Mashup

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The origin of the word "mashup" remains vague. In terms of common usage it dates back to at least the 1960s, though Charles Dickens used the term as early as the 1850s to describe two characters (Mr. and Mrs. Mashup) in one of his stories.[1] In the early 2000s, the term mashup commonly described a particular practice of combining two music recordings.

As the word became more popular, the concept of the activity expanded and a "mashup" could refer to a combination of various materials. In media this included memes, videos, and still images. Music mashups became even more popular as producers incorporated corresponding video edits as part of an overall multimedia expression. Subgenres eventually developed, such as critical and political remix videos, as well as mashup memes. The concept of the mashup was eventually extended to software development, and became an all-encompassing descriptive term for the general amalgam of two sources that, be it music, image, or code, retained a clear recognition between its various elements. Mashup is often used in direct relation to the act of remixing. While the two terms, mashup and remix, are often used interchangeably, there are some notable differences. This becomes clear once we outline the history of mashup. In what follows, we consider the basic meaning of the term mashup, and then describe its evolution from music to software and culture at large. We end with a reflection on how mashups open the possibility of a third meaning that points to different ways of engagement with remixed source material.

Definition of Mashups

[insert figures 18.1 and 18.2]

The terms "mashup" and "mash up" in English appear in print in the 1850s.[2]

(Figures 18.1 and 18.2) The way the words have been used appears to allude simply to

bringing two or more things together, as in mashing potatoes with other ingredients such

as lentils and meat.[3] From the 1960s to 1980s, the term appeared in Caribbean literature.[4]

"All he foot get mashup" denoted that a person's foot or leg was physically injured.[5]

Attributing a definitive source of origin for the term is likely impossible. Yet one can

infer from reviewing the literature that mashup usually implies the combination of at least

two things, or to smash or destroy something. These connotations are worth keeping in

mind because they both play an aesthetic role in many creative productions that are

considered mashups.

Used as a verb in the context of music, "mash" can be traced back at least to

Jamaican patois from the early 1970s. In the island's reggae and dancehall music, MCs

would occasionally proclaim "mash it up!" as a way to build energy during performance.

To "mash," then, was a general call to succeed, to do well, to push the music's "vibe"

forward, not unlike hip hop MCs shouting "put your hands in the air!" In one example,

the U.K. roots band Steel Pulse's pro-marijuana 1977 anthem "Makka Splaff (The Colly

Man)," we hear "Mash it Grizzly!", a directive to percussionist Steve "Grizzly" Nisbett,

who responds with a bombastic drum fill.[6]

To mash also gives music a political dimension. Just as the term was used as a

call to build up, so too it could be a signal to tear down, or wipe away. Both the up and

down variations retain a positive and cathartic element—both express a process of

purification. More specifically, following the Jamaican Rastafari movement and its criticism of imposed Western values (crass materialism, colonialism, racial injustice), to mash *down* is to destroy, to purge, to resist. In the 1978 track "Mash Down," the Roots tell listeners: "We're going to mash down principalities and wickedness," in reference to doing away with the corrupt Babylon culture foisted onto otherwise peaceful and natural people.[7]

Just how these Jamaican uses of "mash" carry forward into contemporary music mashup culture can be perceived to some degree when we look at the way the word was used in Caribbean literature, as Jamaican diaspora took place during the 1960s.[8] Thus, while one could argue that there seems to be no direct link from earlier manifestations to the common usage found in music and culture at large, it certainly is not unreasonable to surmise some sort of relation, if only because so many aspects of remix culture today can be traced back to Jamaican reggae, dub and dancehall music. Following these earlier moments, the term appears to denote a particular subset of remix music practices, crossing over to the United States and other parts of the world in the early 2000s that are characterized by the concept of combining two songs together. Soon after, the definition expanded even further, with mashup being used to describe a certain strain of software development. The term at the time of this writing designates generally all types of combinations, from music to video editing to software.

Music Mashups

In typical formulations, music mashups consist of the vocal track of one song overlaid on the instrumental track of another. The contrast between the two recordings as they are heard together reveals the artistic intent, and is not without historical precedent.

