

Katie B., "The New Games Ethic: Colonial Themes in World of Warcraft," June 2005

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"What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute?"

—Andrew Jackson, seventh President of the United States

World of Warcraft is the newest in a series of games in the Warcraft line produced by Blizzard. This Massively Multiplayer Online Game, MMO for short, which was released late 2004 to record breaking sales, now has around 1.5 million monthly subscribers, and has recently been released to an international audience (PC Game World, 2005). MMOs are a fairly new phenomenon in the video game market, and have just recently began reaching mass markets in their appeal, thanks in part to previously popular MMOs like Everquest, Everquest II, and Star Wars Galaxies (PC Game World, 2005).

Very little academic research has been conducted to explore the new issues that MMOs' create though some key studies have been done by researchers like Bartle, Yee, Castronova, and Taylor, among a handful of others. While there has been increased critical attention given to MMOs, few researchers have looked at the colonial undertones embedded within some of these games, World of Warcraft in particular. These colonial themes are an integral part of game play in World of Warcraft and are deeply rooted within the structure of the game itself.

The presence of colonial themes in World of Warcraft is important in light of colonialism's prevalent influence, both historically and in the present day. Pop culture "to a great extent, reflects and shapes how society views ethical issues" (Monroe-Mueller, 2005). There have long been concerns about video games' influence on the people who play them, but this study's purpose is not to present an apocalyptic view on gaming, but an honest examination of the reasons and impact behind colonialism's inclusion in World of Warcraft.

The research problem in this case is three pronged, mostly due to the required textual analysis. This study will first examine how themes of colonialism are woven into the game itself before moving into an examination of players and their awareness and subsequent reactions to these colonial biases. While there has been very little research done on the actual issue of colonial themes in video games, especially in MMOs, there is a large body of prior research investigating how colonial themes are embedded within other forms of pop culture such as books, movies, and games.

During the Victorian Era, the games ethic was a well thought-out plan ideological component of the British Empire which was propagated with much success through Britain's public school system. Schoolmasters across Britain made it their mission, on the bequest of government officials, to train youths up to fit and serve the image of the eternal British Empire. The medium used to further this training was sports since the schoolmasters "were

convinced of the desirability of games, especially team games, in the training of the young. They believed in the value of these games for the development of ethical behavior and the formation of sound social attitudes" (Mangan, 1985).

Games like rugby and cricket stressed ideals such as masculinity, cooperation and sacrifice for the common good, plus an inbred sense of superiority that stemmed from both birthplace, and race. Team sports "served on the one hand as colonial travel brochure, army advertisement and farming prospectus and, on the other, as an ideological mouthpiece for 'guileless patriotism' made manifest of shouldering 'the white man's burden'" (Mangan, 1985). Recovered records reveal the depths to which the public school systems went to foster these images and ideas.

The racial implications and repercussions are still reverberating through Britain even until this day, well over a hundred years later. As "the subscription to the games ethic was not merely the derivative source of sacrifice; it was the manifestation of the moral supremacy of White Motherland and her Dominions over black, brown, and yellow 'races'" (Mangan, 1985). Generations of non-Caucasian Britons, both native-born and immigrants, have been dealing with the remnants of these ideological tenants for all their lives, both within the games they themselves are playing and within Britain's larger society (Williams, 2002)¹.

Further literature will be examined in respect to the textual and ethnographic aspects of this research project, but the first research question will be addressed now: how are themes of colonialism and imperialism woven into the text of World of Warcraft itself? It is important to establish the existence of colonial themes through an analysis of the actual game before moving into the ethnographic part of the research study.

World of Warcraft seems, on some levels, to parallel the classic games ethic. A superficial look at the story arc and basic structure of the game reveals similar inbuilt colonial biases. The story arc behind the Warcraft series, leading up to the current game, reads very much like an exaggerated series of events stolen from human history. While the motivations behind including certain events are unclear at times, there are very obvious historical connections between the series and real life history. The two warring factions, the Alliance and the Horde, come from complex histories which integrate many of these historical events.

