

# Designers = Meta-epistemologists?

Questions of practicing design in the spaces of *beyond-knowledge* and the *not-yet*.

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**Abstract:** ‘You might know-it-all, but what can you do with it now?’

In this paper we propose the view that *design* is a world-making activity, situated in negotiation, configuration and adaptation. Thus design brings about change in a space of *beyond-knowledge*, and of the *not-yet*. It therefore reflects, alters and creates deep value systems at a meta-epistemic level: the level of ethics and virtue. We argue that design operates and transgresses in the space between *being* and *becoming*. It is *being-with* and *action-within* the fabrication and binding of artifice; self-consciousness arising with continual co-dependence. It is an act of *futuring* reliant on know-how rather than know-what [8].

These statements liberate design from traditional *knowledge-making* and *disciplinary-thinking* of the academy resulting in potential causal emergence of new systems, disciplines, values and boundaries, manifesting ethical value into components of experiential realities. This creates the space for the possibility of deep understanding (gnostic, tacit and/or implicit) of the concepts of ethics, virtue and eudemonia through an affirmative, change-centred, world-making and poetic design *in practice*, rather than via traditional dualist, rational, logical, analytic or scholarly means [13].

Though we make reference to traditional knowledge and rigour in this paper, rather than reaching any concrete conclusions, we propose and outline emerging questions around the notion of design as a *meta-epistemological* world-making practice

**Keywords:** *design philosophy; virtue; futuring; co-dependence; purposeful design*

## 1. Introduction

In this paper we begin with a personal reflection which resonates with our own experiences as practitioners and move on to a discussion of the recent activities of design professionals and their industry. Through this exploration from the individual to the collective, we propose a new framework for understanding the intrinsic processes of design-action. We believe that the objects and intentions of design uphold and continually remake the current flow of socio-cultural value in our society. Our perceived framework seeks to encourage convivial and futuring activities within *our* industry.

We argue that progressing the current conceptions of design as a problem-solving activity in industry is harmful to the creation of a virtuous possibility finding future-state practice. The framing of design activities in the academy are also counter to establishing the possibility of future eudemonic-action, due to the re-appropriation of analytical or truth-oriented language, rather than languaging its activities in their own right [10]. Language is important in establishing an ethics of design, and focusing on purpose can become a catalyst for bringing-about prudent design industry, and therefore a potentially common and auspicious futuring society.

We will move through three perspectives in the paper. First, reflecting upon a recent history and understanding of design, its industry and component practices; second, establishing a way-point of current-state practice, identifying individual potential and possibility for socio-cultural value shifts; and third, proposing both a new direction for design practice and scoping tentative ways of enacting that re-direction. We hope that this paper will show the virtuous possibilities intrinsic to our activities as designers, and seed reflection on the responsibilities to the future many may have ignored within design. We see this as vital for collective, social and global well-being and happiness. Due to some of the complexities in the language within this paper, we have also included a short glossary (section 5) following the main body of this paper.

## 2. Design-action as seen from Past, Present and Future Perspectives.

### 2.1 The self-reflective designer?

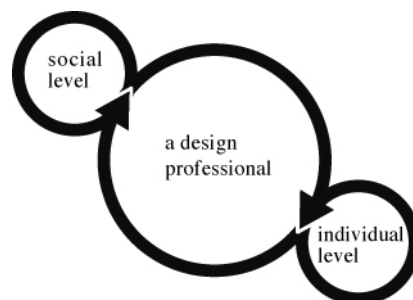


Fig.1 Recursive iteration.

*On my business card, my title is designer. I have been known as a designer in the public and I have introduced my self as such to people I've met. I have done something because I am designer and at the same time I was doing something to be a designer. While I was pretending as a star designer in front of some clients, I was using specific words like a serious artist. In the name of a designer, I am performing as a designer. So, I've learn a designer's role through whole my surrounding and the endless loop. Yes, I was a designer. I am a designer and may be I will be a designer in the future... I might know it all but what I've done with this and what I have to do with this? Hyaesook Yang – Taken directly (uncorrected by the authors) from the designers reflections on professional design experience, 2009.*

In the above transcript, Hyaesook Yang, one of the co-authors of this paper, reflects on her own experience as a design professional and defines herself as a designer on both an individual and a social level by a process of

recursive iteration (fig.1). It may appear, when reading the above, that some of her professional experience, which may not seem to be the traditional designers' role, has been forged by the variety of her expertise. Moreover, by mentioning 'the endless loop', her role appears to be in flux. In short, the above quote suggests that the design process has been harnessed to fit a multiplicity of factors within Yang's plastic activity. Consequently, searching for the answers to personal questions of professional responsibility could be seen as an investigation of the space of flux where design is a situated experience, rather than a reference to any fixed terminological or analytical knowledge. This is because any situated experience from an activity in flux is itself relational to its surroundings. With this fluctuating state of the individual designer as our starting point, we decided to look at whether the industry itself was in the same state of change and whether we could indeed encourage a state of positive growth through the presentation of this paper.

