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Project: 101173961 - Nature studio  
Deliverable n:o D5.2.  
Methogology or "user's manual" for open air studio  
locations in Latvia.

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# Foreword

By project leader Mikko Keinonen

One of the main aims of Echoes of the Ancient is to create a chain of open air studios across Europe in Finland, Latvia and Portugal. The idea is not to build anything: the studio status will be based on wide knowledge on the chosen locations.

While planning the project one of the goals was to create a “studio methodology” for each recording location. Now, after exploring the locations and gathering the information, observations and insights, we must admit we made a terminological error while planning.

“Methodology” is a scientific term, which has a specific meaning. In our case it’s too specific and therefore misleading. It promises an approach which is not exactly relevant concerning our workflow and findings.

Anyway, our plan has a remark which opens up the reality of recording in nature and has proved to be completely accurate in our project: Recording in nature is a constant never ending learning process because the number of variables and unknown factors is so wide. Natural locations change constantly depending on the weather, time of the day and season and there can always be something unexpected because they are not environments which are isolated from the rest of the world.

Another unpredictable factor are the people using these locations: every instrument has their special features, possibilities and limitations. Every musician has their own ways of using their instrument or voice and every sound professional has their own priorities and methods and ways to react to the changing conditions. When you combine all these factors, the number of potential outcomes is already endless.

## Innovations with the help of experiments

Echoes of the Ancient is an innovation project which experiments via bringing together elements which weren’t brought together earlier - like musicians and sound technicians with different backgrounds and different working environments. The goal is to produce new information and create new art and hopefully find insights that would be new and meaningful enough to be called innovations.

Anyway, the goal is not to create a final truth or canon on how things should be done in the locations we’ve chosen to explore. Instead, the idea is to invite ourselves and others to an experience which challenges our ideas and conceptions of a correct workflow, definitions of art, relationship between humans and other elements of nature or whatever makes us blind and deaf for a load of opportunities only because they weren’t a part of our plan. The idea is also that this experience and process wouldn’t end when the project is over and we’ve given our report. Our project is just supposed to be a beginning, a spark for something that will go on without limits when it comes to time or location.

If we acknowledge and accept these common goals it becomes clear that we’d be contradicting ourselves if we tried to create something that would qualify as “methodology” - at least on a wide scale. If we tried, the first problem would be that it would demand a lot of simplification and compromises to agree upon something every professional involved in the project and process would accept. Another problem is that if we managed to reach such a compromise, it probably would be more harmful than useful because too exact methodologies, guidelines or dogmas would just create a delusion that we already found everything relevant and the only thing others coming after us would be to try to repeat what we already did.



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Anyway, there's a lot we can provide: practical information, insights, observations, findings, even warnings. Still, it would be misleading to call all that a methodology or even a user's guide. A tourist guide to acoustic nature locations for sound and music professionals and enthusiasts would be probably closer to reality.

## Different approaches, different results

There will be "studio methodologies" from Latvia, Portugal and Finland and the form and content of the document will be quite different for each country. That's because the process, conditions and methods vary a lot.

In Latvia the data is mainly based on the experiences of the vocal group Saucējas and their recordists. They have a long experience of recording in nature and even the Latvian vocal tradition is widely based on singing outside and they have a lot of songs with instructions on how to do it.

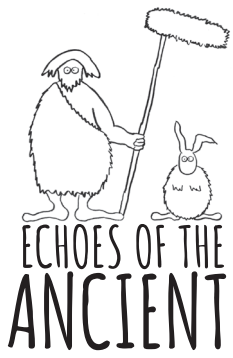
In Portugal the emphasis is more on acoustic experiments done by sound recordists and technicians and partly on recordings done with more variety of musicians.

In Finland the approach was the most experimental with quite a variety of locations with both wide and small spaces and forests, rocks, caves and lakes and also with a wide range of musicians and music genres.

## Maybe a "methodology" after all?

Anyway, despite everything written above, there could be some general guidelines for recording outside. They could be even called a methodology and they could be written on a stone somewhere in a deep forest:

1. Stop and listen.
2. Forget about what you know and open your ears to hear what's really there.
3. Expect unexpected and accept it.
4. Don't try to fit the environment to your vision. Fit your vision to the environment.
5. Feel free to feel free, but show respect. Remember you are there as a visitor.