Before music mashups developed into a fully-fledged genre of remix, audio collage artists had experimented with splicing together bits of analog audio tape and vinyl records to produce a *third recording*. Examples include Christian Marclay's avant-garde turntablism, John Oswald's "plunderphonics," and Negativland's culture-jamming audio collages. The most notorious early, proto-mashup is Negativland's "U-2," which layered music from the Irish pop group U2's "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" with an expletive-laden rant from Casey Kasem, one of the most familiar and family-oriented top-40 pop radio voices in the United States. The resulting sonic train wreck landed Negativland in legal trouble: U2's record label sued the band for copyright and trademark infringement.[9]

Moving from parody and media critique to homage, one of the first recordings to define mashup as a music genre was "A Stroke of Genie-us" by Roy Kerr, also known as Freelance Hellraiser, released in 2001. Kerr combined the pulsing rock of NYC-based alternative band, The Strokes's, "Hard To Explain" with pop diva Christina Aguilera's vocals in "Genie in a Bottle."[10] Soon thereafter, mashup productions abounded. Other notable artists include Mark Vidler, working under the alias Go Home Productions, whose "Ray of Gob" from 2003 combined The Sex Pistols "God Save the Queen" with Madonna's "Ray of Light."[11] In 2004, Brian Burton, operating as Danger Mouse, released *The Grey Album*, which sampled the a cappella rap from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* with instrumentation from The Beatles' *The White Album*.[12] Danger Mouse's new creation quickly became one of the most well-known and controversial mashups of its time when the original copyright holders demanded that the album cease distribution. Terry Urban, Girl Talk, 2ManyDJs, DJ Earworm, and Tom Caruana are just a few of the

mashups artist to gain critical and commercial success for their innovative mashup productions in the first decade of the twenty-first century. At this point, mashup as an established genre of music is ubiquitous, with music festival stalwarts such as those mentioned above appearing in playlists alongside unknown bedroom studio musicians. On a formal level, mashups have become increasingly sophisticated, with artists collaging and reconfiguring dozens of songs in the space of mere minutes.

The rise of music mashup culture would not have been possible without parallel developments in digital audio technologies. In the early 2000s, new computer software solutions made it possible to manipulate audio data in ways that were not previously available to average users. Software offerings such as Ableton Live introduced the ability to easily decouple audio *frequency* from audio *speed*, in real time. Anyone who has played vinyl records on a conventional turntable will recall that slowing down (or speeding up) the rate of the record's rotation also shifts the pitch of the music. Playing records faster than they are intended produces the "chipmunk" effect to vocal tracks. Newer software algorithms removed this limitation, allowing users to adjust the tempo of a recording while maintaining its pitch, or, conversely, to alter the pitch while keeping the tempo. This made it possible to "lock" two songs of originally different styles to a master tempo, ensuring a precision synchronization Additionally, since pitch became a variable unto itself, songs originally produced in differing keys could be adjusted and blended harmoniously. Users found they could combine songs from almost any genre together into new and unusual, yet still musically coherent, expressions.

Music mashups fly in the face of many conventions. Like remix in general, they call into question long-established notions of authorship, artistic labor, and originality.

Mashups also subvert standard methods of distribution. Emerging at the outset of Web 2.0 and social media, mashups are forms of expression made for and by the Internet. It is online—source materials often reside there in the first place—where mashups ultimately live as new expressions ready for download. Traded around the Internet for little or no money, they embody the "free culture" aesthetics of recycling and sharing.[13] They also provoke the ire of copyright holders, which is why, in the early 2000s, mashups were also sometimes referred to as "bootleg remixes," unauthorized reinterpretations of one hit wonders and obscure tracks alike. Mashups continue to test the boundaries of copyright law as well as the ethics of creativity.

