The popularity of football games in the world. 
Is there a relation with hegemonic power?

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Abstract

Football was invented in the most prestigious public schools of the British hegemon and diffused to the European continent. The early professionalism and the social trickling down to the people’s game made it the sport in the world. Rugby kept until recently its status of amateurism and was spatially diffused into the White dominions. Some formalised versions of rugby and mixtures with other types of football resulted in Australia rules, Canadian football and American football but not of them spatially diffused. The US hegemon introduced baseball and not American football in regions influenced by them. Gaelic football on the other hand was and is an expression of local Irish nationalism.

1. Introduction

“During the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962, US government officials, examining aerial photographs of Cuban fields, missed an obvious clue about their use. It took a German-born American, Henry Kissinger, to realize the significance of these fields. They were football pitches, and the Cubans, he knew, did not play football; they played baseball. The Russians, however, were dedicated footballers.” (Waldstein & Wagg, 1995:72)

The title of this article can in some way be misinterpreted or be misleading. At first glance readers may think that the contents will be a description and explanation of what we in continental Europe known as our most popular sport “football”. In reality we will analyze, as said in the title, the “football games” in a global context. Besides what is referred to as football in Europe, some other football games such as rugby football (league and union), American football, Canadian football, Australian rules football and the historical folk game of Gaelic football enjoy in some parts of the world a higher popularity. In this article we will explain the origin, and the differences in popularity of those games across the globe. We will try to answer the questions: Why is football the most popular football game in the world? Why is rugby so popular in South-Africa, New-Zeeland, Australia, these places that are known as the “White Dominions” and in a far lesser degree on the European continent? Why is American Football only popular in the US without major global diffusion? And how does Canadian football, Aussie Rules and Gaelic football fit in this picture? We will link these answers with the hegemonic power of the UK in the 19th century when modern sports were
invented, the resistance related to nationalism or patriotism in some parts of the world and the channels used in the spatial diffusion.

2. The origin of “football” in the UK: Football Association, Rugby Union and Rugby League

Some forms of kicking a ball and “folk football” can be found in Ancient history and Medieval and early modern Europe but the modern game of football can be linked to the British public schools (Dunning & Sheard, 1979; Baker, 1982; Mandell, 1984; Guttmann, 1994; Wagg, 1995; Horne e.a., 1999; Dunning, 1999; Dejonghe, 2004; Van Bottenburg, 2004). Folk football was, according to Horne (1999), becoming marginalized because it was not conductive to the mores, values and aspirations of an expanding commercial and industrial culture. The codification of football in the 18th until mid 19th century into a modern game is what Elias (1971) and Dunning & Sheard (1979) referred to as a sportization phase of pastime. Modern stands here against traditional and is according to Taylor (1996) a word used to describe the cultural changes that accompany the constitution of political economic structures in a transformed society. Wagner (1990) and Gutmann (1991) argued that industrialisation and modernisation created a process of cultural diffusion which resulted into a substitution of transformation of traditional games by or into modern sports. If sports diffuse before the sportization process is completed, hybridisation of the game is still possible. American football, Australian Rules and Canadian football can, as will be shown, be defined as hybridisation of formalized but not codified football variants.

If we translate this to modern football games, this shows a rupture between the traditional folk games for common people and the football games for amateurs with formal rules and codes developed in the private schools between 1845 and 1863. The pedagogical fixation on Darwinist competitiveness between students and the creation of muscular Christians was based on what Baker (1982) called the need for future strong leaders of the British empire. The adaptation of football as a leisure activity by several public schools resulted in different rules. Some of them such as Cheltenham, Marlborough and Rugby formalised handling or running of tackling games. Other private schools such as the more prestigious Eton, Harrow, Shrewsbury and the London schools Westminster and Charterhouse preferred a formalised non-handling or dribbling and kicking game. The reason for this dichotomous development was purely an adaptation to the local circumstances of the playing areas. The schools where pupils had to play within the cloisters had no space to adopt the running and tackling game. The rise of the railway network made interschool competitions possible but as each school played by its own rules, a uniform codification became necessary. The need for unification of the rules happened after several attempts. The first one occurred in 1848 when students from Eton, Rugby, Winchester, Harrow and Shrewsbury negotiated in Cambridge about a set of rules, the “Cambridge Rules”. Those were favouring the Etonian kicking game and is the cradle of the rules of Association football as we know it today. In 1857 some older students from Harrow created “the Sheffield Rules” and in 1862 there was another attempt in Uppingham. The desire for a bigger league resulted in the need for constitutional compromises between the different committees and clubs. On October 26, 1863 representatives of several clubs met in London at the Freemason’s Tavern. This meeting was the inauguration of what we known today as the Football Association (FA). The unifying rules
of the FA were based on the Cambridge rules and published on December 8th, 1863. Besides these southern FA rules, the clubs in the northern part of England use the ‘Sheffield rules’ between 1857 and 1877. A compromise between both sets of rules created the “national FA” and made a merger between the two associations possible.(Bale, 1980; Baker, 1982; Holt, 1989; Horne e.a, 1999; Dejonghe, 2004; Van Bottenburg, 2004; McComb, 2004; Goldblatt, 2006)