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# Descriptions of the Latvian recording sites

By Janta Meža, member of vocal group Saucējas

## Sāviena Hillfort

Sāviena Hillfort is located in Ļaudona administrative parish in Madona region. The hillfort and surrounding area are part of an esker, or oss – a ridge several kilometres long consisting of loaf-shaped hills formed as the result of water flowing from melting glaciers. This is called the Madona-Trepe Ridge. Sāviena Hillfort (9 th –12 th century CE) was built on one of these hills. The outline of the hillfort is still clearly visible to-day, with a wider section at the top of the hill and several concentric ridge-like structures further down the slope.

### Location 1 –

#### The slopes of Sāviena Hillfort across from Līnītis Lake

A sparse forest of mature pines grows on the slope where Saucējas sang. A small lake, called Līnītis, is located approximately 150 metres in front of where the singers stood. Dense stands of young birches, osiers and willows alternating with reeds form a dense wall of vegetation all around the lake. However, an old firebreak leading through the lakeshore vegetation directly to the water forms an ideal corridor for sound, connecting the hillfort slopes with the acoustic environment of the lake. The singers stood so that the sound waves moved along the firebreak from the steep hillfort slope down to the lake. They stood mid-way up the steepest slope, facing the lake and approximately ten metres above the landscape in front of them.



### Location 2 – Līnītis Lake

The elongated lake (total area: 2.1 hectares) lies east of Sāviena Hillfort. Its banks are beginning to become boggy, with plants (sphagnum moss, cranberries, sedges, etc.) growing out from the shore and over the surface of the water, forming a dense mat



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several metres wide. This boggy mat floating on the water can support the weight of a human, but one's feet sink quite far into the vegetation. Stands of small-leaved tree species (mostly birch and grey alder) grow higher up on shore all around the lake and form a dense wall of vegetation. The choices of location for singing near the water were quite limited due to the vegetation; walking or standing were only possible in a few places where the singers' feet did not sink dangerously deep into the boggy mat. Nevertheless, during recording the singers stood on a sinking substrate of vegetation a few metres from the water line and faced the middle of the lake. The sound of their voices spread across the whole lake and echoed off the trees growing around the body of water. The echoes bounced back unevenly, at different rates and intensities, from all sides of the lake.

### Location 3 – The hillfort surroundings

Sāviena Hillfort and the surrounding area were very suitable for when the singers divided into smaller groups relatively far from each other but sang simultaneously. The goal of these recordings was to recreate an audial landscape that can be listened to as a complex piece of music and yet each separate part of the music can be distinguished (the solo closer, the echo farther away, etc.). Therefore the placement of the singers in the landscape and their specific distances from each other were important. The singers had to stand higher than and on opposite sides of the recording equipment. When singing together from various different locations, the singer(s) with the most dominant role in the song had to stand closest to the recording equipment, with the other singers standing much farther away.

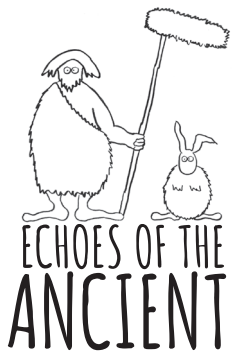
During recording, the solo singer stood on the southeastern slope of Sāviena Hillfort, with the background singers spread out elsewhere on the hill at least 100 metres from the soloist or even behind the top of the hill, which was more than 100 metres away. If the background singing threatened to overpower the solo singer, the singers had to move farther yet or turn to face away from the recording equipment. Like the slopes of Sāviena Hillfort, the nearby area is also covered with a sparse forest of mature pines, except the hill to the south, which has been logged and where new trees are now growing. The singers on this hill had to move the farthest away and sing facing away from the recording equipment, because hardly any obstacles blocked the sound of their voices.