On the Alliance's side, the Night Elves flourished early on as "their temples, roads, and dwelling places stretched across the breadth of the dark continent" (Blizzard, 2005)². Like most great civilizations, the Night Elves eventually fell into decline through the actions of their rulers until, broken and humbled as a race, they "began to study the arts of druidism that would enable them to heal the ravaged earth and re-grow their beloved forests" (Blizzard, 2005). The Night Elves stand apart from the other Alliance races partly because of their continued reliance and care of nature, as well as their physical appearance. Many Night Elf quests revolve around preserving the balance in nature, and correcting wrongs. Night Elves are the only Alliance race where dark skin is the predominant coloring for the race, a trait which appears to reflect a sort of inherent untrustworthiness. In the

¹ The popular film *Bend it Like Beckham* is one of the first films to address some of the lingering issues of racism in British sports, no matter how superficially.

² The Night Elves, on many levels, parallel with Ancient Mayan or Aztec civilizations. The corruption of the Night Elves' rulers and Queen came from the outside influence of a powerful figure, Sargeras, whom they worshipped falsely as their God, reminiscent of Cortez who was worshipped as Quetzalcoatl by the Aztecs (www.blizzard.com, Hernando Cortez).

small descriptions of each race, Blizzard's website states that Night Elves are "nocturnal by nature, and their shadowy powers often elicit the same distrust that they have for their mortal neighbors" (Blizzard, 2005). Even though the Night Elves are officially part of the 'good' side, or the Alliance, there are uneasy tensions between this race and the other, more similar ones³.

Humans are the second Alliance race to appear in the series' history. Humanity began as a fractured race, with many small tribes which eventually unified against a common threat, the Trolls (Blizzard, 2005)⁴. The human tribes eventually fragmented again, only to unite again in the face of another Horde threat as seven human nations formed the first form of the Alliance. Once united together, the humans managed to break and route the Orc threat before rounding up Orc survivors and putting them in internment camps. Human quests, like the rest of the Alliance races, are more likely to be monetarily motivated, and stress the killing factor of the quests. Humans and Dwarves share a unique class type as well, Paladin. Paladins "do battle to protect the world from the forces of shadow. Powerful warriors in their own right, they can also call upon the Light" (Blizzard, 2005). The Paladin class is interesting because, once examined, it clearly represents the 'knight in shining armor' stereotype in the game, thereby insinuating that, as forces of the 'Light,' those who are against Paladins are automatically against 'Light.' Paladins were used extensively to guard the Orc internment camps when they were operational.

The Dwarves, who are represented as close allies with the Humans, are ideologically aligned with the Gnomes (Blizzard, 2005). Both races, which begin in the same starting area around the Alliance city of Ironforge, appear to represent the capitalistic interests of Western culture. Both races are deeply involved in mining and the creation of machinery, goals which seem to directly conflict with the nature nurturing ways of most of the Horde, and the Night Elves as well.

On the Horde side, the first race to appear in the history of the series is the Trolls, who early on are presented as a "barbaric, evil race" (Blizzard, 2005). The Trolls, who were broken early on in the history by a unified human front, remain fragmented in different tribes throughout the story arc. Most of the Troll clans are still considered evil, but the Darkspear tribe, which is played by the gamers, is closely aligned with the Orcs⁵. The Trolls, Orcs, and Tauren all have the ability to choose the Shaman class of character. The Shaman class, like the Alliance's Paladin, seems to represent a clear stereotype of Native Americans. Shamans are asked to be very in tune with the earth and spirituality of their tribe; they are also able to call totems, mostly of protection, during battle, clear indicators of the Native American culture.

³ Aside from their physical appearance, the Night Elves' history aligns them much more closely with the Orcs and Tauren, who also share a close connection with nature, and are based on Native American people. While Alliance players are openly asked to be hostile to the Horde races who display these traits, the Night Elves are considered unwanted, untrustworthy allies.

⁴ Very Anglo Saxon and King Arthur actually, especially considering the European look of many of the Human settlements. There's elements of the Prometheus myth as well, from when human mages called fire down upon the Trolls, which prevented them "from regenerating their wounds and burned their tortured forms from the inside out" (Blizzard, 2005).

⁵ The Troll's Jamaican accent is amusing, until it is considered in light of the implication that the majority of the Troll race is utterly evil and barbaric. This then raises concerns about the portrayal of the Jamaican people and how the 'enemies' of the Trolls are taught to view people of that nationality. One of the phrases for the male Trolls is "How would you like to try some of my jungle love?" a clearly racist reference to African Americans as well as mixing stereotypes concerning African American sexuality and jungle primitiveness.

