“What Game Shall We Play?” Interpreting Theoretical and Practical Insights From Education and Design Classics in Contemporary Contexts

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the concept of play from a historical perspective. Many past authors have highlighted the diverse potentials of this multifaceted activity, which is often— though not exclusively— associated with childhood. We discuss the contributions of Carolina and Rosa Agazzi, Giuseppina Pizzigoni, Ettore Guatelli, Mario Lodi, and Gianfranco Zavalloni, who explored play through various lenses, offering a range of interpretations and applications within their own educational and pedagogical approaches. Our analysis also incorporates insights from professionals focused on children and design, specifically Bruno Munari and Riccardo Dalisi, to uncover additional dimensions of play. Finally, we examine contemporary educational contexts, including selected teaching practices and teacher training initiatives, to connect historical insights with current perspectives on the role of play.

1. Play and School: A Multifaceted Relationship

The vital role of play in children’s live (Bondioli, 1996; Braga, 2005; Bruner et al., 1976; Winnicott, 1971) is a well-established fact in contemporary society, although it is not always recognized as a fundamental right of childhood. Our understanding of the immense potential of play can be enriched by exploring its historical interpretations, uses, and applications in classic works by authors who were directly involved in education and schooling. Play has

Part of
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sometimes been conceptualized as a spontaneous, independent activity that should remain separate from formal education. In other cases, on the contrary, it has been seen as a key component of innovative teaching methods designed to engage and inspire not only children but also young people and adults. To better understand these divergent perspectives, it is of value to revisit the ideas of key figures from the late 1800s and entire 1900s — namely, educationalists and teachers who developed innovative teaching and learning approaches during this period. Through their writings, we can trace a complex landscape rich with insights that illuminate contemporary educational approaches. These historical perspectives and experiences continue to inform our understanding of how we position ourselves as educators and teachers today, particularly in relation to our intentional choices about incorporating play into school settings.

In this paper, we examine a selection of authors who established key connections between theory and practice through their firsthand experimentation with play in teaching.

1.1 Rosa and Carolina Agazzi: Spontaneous Play and Educational Play

Consider the Agazzi sisters, Rosa (1866–1951) and Carolina (1870–1945) (Altea, 2011), whose writings frequently reference play with varying meanings and practical applications. Play entered their school from its earliest beginnings, as illustrated in this passage:

> The first days. Onwards… let us allow the children their freedom. Look how that carpet of leaves, both large and small, has already captivated them all! Wheelbarrows, baskets, and thick cloth bags are put into action. Some children prefer making bunches of large leaves, while others join with a classmate in piling them around a tree trunk; … It's a celebration, a competition to see who can gather the most. (…) For today, we have done enough taming, enough persuading that at nursery school we play. (Agazzi, 1950, pp. 34–35)

Play thus becomes a primary tool of engagement—the text uses the verb "tame"—to attract children to the world of school in a pleasant and fulfilling manner that is already known to them from personal experience. Instead

of rigid rules or imposed discipline, the games proposed at school offer a sense of freedom, supported by a varied selection of educational instruments which, though everyday in nature rather than sophisticated, are thoughtfully selected with specific educational aims in mind. The sisters emphasize a fundamental principle: children's natural preference for play. They harness this inclination to guide activities along trajectories increasingly oriented to the teaching-learning process: The teacher knows what children like: they like to play, especially circle games – all the better if the words are to be chanted in a singsong (Agazzi, 1950, p. 37). Indeed, as teachers and educationalists, the Agazzis presented play to kindergarten teachers as a valuable means of organically introducing children to the construction of academic knowledge, as in the following passage: From the exercise-game to the formation of habit: initially presented as play, the exercise gradually sheds its playful character, yielding to the educational dimension and thus marking the beginning of the habit (Agazzi R., 1950, p. 74) The Agazzi sisters, as many authors have noted, successfully integrated play into formal education via two distinct approaches. The first emphasized the necessarily participatory yet unconstrained nature of play, while the second leveraged play for educational purposes. As Francesco Altea (2011, p. 35) observes, the Agazzis presented play as a stepping stone to children's first work activities and their integration into the social environment.