The expunge of hacking (kicking an opponent in the shins) and running with the ball from the FA rules was the origin of a schism between Football Association and Rugby football. The “Old Rugbeians” had already an alternative code of Rugby rules by 1862 but the need for unification in the different rules resulted in a meeting in the Mall Restaurant in London on January 26, 1871. As a result the Rugby Football Union (RFU) was founded and a common set of rules was introduced in June 1871.

In its modern format association football and rugby football started as leisure activities for upper and middle class boys of public schools and universities. The “old boys” wanted to keep the game for themselves. The emergence of a free Saturday afternoon for the working class made the need for distraction and the creation of a common identity in the urban centres in the north of England necessary. Churches, factories, trade unions and local businessmen educated with the muscular Christianity ideal introduced and gave modern football-- and to a lesser degree rugby-- to the masses. Football was in no time within reach of everyone. The FA rules and the southern clubs were imbedded in the southern amateur and middle class ethos. In the urban and industrial northern part of England, football developed to become “the people’s game”. Leading clubs in the North started in the 1870s to charge admission to spectators and started to pay wages to attract highly skilled working-class players. The wages were paid to cover their so called “broken time”, time lost from their other work and the risk for injuries. The FA sustained their upper class and middle class amateur policy. The growing influence of the working class players and the introduction of professionalism made that upper and middle classes took refuge in other sports such as cricket and rugby union. The Football League, a professional competition, started in 1888 in Northern England and the Midlands with 12 teams and was the cradle of contemporary professional football in England and the rest of the world.

The middle and upper classes withdrew themselves in the Rugby Union and England, together with Wales, Scotland and Ireland founded the International Rugby Board in 1888. This IRB defended pure amateurism and prohibited every form of financial compensation for broken time. One of the old sayings of the old Rugbeians and upper class amateurs goes “football is a gentleman’s game played by ruffians, and rugby is a ruffian’s game played by gentlemen”. This indicates that in most rugby playing countries, rugby union is/was widely regarded as a part of the establishment and a historically amateur sport educated in a lot of private schools.

Some old students of public schools and universities introduced rugby in the northern part of the country and the same discussion about professionalism was held and a second schism occurred. The divide occurred according to Moorhouse(1995) and Downward & Jackson(2003), just like between professional and amateur football, geographically as well as according to class lines. On August 29, 1895 21 clubs of the industrial north decided at a
meeting in Huddersfield to redraw themselves from the Rugby Union and they created a new governing body that from 1922 has been know as the Rugby Football League.

The International Rugby Board decided on August 26, 1995 to accept professionalism. The reason was the existence of a hypocrisy of shamateurism and to counter the rise of Rugby League in New Zealand, South Africa and Australia. In these countries a professional Super League was created in 1997 and the union was afraid that players would leave the Rugby Union to enter the Rugby League. To counter this initiative the New Zealand, Australian and South African Rugby Unions started a Super 12 and later the Super 14 combined with Tri Nationals Series for national teams. In Europe teams from England, France, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Italy formed the Heineken Cup and the century old cup between the major national teams became the six nations championship.