Mashups, like other remix practices, sprout from DIY initiatives. Given that the Internet, in conjunction with new software technologies, helped empower everyday computer users operating outside the specialized field of professional audio production, music mashups can be placed on the continuum of remix as amateur cultural phenomenon. Mashups are a type of digital folk music. Just as young people in The Bronx "misused" turntables when they repurposed them as music instruments and in turn invented hip hop, so too have technically savvy younger generations realized the potential of manipulating computer data towards a new aesthetics. And it is not merely music that is mashed up; any type of data, from video footage to Microsoft Word documents can be used, even abused, in order to create something new that paradoxically thrives on the recognition of the combined elements.

Mashups and Memes

Like software developments in the audio domain, still and moving image editing options, aided by speedy Internet circulation, also opened up creative avenues for

everyday users. Long the staple for retouching and color correcting images, Adobe's Photoshop application would become an essential tool in the service of combining images and text together in order to produce new meanings for old pictures. At this point, mashing up images and text in the hope that they "go viral" as memes has become so commonplace that smart phone applications, such as Make a Meme+, Meme Producer, and Meme Generator, now exist to make the process easier. In short, anyone can make a mashup meme. Thus, no definitive example can be offered. There is, however, a common format: one or two images, positioned one on top of the other or side by side, with a pithy phrase or two written (often in the typeface Impact). The sources in meme creation often come from still shots from Hollywood films or television shows, but just about any image can be used. The accompanying text messages can range from the nonsensical to the hyper-partisan.

Meme mashups have also gained popularity as videos uploaded to the Internet and as visuals screened in live performances. New video hardware and software tools such as Roland's DVJ-1000 and the Vegas editing platform have come into wider use, with the effect that the boundary between mashing up music and moving image collage is practically seamless. Moreover, the syncing of music mashups with corresponding archival video of musicians' performances have yielded an entirely new, hybrid remix artist: the "VJ." The U.K. audio/video mashup group Eclectic Method combine footage of the Jackson 5 or James Brown with contemporary electronic music to deliver a schizophrenic dance club visual experience.[14]

The musical collective The Gregory Brothers have produced some of the more notable Internet video mashup memes over the last several years. Their *Songify the News*

(previously *Autotune the News*) is a series of videos featuring clips taken from local TV news reporting and "talking head" news shows mixed with green-screened live musical performances of members of the group.[15] Many of their videos provide entertaining vignettes into current events, though like some past artists who appropriate from mass media content, there can be an ambiguity to the messaging. They are at once an indictment and trivialization of media sensationalism.

The Internet meme achieves its highest status, and perhaps loses its vitality, when it reaches a state of self-awareness. There is no better example than the "Hitler/Downfall" video mashups. In contrast to the complex editing found in the examples above, these memes, all taken from the 2004 German film *Downfall*, recycle the same scene—Hitler in his final moments within a Berlin bunker—swapping out only the English subtitles in order to deliver their message. In one video, the doomed leader lashes out at his inner circle after discovering the iPhone 7 has no headphone jack; in another, he decries Britain leaving the European Union. Yet its ultimate expression is found in a version in which Hitler's attack is directed at the meme itself: he assails his military advisers for allowing the "Radiohead Lotus Flower" meme mashup to surpass it in popularity.[16] It could be said that the longest-lasting mashup memes are those that include within them a statement about their own role in contemporary media consumption.

Mashup memes tend to take on many forms, including copying from all possible sources of media. The "Downfall" and "Lotus Flower" examples are a case in point.[17] In the former, it is text, in the form of subtitles, that is mashed against image and sound. In the latter, it is sound against not just image, but styles of editing (fast, slow, and selective

omission of frames, among other strategies) that provide the creative drive for the respective memes.

Software Mashups

In technical terms, code is the common link between music mashups, meme mashups, and what has come to be known as "software mashups." Computing made sampling and all other types of music manipulation configurable, which then enabled the treatment of sound as data. The term mashup was used in relation to software around the year 2006, in parallel to the rise of music mashups.[18] Software mashups are networked applications; they cannot function unless they are able to access data from two or more sources. The term is now part of the technical vernacular of software development. Both Techopedia and Wikipedia define software mashups as web applications—as web pages that bring two or more sources together in a new presentation.[19] Techopedia more explicitly states that this combination creates "a new service." While these definitions may not be academic, they are what most people will encounter when searching for the definitions of software mashups, insofar as they describe the vernacular, and are what most individuals engaged in developing software will read. The definitions are also evidently driven by commercial, or at least utilitarian, interests.