## **2.2 Prospect-offering within the design professions?**

The practice of design is often regarded as 'problem-solving' and it tends to deal with ill-defined problems [4] in the real world. In *Designerly Ways of Knowing*, Cross cites Schön who portrays it as '*reflective practice*' and looks for '*an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty*' [3]. The term problem is in itself problematic. Problems in design processes can also be seen as *tools* for dealing with uncertainty, provisionally framing practice and locating the self in relation to potential spaces and directions of change. In this way the use of these tools differs from the traditional idea of problem solving because the actual problem being solved is often known a posteriori. Nevertheless, those practices can be seen in non-designers' activities too. It is very natural for all of us to live in *plastic* states and to continuously *scaffold* our surroundings unconsciously, because certain activities implicit to today's design are essential for sustaining humanity [2]. We practice it not only to problem-solve with rational logic, but also for a second-order activity of *possibility-finding* in order to negotiate intangible complicated diversities.

Any professional design practice needs a reasonable purpose to be realised. From the forms to the functions, the outcomes are required to deliver clear benefits to clients, sponsors and markets. This is why design professionals tend to be capable of dealing with increasing complexity [9] (though the initial design process often comes from uncertainty). Furthermore, participation in these processes tends to incite the negotiation of new categories to clarify the required purposes as and when they unfold. Consequently, this process is further professionalized into design categories such as, *service-design*, *co-design*, etc., shaping the activities and both the internal and external expectations of the design industry. As we can see from the process, designers are familiar not only with *problem-solving*, but also reasonable *prospect-offering* as a purpose of professional practices. Prospect-offering is creating a better future by constructing positive and understandable factors to clients what Wood calls the win-win-win-win scenario in which the client, consumer, environment and designer are all in balance [14].

## **2.3 Shifts in the values of the design professions?**

In this man-made world we are surrounded by designed artefacts, from products to lifestyles. Whether these artefacts are tangible or intangible, they were produced by human intention and in unison they collectively create and remake the flow of cultural value in societies [12]. If we look back at the history of design, it has been used to achieve a more comfortable materiality for human beings. Thus design has been empathetic [2]. In hindsight,

therefore, it seems to have been very easy for the design industry to gradually re-direct its component practices to focus on more profitable approaches for clients. In turn this has led to the exploitation of consumers' individual wants rather than to improving quality of life and social wellbeing. This is most possibility because the economy has become the biggest influence on design in the real world. As a result, successful design tends to be associated with profit rather than benefit. Ironically, the value remaking process of design artefacts is often determined without the awareness or intention of designers and their respective industry.

In business the application of design is regularly used to boost markets due to its influential trend-setting nature and its potential for innovation. Dilnot [5] pointed out that *'design has placed itself more and more at the direct service of private interest.'* For example, the international success of IDEO, which spotted 'emotional values' in the consumer's experience is an interesting case illustrating how design is portrayed as a magical solution within the often ungraspable values of consumer-led markets. Because of these auspicious abilities of design, the design professions are expected to acknowledge and be aware of changes in the broader complexities of humanity. For instance, designers should now not only suggest aesthetically pleasing prototypes, but also feel-good scenarios for the clients and consumers, such as the current folly of eco-friendly and fair trade products arriving on shop shelves in the UK. This can be a very tricky task, balancing sense and sensibility to negotiate double-edged factors into practice, but designers have again seemed to have shifted their skills into that space. The meta-epistemic nature of designers leads them to keep up with the world intuitively as well as logically.