3. The spatial diffusion of the English modern football games

Bale(1982) noticed that sports, like many other cultural traits followed regional patterns of modernization. In the same period as the formalisation of modern sports in the different public schools was Britain according to Taylor(1993;1999) the cultural hegemon in the world-system and their modernity was globally diffused. The spatial diffusion of football games from its cradle occurred, as will be described in this part, in different spatial patterns.

3.1. Europe

3.1.1. The depth diffusion and resistance on the British Isles: center-periphery relation

The depth diffusion of the codified versions of football and rugby occurred first of all in the British Isles. Within the “Celtic fringe”(Ireland, Scotland and Wales)-- according to Maquire & Tuck(2005)--Wales and Scotland have used the English sports to challenge the political and economic dominance of England by trying to beat them at their own games. In Scotland football became an expression of religious background (Celtic/Hibernians versus Rangers), territorial segregation and local identity and rugby the sport of the Anglophile part of the population. According to Bairner(1996) and Bradley(2002) most Scots are ninety-minute patriots and sport is with the tartan army the most popular manifestation of Scottishness within Scotland. In Wales rugby is because of the neighborhood diffusion from nearby English regions and the resemblances with the local folk football game “cnappan” the most popular sport. According to Maquire(1994) it is the national sport at which they can beat their suppressor.

The Irish cultural(catholic) nationalists reclaimed their identity and rejected British sports. In 1884 some nationalists established the Gaelic Athletic Association(GAA). The GAA used the Gaelic language, the Irish national flag and the hurling stick as a symbol. They promoted their own Gaelic Games such as hurling, camogie, handball and rounders and Gaelic football and defended the Irish culture against foreign English imperialist culture. On the other hand rugby was according to Diffley(1973) in Ireland used to support the Irish nation. Rugby Union is

1 Camogie and hurling are traditional Celtic games that have some characteristics of hockey. Camogie is played by women and hurling by men. It is played with a cuernes stick, a caman or camog.
nowadays a sport in which a united “Ireland” competes on a world stage against other nations (Bairner, 2001; Maquire & Tuck, 2005). Gaelic sports are the expression of ethnic Catholic cultural identity but give the Irish no opportunity to compete internationally. Football is as in Scotland used to give religious identity and has the highest popularity in Northern-Ireland. **Gaelic football** is a mix of football and rugby. A team has 15 players, the ball is round and the goals are the combination of rugby and football with a goalkeeper. The game had to be codified so that it could compete with the imported football games. Gaelic football is, because of the absence of economic and political influences of Ireland in the world, played in Ireland and some enclaves of Irish immigrants in the rest of the world.

3.1.2. Continental Europe

The local urban cosmopolitan middle and upper class elites were the first adaptors of the codified modern sports. They preferred football and not rugby because football was popular at the more prestigious public schools of Eton, Harrow and Cambridge. The way football was transplanted to other countries and regions happened in several phases: (Bale, 1980; Mandell, 1984; Guttmann, 1994; Dejonghe, 2004; Van Bottenburg, 2004; Goldblatt, 2006)

1) British emigrants form their own clubs  
2) Local cosmopolitans introduce the game and copy values of the hegemon and British elites  
3) Cosmopolitan elites in countries of the early adopters take over the role as diffusionists  
4) Football became a game of the working class and a national FA was established

The period between phase one and three can be defined as the decision phase of an innovation diffusion process. In continental Europe football was a relocation and neighborhood diffusion introduced by British emigrants. Football was spread through harbors (Le Havre, Bordeaux, Hamburg, Bilbao, Barcelona, Lisbon, Porto, Saint-Petersburg, Genua, Haarlem or Antwerp to mention some), industrial core regions (Bohemen, Ruhr) or capitals (Paris, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Moscow) (Duke, 1995; Augustin, 1995; Wagg, 1995; Ravenel, 1996; 1998 Arnaud, 1998; Dejonghe, 2004). Bale (1980) noticed a distance decay relation between spatial diffusion and distance to London and a strong relation with economic development of the country that adopts football. The main source of resistance in continental Europe came from Germany. The rival in the struggle for hegemonic power called it “Fussflummerlei” (football hooliganism) and the “English disease and accentuated the difference between German culture and Western (British) civilization (Stokvis, 1989; Dunning, 1999). The anti-British feelings and growing nationalism in Italy resulted in 1909 in a change of the name of football into calcio, a reference to a 16th century game “calcio Fiorentino”.