1.2 Giuseppina Pizzigoni: Play at School

While the Agazzi sisters embraced play as an essential step in guiding children toward more structured school learning, Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870–1947) approached it from a different perspective. As a teacher, school principal, and educationalist, she was concerned with a more protracted educational trajectory —from nursery school through vocational school—which allowed her to observe how the role of play evolved over time. Furthermore, her concept of school, encapsulated in the emblematic phrase "School is the world," completely redefined the role of play. Thus, the relationship between play and education extended beyond the interior of the school (although the building was designed based on an unconventional vision of teaching and learning), emphasizing and valuing the outside world as key to her educa-

tional offering. In her writings, Pizzigoni succinctly yet impactfully outlines the requirements for setting up a school with an alternative educational approach: Applying the experiential method in teaching demands a special environment, ample time, and adequate means (Pizzigoni, 1956, p. 31). The school's prospectus featured several outdoor spaces, each designed for a specific purpose. Notably, two of these were explicitly labelled as "playing fields."

The importance of play was further emphasized in the curricula developed for this new school and innovative teaching method, particularly in relation to physical education. Pizzigoni writes: "For physical education: Outdoor life as early as possible. Play, preferably outdoors, after the midday meal. Free play and movement-based games: ball, skittles, ball and net, and hoop on the playing field" (Pizzigoni, 1956, p. 35). This emphasis on outdoor living, with opportunities for constant movement and a teaching-learning approach rooted in practical, individual, and collective experience, was a defining feature of the new program from its first announcement on September 8, 1911, which declared the opening of:

The Scuola Rinnovata based on the experiential method […] In two first-grade classes in the Ghisolfa district, the experiential method proposed by the Committee for the Scuola Rinnovata will be implemented with the permission and support of the school authorities, the City Council, and the government. […] In these two classes, the school day will run from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with a two-hour break for lunch and rest, spent on school premises. Attendance on Thursdays is optional. The curriculum is the same as that of other schools but is delivered using a different method. The children will incur less mental strain in reading and writing and will benefit from a scrupulous physical, aesthetic, and moral education. (Nicoli, 1947, p. 32)

This brief announcement implied that the proposed new school was not based on words and abstract teachings – indeed, Pizzigoni often advocated for "few words" in her writings – but rather on the constant hands-on experiences of each child and group of children. The longer school hours, the extensive time devoted to the different educational activities, and their constant interconnecting, along with an emphasis on nature, growing plants, and caring for animals, became defining features of Pizzigoni's method. Experience

and discovery displayed a characteristic trait that is reflected in some of Pizzigoni's observations about play:

> Games play a vital role in the Scuola Rinnovata, bearing great value for both physical education and moral development. A school without games not only lacks a powerful educational tool but might be compared, in my opinion, to a day without sunshine. And I quote from the chapter on "School Games" in the *Mannheim Elementary Schools Yearbook*, which states that youth games provide a proper outlet for the natural energy of children attending public schools. It has become evident that this is the only way, in the living conditions of a large city, to foster love of vigorous physical activity in the open air. This serves as an effective means to combat the dangers of idleness, alcoholism, tuberculosis, and more. (Pizzigoni, 1956, p. 43)

For Pizzigoni, it is crucial to attend to children's health and physical development, as well as offering a learning approach centred around the joyful discovery of knowledge as well as continuous movement both inside and outside the school - an approach that mirrors children's natural, playful behaviours.

1.3 Ettore Guatelli: Objects and Games as Learning Materials

While Agazzi and Pizzigoni are well-known to education scholars and practitioners, Ettore Guatelli (1921–2000) may be a less familiar figure. This author, who was a teacher, is particularly remembered and studied by researchers of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage because of the museum he created. His house-museum (Guatelli, 1999; Clemente & Guatelli, 1996), located in Ozzano Taro, Collecchio, and described by Guatelli himself as a "museum of the obvious" or "museum of everyday life," houses a collection of over 60,000 objects and stands as a landmark in contemporary museography. The humble objects, salvaged and displayed according to Guatelli's personal aesthetic principles—the hallmark of this space—are everyday items that preserve the imprint of those who, through daily use, have worn them down to the point of making them part of themselves (https://www.museoguatelli.it/museo-del-quotidiano/). An entire room of this museum is dedicated to games. These include old games fashioned from waste materials – often the sole means by which children from less privileged social classes could cre-