Software mashups became common in the initial stages of web 2.0. Early examples include news feeds, as well as maps with specific local information. The basic principle of all mashups is the extraction of information from two or more sources. Mashups repurpose sources for a different function, thereby potentially creating a new use from their pre-existing purposes. An early example that is no longer active is Pipes by

Yahoo![20] This particular type of mashup would provide access to dynamic information directly from the database. What Pipes by Yahoo! explored early on was the possibility, which is now taken for granted, that users could customize, to a sophisticated level, the type of information that they accessed from day to day. Pipes, in its own way, provided users with the same possibilities made available by early Google news feeds, when users customized their personal portal news page. In software mashups, the actual code of the copied applications is not accessed; such mashups are usually combined with a type of "binding" technology. One can think of pre-existing applications (or "apps") as building blocks designed for modular implementation. A basic and early software mashup technique is described as "scraping;" it consists of lifting material from the front pages of various websites to aggregate it. This practice is now commonly exercised online whenever web developers embed prepared scripts that are made available on social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, or Flickr. Other types of mashups actually embed or incorporate material directly from databases, according to permissions allocated by the online entity with an Application Programming Interface (API).[21] Using an API, developers aggregate specific information for their platform, which provides a unique experience for the user. Pinterest is a clear example of this type of approach, which in effect creates a platform for sharing unique content, based on borrowed data as well as the relation of selections to and by each user. What can be noted in the above examples is that a software mashup is only stable as long as the sources offering the information maintain open APIs.

The conceptual and cultural role of mashups changed dramatically when they evolved from the music realm to a more open media space such as the web. While the

software mashup operates mostly for commercial purposes, it has been shown repeatedly that social media platforms, which allow narrow and specific API access to their content, are being repurposed in the service of social change as a response to major current events.[22] For example, the mashing of information to be shared continuously played a significant role in the Arab Spring, which relied on social media in order to communicate and organize activist actions in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia.[23] Mashups also played a role in the Charlie Hebdo events, as people in France organized acts of peaceful resistance against terrorist attacks[24] In these cases, all types of information were shared, from locations on maps to images from specific areas, which were then accessed across social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

There are thousands of software mashups available at the time of writing this chapter. Some notable examples include Trendsmap,[25] which continues to implement the text over map approach explored early on by Google and Yahoo!.[26] Another mashup that functions more as a work of art is "Spell with Flickr"[27] which uses Flickr's API in order to mashup images of letters in a "ransom-note" style, spelling out phrases entered by the user.

The concept of mashing pre-existing data has enabled an exponential increase in online content development. In turn, the idea of repurposing data allows network culture to increase its activity to a degree that would be impossible if the sharing of information were not understood as a vital strategy for communication, as well as the growth of global markets. In a sense, then, the term mashup has been co-opted for the sake of the growth of an emerging "productivist" culture, which itself is a hybrid of property interests and an open sharing of information.

Mashups as Third Meaning

Mashups are ubiquitous. They are the contemporary embodiment of remix culture. And while the remix can be understood as a type of general collage practice whose sources may not be readily identifiable, the same cannot be said of mashups in particular. A defining characteristic of the mashup, whether it is music, image, or software, is that its elements operate together but remain discrete. Indeed, part of the success of the mashup has to do with the thrill of being able to identify these elements as they take on new meanings in the process of their combination. An evolved form of the *third meaning*, to invoke Roland Barthes, is produced.[28] This is especially the case in creatively expressed mashups, which oblige us to reexamine our own relationships to both their content and form.