The early codification of football made that rugby started with a disadvantage in the European spatial competition. The local elite adopted football and clubs were established in the main urban centers. This was the start of a spatially neighborhood diffusion. Football became the most popular team sport and trickled down to the working class people. Rugby entered Europe through the school system and kept its elite amateur ethos, which made it difficult for the sport to spread into continental Europe. The spatial diffusion of rugby is strongly connected with English public schools and pedagogic methods. After the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870-71 some elite schools started a transformation into the direction of the adored public school system with their muscular Christians. Pierre de Coubertin, the founding father of the Olympic Movement, selected rugby as the first and main collective sport in his “Mouvement Sportif Française” and so the sport was introduced in 1872(Augustin, 1995; Dine, 1998). In analogy with football rugby entered France through harbors such as Bordeaux and Le Havre. Rugby developed, as shown in figure 1, mainly in the region La Rochelle-Bordeaux-Bayonne-Perpignan-Grenoble and is called the “l’ovalie”. The location of football and rugby clubs shows a relative disjunction and rugby is in some of the major cities in France such as Grenoble and Dijon a substitution for a successful football club(Mathieu & Praicheux, 1987; Dine, 1998; Ravenel, 1998).

![Figure 1: Diffusion of rugby in France](http://pedagogie.ac-toulouse.fr/histgeo/monog/rugby/histrugb.htm)

3.2. Rest of the world

In the rest of the world Britain exported as the core region of the world system their formal and codified modern sports. Rugby and cricket became popular and took root were Britain ruled and it has survived and flourished in postcolonial cultures and pedagogical education systems related with the English motherland. Football, on the other hand, only needed the presence of British cultural and economic influence. On the other hand some emigrants of the mid 19th century took some existing formal version of the public schools along with them. These formal version were sometimes adopted in local universities or public schools and were
a secondary cradle of new football games such as American football, Canadian football and Australian rules.

3.2.1. Africa and Latin America

The British administrators educated in the public schools had as one of their tasks the civilization of their colonies. According to Mangan (1986) it was there mission in Africa to bring something that would improve the natives. The function of sports was to control local cultural and leisure activities. Bale & Sang (1994) noticed that the game of football was played for moral benefits and to make them more British. The ultimate aim was to transform the social structures of the periphery to give it a place in the British and later on European commercial and economic system. The main difference between the British empire and France and Portugal was that according to Mangan (1986) and Stuart (1995) France and Portugal tried, with football as one of the tools, to assimilate the local population and Britain only wanted to transform the local conditions in their economic and commercial favor. Football was and is in the post colonial period used as an ideal tool for unification and political leaders have been closely associated with the most popular teams and good performances of the national teams (Broere & Van Der Drift, 1997; Hayatou, 1998).

Most of the countries in Latin America were independent in the 19th century. Some parts of the region was incorporated in the periphery free trade imperialism of the British hegemon. He introduced modern sports and more specific football in the main urban center and harbors. In the 19th century the British entrepreneurs dominated in an informal way the economic scene in Argentina (first club in Buenos Aires 1867), Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Chili and Brazil. The first participants and attendances of football were the local elites from immigrant communities, many of whom had been sent to British schools by their Angolhile parents. Urbanization and industrialization of the coastal regions created inter neighborhood competitions between immigrants from different countries. Football descended in the same way as in Northern England from elite to working class professionalism. (Corbridge, 1993; Guttmann, 1994; Del Burgos, 1995; Goldblatt, 2006). Football has according to Del Burgos (1995) and Boniface (1998 been used --since the beginning of the 20th century-- as an instrument of mass control, social binding and precarious of ethnic and political mixes.

3.2.3. The cultural intensive White dominions and the Australian exception

The cultural intensive version of the Rugby Union was exported in a selective way to what is called the rugby dominions. In the “White Dominions” New Zealand, South Africa, Australia and some islands in the Pacific the sport has evolved to an expression of loyalty to the empire. The sport was in 1868-1870s introduced in a formalized way in the public schools of Wellington and Auckland and spatially diffused to other cities and rather quickly it seeped into the lower social classes and became a culturally neutral sport. In South Africa rugby was also introduced through elite schools such as Stellenbosch but it became an icon of racial segregation and is nowadays the sport of the middle class Afrikaner. Football on the other hand is the sport of the black population. Football was introduced by the colonial army and was in the beginning of the 20th century rather popular amongst the urban working class. Local governments and mine owners used the sport as a social control tool for their labor
force. Rugby is nowadays “the” sport of the white Afrikaner and in some cases an icon and expression of their culture.