Orcs are probably the most interesting race in terms of colonialism in World of Warcraft. More so than even the Trolls or Tauren, Orcs are clearly representative of the North Native American culture, between visual indicators and the Shamanistic leanings. Orcs are more humanoid looking than Trolls as their limbs and facial structures are not as elongated and emphasized. The Orcs also have skin tones more similar to Native Americans, ranging from olive and shades of red to slightly less realistic green. The Orcs though, are not native to the world where the Warcraft series takes place. According to the story arc Orcs are aliens, brought to the world after being corrupted from a spiritually sensitive race into bloodthirsty savages who first formed the Horde (Blizzard, 2005). The Orcs's bloodthirstiness was subdued during their stay in internment camps, which is a disturbing sort of justification for the imprisonment and enslavement of another race of people.

Historically, the Orc's persecution by the Alliance bears a startling familiarity to the events surrounding the Indian Removal Act of 1830, when, "by the 1820s, the term 'colonization' had become a popular label for the concept of solving social problems by the physical removal of undesirables" (Wallace, 1993). On the well documented Trail of Tears, "the captives were marched to hastily improvised stockades- in the language of the twentieth century, concentration camps" (Wallace, 1993). Similar treatment was meted out to Japanese Americans during the Second World War when they too were placed into internment camps. The legacy of such false imprisonment is still felt by both the internees and their relatives until this day as, "under these conditions, they learned to internalize a 'second-class citizen' sense of self" (Nagata, 1993). By including such blatant examples of slightly reframed historical events, World of Warcraft most clearly reveals its colonial biases, and perhaps shows how even video games can draw unwanted emotional baggage depending on choices made in terms of narrative.

The Tauren are very similar to the Orcs, but have a much less involved and controversial history in the world. The Undead are somewhat like the Horde's Night Elves. They are outsiders in the Horde- technically allies, but with "no real loyalty for their newfound comrades" (Blizzard, 2005). The Undead represent an interesting area of study, but are fairly irrelevant to issues of colonialism.

It seems clear, from this textual analysis that colonial themes, whether intended by the developers or not, are indeed present in World of Warcraft. The game, on the surface, asks players to buy wholeheartedly into the dichotomy of "good" vs. "evil" by separating the Alliance and Horde both geographically initially, and through such means as limited communication⁶. The game's ethic comes through in the basic set-up of the game where, once again, the Western ideal is emphasized and taught as the dominant, proper power to support. This is complicated though both by the inclusion of the Night Elves, as previously discussed, as well as the basic nature of American culture and its inherent complexity.

Early communication theories about media's role in shaping identity take a similar dichotomous approach as well, suggesting that media's effects on audiences are direct and immediate (Hypodermic Needle Theory, 2004). This so-called hypodermic needle approach has been discredited in recent years as researchers have discovered that "identity is protean and therefore slippery. The media shape cultural identity, but not by reducing it to the

⁶ Alliance and Horde races are totally unable to speak to each other (any attempt at communication is scrambled through the chat channels). Some basic communication is possible through the preprogrammed emotes like "wave" and "salute," but, any spoken or non programmed responses, including leet speak, are made incomprehensible. By denying basic communication, Blizzard is employing classic war tactics. A misunderstood enemy is easy to hate. Language barriers work greatly to the advantage of those supporting wars.

simple 'we-are-us-or-we-are-them' formula that traditional cultural theorists endorse, a strange legacy of discredited hypodermic needle assumptions of media effects" (Olson, 2002)⁷. An essential part of the complication of identity is the built in underdog mentality which pervades Western culture, especially American culture⁸. This trend rises out of the remnants of the American Dream, and encourages Americans to shrug off dominant readings and support subversive ideological view points.

Thus, even with colonial themes embedded deeply within culture, the power of these themes again, is not absolute. Part of Ancient Rome's success was that it integrated aspects of the cultures it conquered but this integration was partly a natural event that was simply encouraged. There are dominant readings of the media, true, but subversive readings are powerful too in that "the diverse and resistant readings they enable, the global mass media, often considered instruments of colonialism, are neither purely foreign nor purely indigenous, neither colonial nor subaltern. They are a site of negotiation and contestation between two cultures: interstitial, with elements of both, and bearing the possibility of something else entirely" (Olson, 2002). The impact of including colonial themes in interactive media vehicles like MMOs is not clear cut.