The third meaning, for Barthes, is particularly pronounced in carefully selected still images from films. He tends to privilege images that offer a state of ambiguity. Such images call into question the framing that contextualizes them. Barthes focuses on images that expose the slippage of meaning within the overall narrative of a story. His basic theory of the third meaning, which is an early poststructural reflection that in effect questions early structural theories, exposes the instability of conventional understanding within a carefully structured narrative. The third meaning—that slippage in understanding is today part of all forms of communication, and is essential to creative productions that strive to provide an ambiguous or open-ended reading, while also pointing to how they are themselves structured.

Mashups certainly take the aesthetics of the third meaning in their own way. Music in particular, due to the art form's close relation to the abstract and open-ended

experience, are ripe to explore the third meaning when combining elements that show the instability of the sign, demanding a reaction from the listener. The mashup is an "obtuse" form of signification that exposes the instability of its elements (content and form) as they are brought together. The obtuse meaning is the product of a fourth, semiological element called *signifiance* (following the research of Julia Kristeva). In its own way, the mashup brings together two elements that already possess several signifiers and signifieds (pre-existing concepts and forms). Such elements can be mashed up in ways that may come off as inconceivable, or perhaps even violent or destructive. The indecisiveness in meaning is produced when one hears two or more elements at play that seem autonomous, yet are bound as one new expression that both fights and embraces itself while offering a claim for something completely different. This can help explain why some of the most acclaimed mashups, particularly in music, bring together compositions that would not immediately seem to complement each other. Music genres that would seem incongruous—country and hip hop, bubble gum pop and black metal— blend naturally, though the results certainly vary.

One of the affective results is that of the feeling of nostalgia, as evoked by Vidler's "Ray of Gob," or DJ Earworm's megamixes, known as United States of Pop, which mash all of the top 40 hits at the end of each year.[29] Another example is found in the recent album *Mouth Moods*, where producer Neil Cicierega takes the listener on an aural journey through 1990s pop music.[30] Anyone who experienced the decade firsthand will immediately identify with Cicierega's mix. It has the capacity to induce memories that are nonetheless made strange, as layered snippets of tracks contrast with one another.

Old meets new, fragments of history reshape future listening traditions, experienced in the present.

Yet mashups are more than new formalizations of past content. Decidedly more critical in his intent, mashup video artist Jonathan McIntosh remixes pop culture in order to expose its ideological aspects. McIntosh's 2009 video mashup "Buffy vs. Edward: *Twilight* Remixed" intercuts clips from the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with scenes from the film *Twilight* to jab at the gender stereotypes, and male sexual aggression, that permeates mass entertainment.[31] In 2010 McIntosh parodied right wing political talking points in the mashup "Donald Duck Meets Glenn Beck in Right Wing Radio Duck," in which the viewer encounters a working-class Donald Duck eventually resisting the sway of radio talk show host Glenn Beck. Beck reacted to the video by calling it "some of the best propaganda" he'd ever seen.[32] More recently McIntosh has repurposed his mashup approach to produce short documentaries that fall under critical video remix, thus joining the ranks of Elisa Kreisinger, Diran Lyons, Desiree D'Alessandro, Anita Sarkeesian, and Owen Gallagher, among many others. Mashups, arguably, are the most transparent form of cultural recombination currently being produced, in any form, from music to text to video to software. The mashup proudly displays the way we bring ideas and forms together. For all of its controversy, it is an unabashed form of remix that openly presents itself.

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[1] Charles Dickens, "Literal Claims," *Household Words* (Leipzig: bernhard tauchnitz, 1856), 252

[2] See the ngrams for Mashup:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mashup&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmashup%3B%2Cc0#t1%3B%2Cmashup%3B%2Cc0

and Mash up:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=mash+up&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cmash%20up%3B%2Cc0, accessed March 15, 2017

[3] Henry Doubleday Research Association. Newsletter, Issues 52-58, 1973, p. 48

https://books.google.com/books?id=HOcnAQAAIAAJ&q=%22mashup%22&dq=%22mashup%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiYgKaCoKnSAhVFWCYKHQ9pDRUQ6AEIIDAB, accessed March 15, 2017,

[4] Earl Lovelace *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*, (Austin: Pearlson Education,1988); see also N Ramadevi, *The Novels of V.S. Naipaul: Quest for Order and Identity* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor: Prestique Books, 1996), 49.