ate their own toys. Today, the toy/game room's exhibits inspire workshops for young visitors to the museum. However, examination of Ettore Guatelli's career as an educator reveals that these collected games and objects played a crucial role in his teaching methodology. What set Guatelli apart as a teacher was his practice of embellishing his lessons with these collected objects, which included both traditional and contemporary games. Within his educational approach, these items became catalysts for experience-based learning, encouraging children to themselves become creators. Guatelli particularly valued toys that children and adults had independently constructed by repurposing waste materials - objects that had long served other functions before being readapted for play and which he collected following their final abandonment. When brought to school, these objects were observed anew and played with, inspiring new creations. Thus, Guatelli's pupils, while discovering traditional games, learned to reuse them, build them, and experiment with them within their peer groups. This approach offers a different perspective on play compared to the other methods we have discussed so far. Specifically, it emphasizes the value of materials and construction, as well as the process and act of narrating the stories embedded in the games on display and in their building and use. As Mario Turci has observed:

> The spaces of the infra-ordinary are the spaces that Ettore Guatelli sought to explore and highlight through the museum he created. These are the spaces of everyday life, which to a distracted eye seem insignificant because they exist on the plane of the obvious [...]. Yet it is in these spaces that the "wonders of the obvious"—and therefore of life as it unfolds in the everyday—reveal the humanity of countless stories. (Pozzetti & Turci, 2021, p. 7)

1.4 Mario Lodi: Nurturing Children's Languages

To come back to a figure who is better known in the field of education, Mario Lodi (1922–2014) offers fascinating insights into the role of play in early childhood and beyond. These insights may be gleaned from the daily journal entries, notes, and annotations that this author - active in the Educational Cooperation Movement (MCE) – produced for the documentation and planning needs of the context where he taught. In these texts, play is attributed

with a different meaning – specifically, it is not just a way of engaging learners' interest, but is also one of children's fundamental languages, a medium through which they produce culture. On careful observation, Lodi noted the striking contrast between his students' natural vitality and joy, and their more constrained behaviour in the classroom: "One day, looking out of my classroom window at the children in the courtyard, roaming free, I couldn't help but compare them to how they seemed here, at their desks – obedient, resigned, and lacking ideas – while down there, they were full of life and imagination" (Casa delle Arti e del Gioco, 2016, p. 19). Hence, he began to focus on developing a different approach to teaching – one that allowed for greater participation in school life, especially in terms of accomodating children's creative languages, within which play is a key component. Even in terms of classroom layout, Mario Lodi emphasized the need to create multifunctional spaces, moving away from the traditional setup of desks arranged solely to face the teacher's desk and the blackboard. As he wrote: "We turned the corners of the classroom into small ateliers for painting, drama activities, reading, and printing." (Lodi, 1974, p. X) The new organization of the spaces and the alternation of different learning activities - which were based on the children's everyday lives and their natural curiosity - was aligned with children's natural way of discovering and learning. This approach combined serious effort with playful exploration and group work.

Mario Lodi's emphasis on play is attested by the founding of the cooperative, now an association, known as Casa delle Arti e del Gioco. This institution was established after Mario Lodi won the International LEGO Prize in 1989. He used the proceeds to set up a study centre dedicated to children's culture, and designed to host exhibitions, workshops, research, and training for teachers and educators. Among Lodi's writings, a small but invaluable book—the first in the Casa delle Arti e del Gioco series—is devoted to play: *Come giocavo* (Lodi, 2014). In these pages, his memories come to life, vividly evoking games played outdoors in nature with friends, marked by a sense of choice and freedom. He writes: "I reflect on the history of children's play worlds, now invaded by the profit-making industry that neutralizes fantasy with serial mechanical play. I wonder what would have happened if adults had convened us to play their games in organized spaces - fifty years ago, this would have been unimaginable. Now it is a necessity, as we wait for city or

countryside to revert to being places where people know and help one other, who share a common history" (Lodi, 2014, p. 4).
Some of Lodi's memories of his childhood play are worthy of mention, shaped as they were by the spaces where they occurred: the countryside, the road, the square, the courtyard, and even the kitchen—each brimming with a thousand suggestions and possibilities.