### Location 4 – The hillfort slope facing Raudītis Lake

A small bog lake named Raudītis lies along one edge of the boggy depression to the west of Sāviena Hillfort. However, the lake cannot be reached due to the boggy vegetation (sphagnum moss, cranberries, sundew) growing out from its shore and over the water in a mat several metres wide. Nearer to shore, the plants form a terrain of mounds and wet depressions that gradually turn into forest as the elevation rises. The uniqueness of the sound produced by singing here was influenced by the acoustics of this large boggy area and the echoes bouncing off the nearby bog-edge forest as well as an active "chorus" of frogs. The singers stood on the gentle slope of Sāviena Hillfort, facing Raudītis Lake and approximately five metres above the water level of the lake.

### Location 5 – The forest

The singers found an area of forest about half a kilometre south of Sāviena Hillfort where the hills form a gentle wave-like structure. They deemed a small incline covered with a mature forest of pines and spruce with lichen and bilberries and cowberries dominating the undergrowth to be the most suitable location to sing in terms of acoustic qualities. The singers stood near the top of the incline and sang facing downhill, where the recording equipment was set up approximately 30 metres away from them.



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## “Ruķeļi” and “Lazdas”

The “Ruķeļi” and “Lazdas” farmsteads are in Amata administrative parish in Amata region. This area is located in the Mežole Hills in the northern part of the Vidzeme Uplands. The two neighbouring farmsteads stand at a relatively high elevation, in a place where several small hills rise very close to each other. There is a steep slope north of “Ruķeļi”, at the bottom of which lies a large, very wet area through which the Kaķenīte Stream flows. Two significant factors dictated the selection of these two farmsteads as a recording location: 1) the hilly terrain and lack of various noises made by human civilisation, and 2) the residents of “Lazdas” still adhere to a traditional method of farming and keep a variety of farm animals.

### Location 6 – The small hill by the pond on the “Ruķeļi” farmstead

The entire hillside where Saucējas sang has been freed of trees from top to bottom in a band approximately 50 metres wide, thus forming a long corridor for sound to travel through (the difference in elevation between the hilltop and the foot of the hill is about 40 metres). A mixed forest grows on both sides of this treeless band as well as in the depression at the bottom of the hill, forming acoustic walls of various forms and at various distances. The singers stood at the top of the slope and faced downhill. The recording equipment was located approximately ten metres lower. For songs featuring two groups of singers, the groups stood about 70 metres from each other. The soloist stood closest to and in front of the recording equipment, while the background singers stood farther out in the meadow and faced away from the recording equipment.



### Location 7 – The “Midsummer hill” on the “Ruķeļi” farmstead

This is a special hill at “Ruķeļi”. When standing at the top of the hill at Midsummer, one sees a beautiful sunset; also at other times of the year, the hill provides a fine view of a broad downhill slope encircled by an arc of forest. In winter this is a good place to go sledding or skiing. When singing, the sound waves tumble softly and slowly down



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the gradual slope towards the forest, filling this large natural space with powerful sound. When Saucējas sang together as a single group, they stood at the top of the hill. For songs in which several groups sang at the same time, the groups stood approximately 60 metres from each other on either side of the highest part of the hill. The recording equipment was set up relatively far away, on the slope about 50 metres downhill from the singers.

#### Location 8 –

##### Around a bonfire at the centre of the “Ruķeļi” farmstead

The goal of this recording session was to recreate the acoustic environment of singing around a bonfire at Midsummer. The singers stood close to each other in an arc around the fire. The recording equipment was set up close by, just a few metres from the singers, on the other side of the fire. A couple of factors significantly influenced the acoustic environment here. The singers stood in such a way that the sound waves echoed off the large trees in the yard a couple dozen metres away. Also, as night falls, wildlife (birds, insects, amphibians) generally falls silent as well, which heightens the feeling that the air has become clearer and carries sound better. This, however, cannot be felt on the recording, because the recording equipment picked up the chirping of the crickets and grasshoppers particularly well, and it dominates the recording, sometimes irritatingly so. The insects almost drown out the sound of the crackling fire, which could be heard very well while singing.

