the prepared Pool. For each below three, subtract one standard share, to a minimum Scene Pool of one share.

After finding actual Party Total:

- Easier: 75 percent or less.
- Even: above 75 percent and below 125 percent.
- Harder: 125 percent or more.

Agent count is a separate pressure lever. A large Pool creates endurance. More Agents create more actions.

A simple award is 1 XP for an Easier meaningful Scene, 2 XP for Even, and 3 XP for Harder. Award it once when the Scene reaches an ending.

A provisional advancement rule spends 10 XP to raise one cardinal Axis by 1, maximum 5. Setting books should define ability advancement and campaign-specific rewards.

OPTIONAL VARIANT: OPEN OMEN

Open Omen changes only declaration timing.

1. Name the acting participant or Scene Agent and choose a cardinal or composite Axis representing the energy brought into the moment. Do not yet declare a task, target, active Skill, or Power.
2. Commit **Normal Dice** up to that Axis cap and any chosen Ready **Power Dice**. Open Omen also permits Ready **Combo Dice** up to **COMBO** before an ability is selected.
3. Roll applicable directional **Damage Dice** and resolve self-Damage cancellation.
4. Resolve roll-driven Passives in legal timing order.
5. Choose the exact ordinary action, target, and at most one active Skill or Power made legal by the chosen Axis, visible dice, fiction, equipment, Statuses, and other requirements.
6. Fix that declaration before the target chooses a defense and reacts. Armor, PRE-PATTERN reactions, Pattern payment, division, leftover 3 and 4 effects, ordinary reactions, Help, comparison, and Effects then resolve normally.

The chosen action must express the chosen Axis. Position, equipment, knowledge, and available targets still constrain it.

Open Omen grants no extra action and no second active ability. It grants no refund when no useful declaration exists; committed Normal, Power, and **Combo Dice** remain Spent. Apply Open Omen symmetrically unless a 4Cast explicitly grants prophetic play to one side. If the chosen action is Untrained, halve its cap after declaration; excess committed **Normal Dice** remain Spent and are ignored.

9. CREATOR GUIDANCE

A compatible product may add, remove, rename, or replace rules. Make the relationship visible:

- CORE uses this SRD procedure unchanged.
- OPTIONAL adds a procedure the table may choose.
- REPLACEMENT names the ordinary rule and states what replaces it.
- SETTING RULE applies only inside the product's 4Cast or setting.

A replacement should state its timing, scope, resources, and counterplay. Avoid silently redefining Action, Reaction, Round, Turn, Pattern, Cluster, Straggler, Damage, Strain, Status, Agent, Side, or Pool.

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4. State the SRD version used.
5. Define every new term, timing, lifecycle, and ending.

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KEYWORD GLOSSARY

ACTION - A participant's use of its Round opportunity.

AXIS - An approach and **Normal Dice** commitment cap.

CLUSTER - Two or more matching surviving Normal or **Power Dice**.

COMPOSITE - NE, SE, SW, or NW, using the rounded-down average of its two component ratings.

HELP CLUSTER - One added Cluster with tie value 0.

MARGIN - Difference in Cluster count; a tie-value win has Margin 0.

PATTERN - Distinct die results required by one ability.

REACTION - A response outside a proactive opportunity.

ROUND - One opportunity for every active participant and Agent.

SCENE - The current situation, pressures, participants, and endings.

STATUS - A named persistent rule state.

STRAGGLER - A surviving die not placed in a Cluster.

TURN - One or more Rounds ending in shared Normal and Power refresh.

4CAST - A setting, scenario line, or game implementation built with 4d4.

4CASTER - The participant who presents and operates Scenes and adjudicates rules.

10. ATTRIBUTION REFERENCE

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4D4 SRD

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Credit where the foundation came from, mark your changes, and make the rest your own.

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