> Fifty years ago, it was the 1930s, and I was a child. […] Our world, outside of school, was made up of our friends, our homes, the street, the countryside. There we played with everything. Each season suggested ideas, which the collective imagination transformed into executable projects and into which we threw ourselves unreservedly. (Lodi, 2014, p. 7)

> The street and the square were also available as play spaces. In the square, we played spanetta around the tower […]. I preferred spinning my top […]. The street had its entertainment: the blacksmiths in the neighbourhood near the school […]; the farrier […]; old Marta with the sweets trolley. (Lodi, 2014, p. 12).

This play was conducted both outdoors and indoors, as an integral part of the children's relationship with their surroundings, where gangs of kids were free to roam and explore. It was total play: "Children's play has no breaks, no holidays. It is the continuous need to do, to know, to understand, or to create—it is the game of discovering the world and reinventing it through play. It is happy work that stimulates learning, organizes thought, and fosters sociability" (Lodi, 2014, p. 3). This vital aspect of childhood, so deeply ingrained in Mario Lodi's memories, was something he not only cherished but also successfully integrated into his teaching.

1.5 Gianfranco Zavalloni: Games, Toys, and the Natural Rights of the Child

Gianfranco Zavalloni's life (1957–2012) exemplified the integration of games, self-made toys, and puppets into education, even before he embarked on his professional career. He brought these creative tools into the classroom during his tenure as a nursery school teacher, and his dedication to this approach persisted as he transitioned through various roles: elementary school teacher, school principal in multiple Italian locations, and in Brazil.

Zavalloni's was a different teaching method that prioritized respect for children and their needs. He collaboratively developed his approach with students, other teachers, and the broader community. His enduring focus on games and toys is evident in many of his initiatives, including the notable exhibition "1 World, 10 Toys, 1000 Combinations," devised in collaboration with Roberto Papetti. This educational exhibition explored toys in different cultures, as well as instruments of education and understanding across societies. It sought to reveal the invisible thread connecting children's games worldwide by showcasing traditional toys collaboratively crafted by children and adults.

Starting from a list of the ten most-played-with toys in the world, countless variations were presented, with the combination of different pieces in order to generate ever new toys (Zavalloni & Papetti, 1997; Papetti & Zavalloni, 1990).

In his introduction to a text on creative games, Gianfranco Zavalloni reflects on the significance of building games, a practice that is now almost entirely lost: "Let us observe the eyes of boys and girls when they build a toy, when they receive a gift, when an adult guides them in using it and playing with it: they shine with intense emotion. These objects are the destination of their dreams, at the origin of their most daring fantasies, and behind all their the most passionate and contradictory desires for possession." (Papetti & Zavalloni, 1990, p. 3). This focus on children's independent construction of their own toys, as well as a deep appreciation for the toys and games of different cultures (Fenizi et al., 2017), aligns perfectly with Zavalloni's commitment to what he terms the natural rights of children. In relation to play specifically, these rights include: *the right to get dirty*, to play with sand, earth, grass, leaves, water, stones, and twigs; *the right to use one's hands* to drive in nails, saw and scrape wood, sand, glue, model clay, tie string, and light fires; *the right to the street*, to play freely in the squares and to walk along the streets; *the right to the wild*, to build a play shelter in the woods, to have reeds to hid among, and trees to climb (Zavalloni & bambini, 2006). Zavalloni invites adults to recall what they themselves loved to do when they were little, with whom, how and where they played and what their favourite games and toys were. This approach seeks to raise awareness about ensuring children's freedom of choice, the use of their hands and time, and the opportunity to awaken their senses

through both collective and individual play. For Zavalloni, too, attention to play is a cornerstone of an educational philosophy that views children as active participants in the creation of a society committed to reimagining how we use time and space (Zavalloni, 2019).

2. Design Projects Beyond the School Setting

Having presented a range of perspectives on play proposed by education specialists – selected based on this author's ongoing engagement with their work – it seems important to extend our discussion to include two designers who have specifically concerned themselves with children's play: Bruno Munari and Riccardo Dalisi. While many designers have contributed to this field, the focus here is on Munari and Dalisi because their approach to play offers a distinctive and particularly valuable perspective.