#### Location 9 – The farmyard at “Lazdas”

The main goal of recording at the “Lazdas” farmstead was to recreate the environment of a traditional farm, in which various sounds harmoniously overlay each other: singing, talking, farm animals, and other sounds of daily rural life. The owners of “Lazdas” have a variety of animals: cows, rabbits, chickens, turkeys, dogs and probably also cats (although they hide from strangers). Saucējas recorded singing in several different places on the farm: next to the barn, at the entrance to the house, under a large oak tree on the other side of the house. No particular acoustic properties were revealed on the resulting recordings, but the more or less noticeable presence of domestic animals can be heard.



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## Recording Ancient Echoes and Modern voices

### Observations and insights

by the main recording engineer Gatis Gaujenieks

When invited to take part in the Echoes of the Ancient project to record performances in the wild, I followed my methods used in the recording of the “DABĀ” double CD album project for the Latvian traditional singing group Saucējas. I had already recorded and mixed a number of studio albums with the group and was well aware of the fact that their singing methods and performances were quite loud, so the greatest challenge was to be able to record the ambience of the surrounding territory, knowing that the audio source would not be lost in the recording process. The project spanned 4 years of recordings in different locations during which time I went through various methods of capturing these performances in the wild.

When choosing the appropriate locations for recording, Saucējas consulted folk song texts and descriptions of the singing tradition, in which priority in relation to singing location is given to such key elements in nature as hills, forest edges, forests, rivers, lakes, bogs and meadows. The ensemble therefore intentionally sought out landscapes containing the above-mentioned elements, assuming that they play a significant role in creating an acoustic space during the singing process.

Recording locations were also in large part determined by much more pragmatic considerations, most important of which involved avoidance of noise created by modern civilization — not an easy task in the modern-day world. While such considerations may have been primarily conceptual, they would also be important in order to obtain high-quality recordings. Out in nature, people perceive sound subjectively and selectively, mainly hearing what they wish to hear and unconsciously filtering out other sounds. However, noises created by machines, vehicles and other modern manmade tools and objects can easily dominate a recording made using dispassionate yet very sensitive modern audio recording equipment. In order to avoid this problem, Saucējas sought locations that were as far away as possible from highways, railways, flight paths and high-voltage power lines.

But distance alone was not always the determining factor. Terrain and weather conditions, including wind direction and humidity levels, also significantly influence the audibility of unwelcome sounds. Of course, wind and humidity are quite difficult to predict, and the singers encountered unfavorable conditions plenty of times during the recording process. They also encountered sporadic, intermittent noises from nearby farms and homes, some of which were seasonal (such as agricultural machinery during harvests), while others were completely coincidental, such as a nearby farmer deciding to start up his chainsaw very early on an otherwise peaceful Sunday morning. Passing airplanes also paused the recording sessions, the app Flight radar 24 was used regularly to determine how long of a window opportunity we had to record songs as well. On one occasion the noise from a freight train, many kilometers away paused a recording session for about 30 minutes. Such and similar conditions regarding recording locations and times at times made the recording process very time-consuming and unproductive.

When The Echoes of the Ancient project team first convened in Portugal for a session at the 1st studio location, Saucējas chose a location across a stream on an incline that faced another incline creating a sort of small valley. The acoustic space was picturesque, with leafy trees all around but did not offer much in the way of reflective audio surfaces for any tangible spatial effect. While the stream did provide a calming steady sound, windy conditions, which caused rustling leaves and a higher level of ambient



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“white noise” combined with conversations between other members of the Echoes team contaminated the first recordings. After everyone involved agreed on paying more attention to the recording process, some good, productive recordings did come about, especially when a few singers went further on top of the hills to provide a larger acoustic stage.

## Selection of recording times

Similarly as with selecting locations for recording, the singers consulted folk song texts and descriptions of traditional activities when deciding on the time and season for recording. Two times stood out as the most appropriate for singing: morning and evening (with priority given to the latter), and spring and summer (which have traditionally been considered the “active” period for singing, as opposed to the “passive” period in autumn and winter, as well as the period when singing outdoors has been done). The sources do not define precise boundaries for these periods, and they most likely shifted slightly from year to year depending on the local conditions for singing and agricultural work. The tracks included on the album were recorded between early May and mid-September, thus roughly corresponding to the above-mentioned time frame.