Australia is partly an exception. It was between 1788 and 1868 a place of deportation for English convicts who arrived in Sydney Harbour. Those convicts brought their local folk version of football to the continent. These entered the country before the sportization process was completed. The discovery of gold in 1851 was the start of a second flood of immigration from the British isles and some of the immigrants introduced the formalized and in some way codified versions of Rugby, football and Gaelic football. History tells us that Tom Wills, a son of a gold digger who was sent to Rugby for his education, returned in 1856 to Australia as an excellent cricket player. He was convinced that cricket players would improve if they could do something during the winter. The result was a kind of football on a cricket ground. The ‘Victoria Rules Football” with its own local code was introduced in 1858 at the Melbourne Cricket Club and in local private schools. The sport diffused throughout the region and a codification occurred in 1866. In 1877 the Victorian Football Association was founded. The game diffused in the 19th century towards the coasts of what we know today as South and Western Australia. As in the UK professionalism was the next major development and in 1896 eight teams in the Melbourne area broke away and founded the Victorian Football League, the predecessor of the current Australian Football League. The sport is nowadays the most covered and watched football game in Australia. In New South Wales and Queensland has it only recently become popular because the English game Rugby League is the local substitute. Australian Rules is played on an oval cricket ground. The game is a mixture of the formalized football games of Rugby and Cambridge, the folk versions of Gaelic Football and other local folk football games brought by the gold diggers in the 1850s and a local Aboriginal game known as Marn Grook. It is a clear example of the difference between formalized and codified games. The lack of codified games until 1860-70s made it possible that immigrants could “invent” an own version.[www.afl.com, 02/05/2007; http://rl1908.com/rugby-league/AFL.htm, 02/05/2007; http://www.colonialrugby.com.au/aussie-rules.htm, 02/05/2007; Dejonghe,2004).

The final outcome is that Australia is not dominated by one football code. Australian rules is the predominant winter sport in its traditional areas of popularity, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Tasmania. Rugby league is the most attended spectator sport in New South Wales, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. In the international context Australia is better known for its Wallabies, their national team of Rugby Union, and to a lesser degree their football team. The reason is that Australia has no hegemonic power and their local games have only spread to some neighboring countries/islands. It other words Australian Rules is a local sport.

3.2.4. The American and Canadian exceptions

In the last quarter of the 19th century the North East of the US was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial nation. This industrialization attracted and was fed by immigrants from the old continent and was according to Agnew(2005) the genius of US hegemony. The combination of a population multi-ethnic in its, a closed British elite, the development of an autarchic economy oriented towards itself, a policy of isolationism and the Southern support
of the British in the civil war resulted according to Van Bottenburg (2004) and McComb (2003) in the development of a strong self confidence and a feeling of superiority towards other cultures. The impact of these factors on sports was the “invention” of typical American sports such as baseball, American football, basketball and volleyball to mention some. The origin of American football --also known as the Gridiron game outside the US and Canada because of the field lines, can, much like in Britain and the other White Dominions, be situated in schools and universities where students played their local formalized variety. It must however be said that first football (soccer) got more attention. On the other hand, in the prestigious universities of Yale and Harvard, a rugby version had become more popular. The preference in Harvard in the 1860s of what was referred to as the “Boston game” –a rugby oriented game-- can be seen as the cradle of American football. A competition between the most prestigious universities of the country, Yale and Harvard, resulted in the so called concessionary rules which were also implemented by the other universities (Baker, 1982; McComb, 2003; Van Bottenburg, 2004). The game confirmed middle class values and diffused spatially to all prestigious schools and reached the west coast in 1904.