2.1 Bruno Munari: Playing with Art and Meo Romeo the Cat

Bruno Munari was an artist, designer, graphic designer, and writer who traversed various artistic movements, from Second Futurism to abstract art, the Concrete Art Movement, and kinetic art, continuously innovating within each. A core trait of Munari's multifaceted personality was his deep commitment to the world of childhood, resulting in a wealth of groundbreaking contributions. These included innovative book concepts such as the unreadable books (1949) and pre-books (1980), designed specifically for very young children; games and toys: the *Meo Romeo* (1949) and the monkey *Scimmietta Zizì* (1952); children's books (*Toc toc. Who's there? Open the Door* (originally published in 1945); *Little Green Riding Hood* and *Little Yellow Riding Hood* (originally published in 1972); book-objects; games for thinking and, in particular, artistic workshops, were designed to take place in museums, galleries, and schools. The first of these workshops – or rather the second, following that realized at the Galleria Blu in Milan in 1974 – was designed by Munari for the Pinacoteca di Brera in 1977, at the invitation of its director, Franco Russoli. The earlier workshop in 1974, titled "Children's On-the-Spot Creativity", introduced a novel way of engaging children with art – an experience that combined the characteristics of play and discovery: a model of a laboratory for

visual education and the production of images, designed for children aged three to eight. The children were provided with various techniques and tools, visual explanations displayed on the walls, and direct projections of materials, including slides prepared and projected by the children themselves. This was the first experiment to explore the practical possibilities of a laboratory for children.

The information available to the children on the walls was diverse in character: textures, modular components, and direct projections (which were highly engaging and captivated adults as well as children). There were also modular components that could be assembled to create three-dimensional constructions, alongside other techniques. Of course, this was not yet a laboratory designed for a specific function like that later created in Brera or at the International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza, or for the exhibition at the Beaubourg in Paris entitled *The Hands That Look*. It was a test of the method (Munari, 1981, p. 14). From that moment onwards, many cultural institutions invited Munari to design and implement laboratories for them, including the International Ceramics Museum in Faenza, the Natural History Museum in Milan, Museo Pecci in Prato, Mart in Trento and Rovereto, the Triennale, and others. This aspect of Munari's work is particularly intriguing to examine. Expanding on his concept, Munari described the workshops as "playing with art". They offered opportunities for children to experiment with the principles of visual communication, prioritizing hands-on activities in the laboratory before engaging with the artworks in the museum. One of Munari's guiding hypotheses was to foster the development of a new sensibility. He summed up this idea as follows: If we play with works of art as children, in twenty years we will have a different audience – one that not only considers what it means, but also understands all the constructive aspects, through play, as children do (Munari, 1981, p. 5). According to Munari (1981, p. 8) playing with art, therefore, is not about becoming artists, uncovering the secrets of the great masters, or learning the history of art. It is not merely about having fun or giving free rein to fantasy and spontaneity. It is not solely about learning techniques in drawing, painting, or sculpture, nor about looking at art with a different perspective. Rather, playing with art is about experiencing the discovery of the rules of creativity in a truly creative way. Here, play is understood differently from the perspectives presented

earlier—a playful and experimental approach, both personal and collective, based on discovering, learning, and having fun by engaging with the rules of visual communication. It involves exploring cultural spaces and entering them as active protagonists. In the words of Munari's son Alberto, it may be seen as a game of discovery in the realm of knowledge:

> If, instead, we consider artistic expression—or metaphorical expression in general—as a form of knowledge, then it no longer makes sense to distinguish activities done in a laboratory called "playing with art" from those that could be done in another place called "playing with knowledge. (Munari A., 1986, p. 76).

The same idea applies to the museum context: so, if "playing with art" is "playing with knowledge," then "playing with the museum" is also "playing with knowledge." The museum becomes a place for constructing knowledge, not merely a space for preserving it (Munari A., 1986, p. 77).