Other forms of media have also included such themes of course, and like World of Warcraft, have had a complicated effect on pop culture as a result. Board games like Monopoly and Risk embody different American ideals- Monopoly encourages capitalism, Risk imperialistic world domination. Books, and movies, and books made into movies perpetuate similar black and white stereotypes, such as Lord of the Rings. The Lord of the Rings trilogy actually contains many of the same elements that World of Warcraft does, especially in terms of the total assumed evil of the Orcs (Turnau, 2004).

Now that a case for the presence of colonial undertones has been established, let us move on and examine, through ethnography, how these themes have influenced and affected players. How aware players of these themes and the real world situations they parallel? Does this awareness affect game play and faction relations?

Research began with immersion into the gaming environment. Members of this class played World of Warcraft at least several hours every week, familiarizing ourselves with all aspects of MMOs, and World of Warcraft in particular⁹. Ethnographic research for the stated research questions was conducted through an open-ended questionnaire, which was posted on a free independent survey website¹⁰. Respondents were guaranteed anonymity and asked to give email addresses that they could be reached at for follow-up questions to anything of particular interest that was initially stated. It should also be noted at this point that, despite any generalities made, these conclusions are limited to the respondents I spoke too and do not necessarily reflect the larger gaming population of World of Warcraft.

⁷ Video games, especially *World of Warcraft*, cling to this black and white approach when creating storylines. Video game research often echoes this old style approach when it comes to claims of video games creating violence in society (Cesarone, 1995).

⁸ For a far lengthier and more detailed discussion of American ideology, see de Tocqueville's classic [Democracy in America](#) (Democracy in America). The foundations for this ideology are more explicitly represented than dialogue about the term itself.

⁹ The importance of full immersion in video game research is documented by previously established researchers like Nick Yee. Due to the shifting nature of the Internet, and MMOs' often close communities, many gamers are wary of taking part in ethnographic studies. By approaching other players as members of that community, instead of as interlopers, the class was able to establish a measure of credibility emphasized by the class website, where these papers will be posted for public perusal.

¹⁰ See appendix for questionnaire.

The questions themselves dealt mostly with issues of representation, and asked people to write about anything of interest in the different races' appearance, mannerisms, speech patterns etc. On a more macro level, respondents were also asked about the appearance of the Horde and Alliance cities and landscapes. The purpose of delving into players' concepts of representation is twofold.

First, by asking what strikes players about the different aspects of the game, the second research question concerning awareness is illuminated and gives outsiders better insight into the level of awareness about colonialism. It may be entirely possible for players to interact deeply with World of Warcraft for gaming sessions without ever noticing the colonialist themes embedded within the text of the game. This is an important issue to examine. If players never notice the colonial leanings within the game, even on the most superficial level, then future questions need to address why people remain unaware. Further research might explore if any lack of awareness constitutes an acceptance of the colonial themes, or simply serves as an indication of post-colonialism's lack of power in the modern world. If players are aware of the themes, then the third and final research question can be answered by seeing how these themes affect game play and inter-faction relations.

The sample for the questionnaire comes from three main sources: an Alliance guild, a Horde guild, and from postings on one of Blizzard's World of Warcraft forums. My two main characters play in these guilds, both on separate servers, with each guilds being fairly prominent on their respective servers. Friends run both guilds and agreed to post the link to the questionnaire on the guild forum or as the message greeting that appears when players sign on and join the channel. I posted on the Off-Topic forum for World of Warcraft¹¹.

All of the respondents are regular players. Most of them are college aged, as the majority of these particular guilds are composed of people currently enrolled in undergraduate studies. The age in the Off-Topic forum board probably varied, with most tending towards a younger age bracket. Total sample size for respondents ended up being twelve. Two more people responded but listed themselves as being under eighteen. Their responses were not used due to legal reasons.