The experience gained from this project fully confirms the conviction expressed in Latvian folklore about morning and evening providing the best acoustics and being the most suitable times for singing. Saucējas found that these times of day were also best for recording, and not only due to their acoustic qualities. However, from the perspective of the singers as well as the sound engineers and resulting recordings, there are several significant differences between morning and evening.

Nature often provides wonderful acoustics on calm, early mornings in spring and summer, which are supplemented by whole choirs of birds and (especially on weekends) minimal intruding noise from human civilization. From the perspective of the sound engineer, this is an ideal acoustic backdrop!

As the sun quickly rises in the sky and the unevenly warmed air begins to move around, the wind picks up and begins to blow the leaves on trees as well as blow into microphones. On a recording, this results in rustling, “smeared out” background noise and unwanted sounds in the recordings. Morning recording sessions thus tend to be short, tense and often with problematic results. To some extent, some broadband noise reduction processing in post aided in producing clearer recordings.

The recordings done in Portugal were done in the beginning of May, and mostly mid day. From the 4 chosen nature studio locations, 2 had interesting acoustics, a larger valley with a reflective rock face which should have proven to be interesting, but due to windy conditions, wind noise contaminated my recordings, I even tried setting up shotgun microphones within our van pointing out the window, but the results were less than expected. But in any case, it was worth a try. In many recording scenarios, there is no right or wrong, whichever unorthodox methods that yield good results is the correct method for that situation. The one Portuguese studio that offered the best acoustic soundstage was the one where Saucējas used a large rock slab as a stage across from 2 different hilltops about 1,5 km away. The 2 hilltops provided 2 separate reflections. In between the stage and the hill tops was a small road where one could easily change the recording positions. This location would have been ideal for a lengthy recording session, due to Saucējas’ ability to provide a strong sound source that could bounce off the hills, and the fact that there was less personnel to disrupt the recording process, but unfortunately due to previous scheduling commitments, the session was cut short.

On the DABĀ album evening sessions the singers’ voices generally were awake and



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responsive, and, unless it rained or there was a strong wind, the recording process was productive and, as the acoustic conditions continue to improve, an evening session could last up to four hours, from 19:00 to 23:00. There was a short evening recording session in Portugal and a longer recording session with performers from the Georgian singing ensemble, Saucējas and an instrumentalist from Portugal during the Dabā festival. Besides the fact that flies were attacking the performers, that evening session produced some excellent recordings done in a more controlled environment in a very good sounding acoustic space.

## Recording methodology

Saucējas had wished to record songs outdoors in nature already since 2010. I did research on how such recordings are made, but most of the available information was about recording birds and other wildlife as well as recording natural phenomena such as thunder or wind for use in films and advertising. I knew that several microphones to record both the singers and the natural environment would be needed to obtain a spatial recording. I also knew we would need a multitrack recording system to record separate sound signals. Around 2010, the only portable multitrack recording systems consisted of laptop computers along with external multi-channel sound cards, all of which needed to be connected to a power supply. As the technology for outdoor recording developed, compact, portable, professional-quality multitrack recorders became available that also had a long battery life.

A Sound Devices MixPre-6 portable multitrack outdoor recording system and two Sennheiser MKH 8000 omnidirectional microphones were acquired for the needs of this project to record both the singers and the acoustic environment. Initially, the recordings for this project were made using only these two microphones. As a result, the singers' voices dominated the recordings, and the natural environment in the background was difficult to hear.

In subsequent recording sessions, an additional recorder and microphones turned away from the singers in order to pick up the echoes. In the studio, these signals were synchronised, balancing the singers and the acoustic environment in which they were singing. Over the course of the project, it became clear that we needed two additional Sennheiser MKH 8000 cardioid microphones to obtain clearer recordings of the echoes without any manmade sounds or mic preamp noise in the background, later these were switched out for a pair of Schoeps CMIT 5 shotgun microphones. Due to the fact that the audio reflections in Latvia are mainly bounced back from tall forests, the level of the signal coming back is comparatively low as compared to the other terrains that offer open faced cliffs and such, so the Sennheisers and Schoeps were ideal microphones to use due to their ultra low noise and high output characteristics. This setup was also utilized during the Portugese sessions as well as the DABĀ festival recordings. My decision to use the wet(ambient)/dry (source signal) microphones allowed me to adjust the balance between the loud Saucējas performance and the ambient sound being reflected back. This allowed more flexibility in setting up recording positions. Of course being further from the source to allow for a more ambient sound resulted in losing definition in nuanced performances, plus there was the obstacles in choosing the physical locations of the recording setup taking into account the local topography.