His revolutionary ideas, which introduced a new way of experiencing museums and engaging with works of art and compositional rules, also extended to rethinking the types of games offered to children. Especially because, as a designer himself, he had created a number of children's games:

"Games and toys must stimulate the imagination. They should not be complete or overly finished – like certain perfectly detailed models of real cars – because such perfection limits the user's participation. The ideal toy should be intuitive, allowing a child to understand its purpose and how to use it without any explanation. You should be able to place the toy in a child's hands, and they will grasp its essence and function on their own (Munari, 1981, *Da cosa nasce cosa*). Laboratories as spaces for play – conceived as activators of creativity and imagination (Munari, 1977) – and games as stimulators of thought were central to Munari's work. He consciously supplemented play with specific rules, covering the role of the adult, the adult's interactions with the children, the preparation of the physical setting, and the selection of materials and tools.

2.2 Riccardo Dalisi: A Designer in the Public Square

Delving now into the work of another exceptional designer, architect, and artist – Riccardo Dalisi – we see that his revolutionary approach also incorporated play, exploring themes of participation and shared creation. In the early 1970s, from 1971 to 1974, Dalisi's work in the Rione Traiano neighbourhood of Naples, which had been built in the late 1950s and was characterized by severe social marginalization, might be described as a laboratory experiment conducted with the participation of the children in the local area (Dalisi, 1975, 1978). Via the mutual exchanges between the children and a group of facilitators, Dalisi fostered creativity and play, using them as tools of transformation and emancipation. In his "animated architecture" project, Dalisi actively engaged local children in designing new structures for their community, encouraging collaboration and a sense of belonging. The children's playful actions occupy and modify the space, creating objects that were stable yet not permanent. Dalisi's approach prioritized playing with design game as a concrete tool of social transformation, capable of influencing and reshaping society (Parlato & Salvatore, 2020).

3. A Reflection on the Contemporary Panorama

After this brief overview of the ideas of educationalists and designers about play and its potential applications, let us highlight a few key points that emerge from their perspectives. Many of the reviewed authors view play as an instrument of learning. Conversely, others emphasize the inherent freedom of play, and its independence with respect to constraints.

A survey conducted in 2024 on the role of play in school settings, with second-year students of Primary Education, confirmed that this dual perspective is also present among contemporary future infant school and primary school teachers. Of the 67 participants, 11.9% believed that play should always include an educational dimension, 86.6% responded that "it depends," while only 1.5% asserted that play should not have any educational dimension whatsoever. The responses provided to justify these choices offer key insights; a select few are presented here as examples: "It's not that play should

have an educational purpose, but rather that it can: in my opinion, it is possible to learn through play, both in more 'structured' situations organized by adults and in free, unstructured ones." "Play does not always need to serve an educational purpose. Sometimes, it is important for it to arise spontaneously among children, with the simple aim of having fun and sharing time together." "Some games can be designed with an educational purpose, while others exist purely as sources of entertainment and freedom for children. However, in my opinion, every game contains, whether visibly or not, an educational element." "Play should be free and spontaneous, not imposed." "Often, a child's spontaneous play inherently carries an educational value comparable to the planned objectives of a teacher. Therefore, play does not necessarily need to have a defined educational purpose, as it naturally enables children to explore, discover, and learn."

In terms of their own experience, particularly during periods of teaching practice at infant schools, all the participants had observed the significant role of play, often related to the use of specific materials or to symbolic and movement-based games in the school yard. However, only 44.6% had directly introduced a game to the children themselves. During their basic training, many student teachers design classroom activities centred on the use of play as a teaching tool. Notable examples include the work of two students: Manuel Anzi, whose undergraduate thesis titled *In Search of the Princess: The Use of Role-Playing Games in a Primary School Class* posed the following questions: Is it possible to design a learning path using the Role-Playing Game methodology? What skills must children deploy, and what forms of intelligence are enhanced by the use of this methodology in the classroom? and Francesca Pretari, with a thesis titled *A Journey Around Play: Meanings, History, and Play-Based Learning* – the starting point of her research project was board games, which she ultimately integrated across multiple disciplines. In conclusion, as evidenced by these examples, the role of play has become an essential aspect of school life – whether as free play or as activities intentionally designed with educational purposes. Key takeaways include the rich potential of play and the fact that explicitly educational games (Andreoletti & Tinteri, 2023; Berti, 2022; Hughes, 2010; Ligabue, 2020; Moseley & Whitton, 2014; Plass et al., 2019) can coexist with experiences that honour the free and untamed nature

of play. When designing games for learning, it is essential to respect key characteristics of play such as freedom, rules, autonomy of choice, and discovery.

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