There are several distinct patterns that appear in the responses. In terms of characters and races, most respondents hardly make any reference to the manner of dress, speech, or appearance in terms of skin coloring between the different races. While some of the races seem to embody a certain ethnicity, the only actual comment about this was an offhanded, "Dwarves are Scottish! YAR!"¹². Most character related observations concern issues about misrepresentation of physical attributes, such as the female characters' exaggerated breast size, not any clear recognition of the varying sophistication levels of the races.

The differing tones of quests are mentioned a few times. When presented with clearly biased text through texts, most players seem much more aware of the attempted manipulation into a certain mindset. A respondent who plays a Tauren notes that "generally the Tauren quests are about honor and keeping nature in balance along with proving yourself in the hunt." While players appear to recognize that there are fundamental differences between the quests based on race, Dwarven quests for instance "all revolve

¹¹ Moderators requested class members to post respondent requests in the Off-Topic forum, not the General Forum, which might have limited the respondent pool.

¹² Trolls, for instance, are very clearly Jamaican.

around ale or killing invaders," there again does not seem to be a clear connection in the minds of the respondents between the differences in these quests, and a sense of a colonial bias.

The clearest indication of colonial awareness can be seen in relation to the excerpts concerning the Horde and Alliance cities. The majority of the respondents note that, in some form or fashion, that the "Horde seem to be more tribal or barbaric. Much more primitive or backward. The undead city, Undercity, is an exception, and it is a more advanced city fallen to ruin. The Alliance cities are paragons of sturdiness, whimsy, technology, and nature. This reinforces the idea that the Alliance are the 'good guys' by being more advanced." Part of this thought process seems to reflect a certain measure of acknowledgement for the 'European' or Western bias built into the good vs. evil dichotomy in the game. As one interviewee puts it, "Alliance cities are cleaner and more epic. Even the music is epic."

In terms of game play and faction interaction, the clear built-in differentiations that Blizzard has put into the game mostly affects how players see the Horde. While the majority acknowledge the supposed 'evil' nature of the Horde, there is a very strong feeling of sympathy and camaraderie with Horde players due to this externally enforced label. About half of the respondents note that they are at least basically familiar with the story arc of World of Warcraft and that this back story definitely complicates the clear cut "us vs. them" concept that Blizzard attempts to perpetuate throughout the game.

As noted, many of the Horde quests deal with honor and inter-tribal relations, a markedly different tone from the capitalistic leanings of similar Alliance quests. While the Horde has a somewhat dubious history, the Alliance's own actions have turned some players off. While talking about why one interviewee chose to play a particular faction, he responded with, "the races were one of the main reasons we picked Horde, that and given recent history from the WC3 campaign, the Horde has behaved more honorably than the alliance has on the whole (excluding the forsaken, who still bother me)." Even while there is a forced dichotomy within the game itself, players are willing to create their own subversive reading of the dominant version of the text.

The strongest trend in the interviews, in fact, is this support, even grudgingly, for the 'underdog,' or the Horde in this case. On most servers, the Horde is vastly overwhelmed by sheer numbers. One respondent, who mainly plays Alliance, admits that "I play a Horde alternate character because they are so outnumbered, it's fun to be an underdog." Another mostly Alliance player says, "I respect the Horde, though I only have alternate characters there. On my server, they are outnumbered three to one. I respect the underdog attitude they have." While players support their favorite side and perhaps, to an extent, buy into a basic dislike of the other side when playing the other, many have characters in both factions, and even those who play one side exclusively seem to maintain at least a minimal respect for the opposing side.

The games ethic aspect of World of Warcraft is complicated by several factors. While the game builds in many of the same elements such as teamwork, sacrifice, and bitter dislike of the 'enemy' in order to support the Western ideal, players are given the choice to take the side of the enemy, in other words the Horde¹³. Also, due to the complex

¹³ There is also a strong physical element in the original incarnation. The games were meant to help build willing armies of youths. *World of Warcraft* at best, helps to maintain the status quo by reinforcing mental ideals, not necessarily physical. Perhaps the lack of physicality has an impact on the effectiveness of the method, perhaps not.

relationship between pop culture, the media, and reality, there are no clear cut cause and effect scenarios.