The acoustic landscape differed in each recording location and session, and over the course of the project we discovered the most optimal placements for the microphones and singers. If the whole group was singing at the same time, the first soloist did not sing directly towards the microphone or stood facing completely away from it in order to balance better with the second soloist and drone singers. Particularly interesting were the sessions in which we made so-called overlapping recordings, involving several groups of singers or individual singers singing at the same time. The placement of mi-



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crophones was different for each song. We experimented and listened to the acoustics of the environment, how far the singers should stand from each other, and in which direction they should sing. Communications between the performers and engineer was done thru walkie talkie radios.

During the early morning sessions, humidity tended to be higher, and condensation formed on the microphone membranes, which led to technical problems. When recording by lakes, we took advantage of the fact that sound reflects from various points from the other side of the lake, but in marshy areas, a persons would sink into the wet ground, and any movement of the feet would produce loud sucking sounds of pulling something out of the mud. This was a challenge more for myself due to the fact that songs would be over 4 minutes long and I had to restrain myself from any movement in this mire during the performance.

But various naturally occurring sounds, such as the strong rustling of leaves or insects flying too close to a microphone, also created exaggerated noise on recordings that had to be removed because they disturbed the recording of the natural acoustic environment, especially if listening on headphones. At times during the recording sessions, monitoring thru headphones, I would find myself swatting away flies that were nowhere near me:) Proper clothing choices were very important, especially for myself, my leather jacket often made creaking sounds while moving around during the recording process, the same with performers wearing stiffer materials, such as rainwear which also rustled during their movements and gusts of wind. Here and there, however, such sounds were left in the recorded material if the performance of the song was too good to lose.

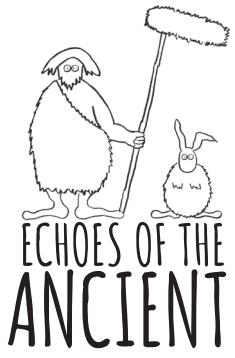
During the Dabā festival recordings, the recordings were contaminated by audience conversations about who burps the best, sounds of breaking twigs and branches that were trod upon during the performances, footsteps walking along gravel roads, horse flies sounding like WW2 bombers flying past microphones and other unexpected sounds created what may have been a very accurate soundscape of the moment but a less desirable concert recording resulted of these bonus sounds. While other recordists chose to leave these recordings as a historical document, I wanted to experiment with these recordings in an effort to reduce these unwanted noises. I utilized various demixing and noise reduction softwares to split up various components and then remixed the audio signals, removing the unwanted noises. Results worked out fairly well, perhaps not perfect, but a much cleaner recording of the performances in their natural acoustic enviroment was achieved.

## Conclusions

While the initial concept and idea of the Echoes of the Ancient project has its merits, especially in connecting various industry professionals from various countries, and a learning curve in the beginning is to be expected, in my opinion a more detailed outline of the various stages and responsibilities to those taking part in the project should have been adopted early on. In my case, I was invited to make quality field recordings of performing artists and share my knowledge of recording methods and later on, give my opinions of the organization of the various events organized.

As in any new idea or activity, lessons are to be learned from early mistakes and time and energy wasted on superfluous activities, but with each next step a more focused work method should develop to obtain better results, that would be more interesting to a broader segment of the public. The results I achieved at the DABĀ festival were much better than from the Portuguese sessions.

I would also recommend that if in the search for new acoustic studios is to be done in the field, that these searches not be done in haste. At least one hour on each site should



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be spent, shorter if after initial examinations prove that there is no acoustic space that proves to be interesting.