The hegemonic power of the US started after WW I and they exported their consumerism and popular culture globally. The reason is according to Van Bottenburg (2003) the differential popularization in the global diffusion of their sports. Baseball and not American football was in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century the most popular sport in the US. Baseball was also the working class sport and followed the flag with the militaristic and trade influences of the US in the world. The result is that in Japan, South Korea, Venezuela, Cuba and other countries in Latin America and the Pacific under the American influence baseball was introduced as the American sport. The US introduced in countries such as China and the Philippines volleyball and basketball into the school system. American football on the other hand was still an elite sport and the US had according to Van Bottenburg (2003:1555) “not a colonial empire like the British, and so football lacked the network of elite schools that provide a foothold for the English elite sports”. Another problem was that in most parts of the world other football game(s) were already popular and American football would be a substitution good with typical American characteristics. Kroes (1996) defined it as a non-European sport and a counterpoint to football. American football has been turned into the most popular sport in the US since the 1950s. The final between winners of the American Football Conference and the National Football Conference, known as the Super Bowl, has every year the highest viewing rates on American television. The sport evolved to an expression of patriotism. Before every game everybody sings the national anthem “The stars spangled spanners” and American flags are all over the stadium.

The Canadian version has an analogue history as American football. British immigrants introduced formalized rugby variants at universities. The formalized version was written at the Mc Gill University Montreal. These “Mc Gill rules” were introduced at Harvard and formed the base for American Football. According to Van Bottenburg (2004) rejected the French immigrants the values and culture of the British empire and the stronger relations with the US resulted in a sport culture typical of Canada with “ice hockey” as the national sport. The Canadian version of football is only played in Canada and --as can be seen in the logo-- also an expression of nationalism. The reason is, as in Australia, the lack of a strong enough
international influence of this country on other countries so that the sport could not be (easily) disseminated (Dejonghe, 2004).

3.2.5. Asia: The empty region?

In Africa and Latin America sport patterns are more homogenous but in Asia was their a colonial impact of non European countries. In Asia we notice a more heterogeneous pattern. The main reason is according to Van Bottenburg (2004) a different colonial history. European countries controlled most countries in Africa, and Latin America was independent by then but in Asia several colonial powers such as France, Russia, Holland and the UK were in command and some countries such as China, Japan, Thailand and some regions in the Middle East, kept their independence. A second reason was the resistance of local culture against cultural imperialism of the west. The introduction of the British educational system in their colonies, dominions and protectorates made cricket and hockey popular but rugby did because of the need of physical contact between the local elite and the British colonial staff not fit into local cultural values. Football was at the end of the 19th century in social decline and hence not played by British colonial employees. It were soldiers and seamen who introduced the sport and made it popular amongst the indigenous lower social classes. Van Bottenburg (2004) noticed that only sports played in the higher classes were institutionalized. The result was that football games had some back slash and still have a disadvantage in global competitions such as the World Cup. As we already mentioned the US introduced baseball or basketball in the regions under their influence and football games were football until recently not popular.

4. Conclusion

Britain is the cradle of modern football games in their formalized and codified form. The early sportization of football combined with the popularity of the game in the most prestigious schools made the sport suitable for spatial diffusion throughout the cosmopolitan and industrialized parts of Europe. The trickling down the social ladder made it “the people’s game” and is the source of nowadays popularity in a lot of a countries around the globe. In the beginning was in the less prestigious schools rugby socially classified below football. The early professionalism of football in England resulted in a social decline and rugby kept its amateurism and was still associated with elite schools and the higher social classes. The internal discussion between professionalism and amateurism resulted in the division of rugby into an amateur association, the Rugby Union, and a professional association, Rugby League. Rugby was spatially diffused through the educational system in the White Dominions and some parts of France. Some of the schools in these White Dominions introduced a formalized version of rugby. The resistance against the British empire (US and Canada) or the mixture with folk versions (Australia) resulted in the rise of new football games such as American football, Canadian Football and Australian rules. Canadian Football and Australian football are, because of a lack of global influence of the country of origin, a local popularity. In the
In the case of American football, differential popularization of sport in the US together with the presence of historical football and rugby in Europe and their former colonies and protectorates, was the main reason why the sport never became popular outside the US. In the US baseball and to a lesser degree basketball are the spatially diffused sports. Gaelic football on the other hand is an Irish expression of nationalism and identity and was formalized and codified in the 19th century as a resistance against the British.

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