Even while accepting the inherent colonial themes in the game, there is a certain extent of recognition and acknowledgment these biases by the players. Respondents never clearly identify the colonial biases in the game, but their candid discussions about the discrepancies of the cities, the story arc, and the enforced lack of communication between the different sides suggests at least a subconscious understanding of the colonial undertones. There is a total lack of discussion in the respondent pool concerning the many real world parallels of colonialism used by the game. Aside from passing references to the Scottish Dwarves, none of the respondents mentioned the ethnicity of the different races, skin tones, or even the use of internment camps, which, while empty, can still be visited in-game either.

This limited awareness does seem to affect game play and faction relationships though. As quoted above, many players choose to at least maintain secondary characters on the opposing faction's side, while nearly all openly acknowledged at least reluctant respect for the 'evil' side. Such acceptance only reinforces the continued discredited nature of the hypodermic needle approach to media studies and highlights the complex nature of identity formed through pop culture.

This study's limitations rest mostly in the inherently somewhat superficial nature of the ethnographies conducted. Due to time restrictions, as this class lasts only a single semester, by the time the class familiarized itself with the game, it left us with an even smaller time frame with which to conduct research. True ethnographic research spends a much greater time establishing long lasting relations with the respondents and the worlds the researchers have chosen to immerse themselves in, usually years.

There are also added communication difficulties in conducting online research. While it is very easy to make contact with a sample population, in other words contact World of Warcraft players through the game itself, it can be challenging to conduct in-depth interviews with people. Aside from a general mistrust of people who approach others in such a venue, many respondents are also unwilling to meet out of game, or provide valid email addresses¹⁴. Despite the popularity of this particular MMO, the respondent pool is somewhat limited by many of these factors.

One particular unforeseen problem that I ran across in my use of SurveyMonkey was the required age of consent¹⁵. While the survey asks all respondents to agree that their age is of legal consent, like many online sites with similar features, there is no way to verify the legality of their assent. Also, several players who answered 'no' on the over 18 requirement chose to fill out the rest of the survey anyway. I attempted to identify their responses but, due to the nature of SurveyMonkey, it is very difficult to isolate all the responses of a single person.

In conclusion, most of the research questions were illuminated and explored in further depth through the study, though answers are complicated at best. Colonial themes, many based on real world events, are prevalent in the very structure of World of Warcraft. Players though, maintain a basic recognition of this fact and, if anything, the colonialism

¹⁴ Many of my classmates were accused of being online solicitors, or frauds, while others spent much of their time defending the integrity and validity of their research (poor Beth).

¹⁵ Researchers must receive parental consent for anyone under the age of 18, a barrier the majority of us chose to avoid, rather than attempt to cross.

complicates the new games ethic, warping it so that a subversive reading sympathetic to the Horde is more prevalent than the intended one.

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to do ethnographic research from the developer's standpoint. In a post-colonial culture, colonialism themes are imbedded deeply within the culture itself. While World of Warcraft does have colonial elements, it would be fascinating to see why these elements were included. Was the use of internment camps an intentional reflection of historical events? Why was the 'bad' side made to reflect many Native American tribes or other minorities? Discovering the intentions behind such basic design decisions would probably reveal a lot about how post-colonialism impacts the masses in terms of stereotypes and their continuation.

Appendix: Questionnaire

1. All information provided will be kept absolutely confidential, including any personal information like character names or email. By completing this survey, you are affirming that you are 18yrs of age or older.
2. Why do you play the faction(s) that you do?
3. What is the primary race that you play and what have you noticed about it (appearance, verbal emotes, quests, etc)? Answer for up to three races that you play.
4. What aspects of World of Warcraft have affected how you play the game (races, story arc, etc)?
5. Have you noticed any general trends in the appearance of the Horde vs. Alliance cities?
6. Why do you think the game is designed so that the Horde and Alliance are completely unable to communicate using anything other than physical emotes?
7. If you play one faction exclusively do you dislike the other faction? (if you play both factions skip to the next question)
8. If you play both factions how do you feel about the opposing faction when you're playing a certain character?
9. Have you noticed anything else that strikes you about representation in World of Warcraft that you have yet to address?
10. I may have follow up questions to your responses. If you wouldn't mind me emailing you about your responses then please list an email account you'd like me to use. As stated above, I will keep all personal information absolutely confidential. For more information about this class, and my findings once I complete my research, visit:
<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/mmo/index.html>

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