[5] Dennis Solomon, *The Speech of Trinidad: A Reference Grammar*, (Kingston: University of West Indies, 1993), 54.

[6] Steel Pulse, "Makka Splaff" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqr1tuCfMMw, accessed March 15, 2017

[7] The Roots, "Mash Down 12'" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoCZNIrz2o4 , accessed March 14, 2017. Thank you to Peter Becker for helping trace the earlier Jamaican references.

[8] A good account of this can be found in Dick Hebdige *Cut 'N' Mix* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

[9] See Negativland, *Fair Use: The Story of the Letter U and the Numeral 2* (Concord, CA: Seeland, 1995).

[10] Freelance Hellraiser, "A Stroke Of Genie-us," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShPPbT3svAw , accessed March 14, 2017.

[11] Go Home Productions, "Ray of Gob," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrjSlTeTpNc , accessed March 14, 2017.

[12] Danger Mouse, *The Grey Album*, https://www.mixcloud.com/SoulCoolRecords/danger-mouse-the-grey-album/, accessed March 14, 2017.

[13] See Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

[14] See http://www.eclecticmethod.net/video/ , accessed March 14, 2017.

[15] See http://www.thegregorybrothers.com ,accessed March 14, 2017.

[16] "Hitler Learns of Radiohead's Lotus Flower Video Parodies," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fvo45_kXogs (accessed March 14, 2017).

[17] For an extensive analysis of these memes see Eduardo Navas, "Modular complexity and remix: the collapse of time and space into search," *Anthrovision* 1.1, 2013, https://anthrovision.revues.org/324, accessed March 8, 2017.

[18] Christian Bizer, Richard Cyganiak, Tobias Gauss "The RDF Book Mashup: From Web APIs to a Web of Data" http://www.online-journals.org/index.php/proceedings/article/viewFile/229/161, accessed March 15, 2017

[19] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashup_(web application hybrid) and https://www.techopedia.com/definition/5373/mashup, accessed March 15, 2017

[20] This site is no longer online. Wikipedia provides a decent summary of how it functioned: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yahoo!_Pipes

[21] There are many resources online that provide this general information. For a concise reference see "Content Development Guidelines," Akana, http://docs.akana.com/cm/learnmore/api_admin_content_guidelines.htm, accessed March 15, 2017

[22] See Eduardo Navas, "Remix[ing] Theory," *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (Wien, New York: Springer, 2012), 100- 108.

[23] Phillip N. Howard, et. al., "Opening Close Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring," http://collectiondevelopment.library.cornell.edu/mideast/Role%20of%20Social%20Media%20During%20the%20Arab%20Spring.pdf, accessed March 15, 2017

[24] Mark Deuze, "A Call for Comparison in Social Media," Social Media + Society, SAGE, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305115580333, accessed March 15, 2017 the article

actually refers to a rather popular post on The Guardian: Jane Martinson, "Charlie Hebdo: A week of horror when social media came into its own" https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jan/11/charlie-hebdo-social-media-news-readers, March 15, 2017

[25] Trendsmaps, http://trendsmap.com/, accessed March 14, 2017.

[26] Tweetping, https://tweetping.net/, accessed March 14, 2017.

[27] "Spell with Flickr," http://metaatem.net/words/, March 14, 2017

[28] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 52 – 68.

[29] "United States of POP Series," http://djearworm.com/UnitedStateOfPop.php, accessed March 14, 2017.

[30] See Neil Cicierega, "Mouth Moods," https://soundcloud.com/neilcic/mouth-moods , accessed March 14, 2017.

[31] See "Donald Duck Meets Glenn Beck in Right Wing Radio Duck," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfuwNU0jsk0 , accessed March 14, 2017.

[32] See "Insider video of Glenn Beck responding to Donald Duck remix (2010)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_406592&feature=iv&src_vid=HfuwNU0jsk0&v=1ytW9l7TBI8 accessed March 14, 2017.

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