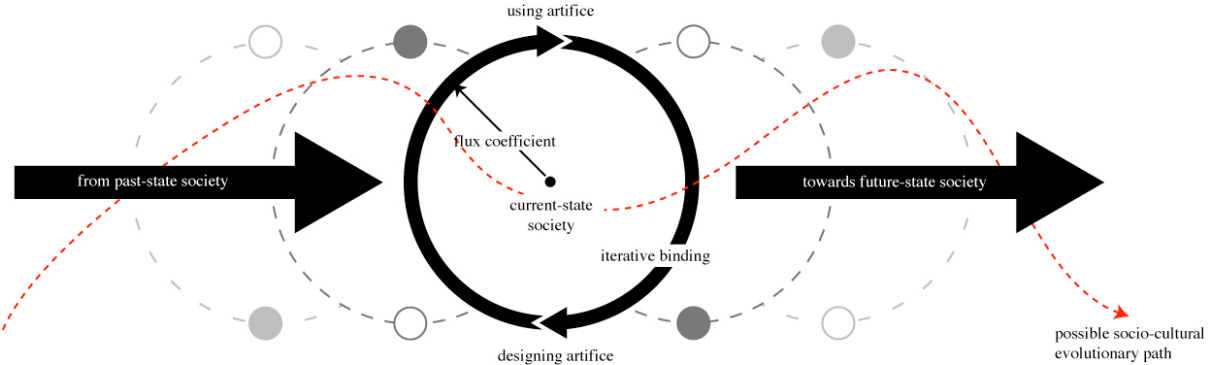


Fig.2 Design and use of artifice diagram – The remarking of socio-cultural values.

If we picture design actions as timelines, processes start from a human's situated experience of the past, practiced with and *brought-as-intervention* into the present. Their aims and purpose are always situated into a future-state, meaning that designers predict current issues to negotiate in-the-moment for the sake of a future by reflection through a past. The whole route is full of feedback: eddies and vortices moving between individual know-how and the collective understanding of societies; Here, we explain the flow chronologically. A design manifests an artefact, and this binds-with and brings-about new possibilities or processes coincidentally (fig.2). During the process, people participate in changing artefacts for individual use. That is the consequence of a design process that keeps shaping elements of a whole culture, as well as fabricating new concepts, values, ritual, practice and issues for future design use. All in all, the design process is never complete and alters its own

further action by manifesting unpredictable factors. To make it simple, a design can be a reflection of the world manifested through a space of ‘not-yet’.

## 2.4 An ethics of design?

*To design is no longer to increase the stability of the manmade world: it is to alter, for good or ill, things that determine the course of its development.* John Chris Jones [9]

We believe that designers can play positive roles in today’s world, because their activities can bring-about an affirmative future to the world as far as their purpose is directed by a collective and deeply intrinsic virtue of design praxis.

It could be said that design professions today are needed to fundamentally shift socio-cultural value systems. As we can see from current world situation, many have already mentioned that we need a paradigm-shift to sustain a future for *our* world. For instance, Edwards [6] states that the ‘Sustainability Revolution’ has already started to affect many aspects of society on a huge scale. It is more than clear that the movement has influenced many design businesses, and the word sustainability has become a buzzword appearing in a multiplicity of places and contexts, from boardrooms to billboards. However, now is a time that professional designers need to engage with an ethics of design, so that the many design professions and professionals acknowledge how design works in, creates and shapes, frameworks, values and societies in the real world. The need arises from the fact that design-action can effect larger contexts than it was originally configured for. Design has a great and equal potential for both *futuring* and *defuturing* – meaning presenting a future to the self-being and *its being-in-the-world* [7]; and *sustaining unsustainable* respectively [8]; Consequently, many deserve affirmative roles to bring about preferable shifts, and knowingly or unknowingly, their choices can be very responsible in order to harness or hinder a re-direction towards eudemonia. Shouldn’t all design practices and world-making activities be responsible for their actions and worldly consequence?

## 2.5 Toward a common future?

The present understanding of design practice can be overly specified to make the most of its potential, often lacking the factor of ‘*flesh of the world*’: realising ‘*we are not simply beings in the world, but beings of the world*’ [8]. Hence, the most vital purpose of design today, *futuring*, could be carried out by common sense (rather than disciplinary) design practice with many, aiming toward common future-states. Ideally as a re-directive practice, *futuring* encourages the co-dependent arising of design processes and outputs with their greater or worldly contexts, and therefore potentially situates ethical values in design as prospects (or prospecting activities) in an ever-changing world, a *poietic-flux* with the designer placed as an expert facilitator of change. To achieve the process, we must forge a socio-cultural shift in our perceptions of ourselves-in-the-world, simply illustrated by a grammatical voice moving from the singular and oppositional ‘I’ to a common and adjacent ‘we’. Again, to cause collective-change of a socio-cultural value system requires a common sense which can frame those collective-actions. But how could design professions engage-with and play a role within this process?

*Language is a manner of living together in a flow of consensual coordination of coordinations of consensual behaviours, and it is as such a domain of coordinations of coordinations of doings. So, all that we human beings do we do it in language. [10]*

Designers are trained to work with ‘code’ which is a kind of artificial language to convert ideas into artefacts [4]. This activity can be very influential in the world and might be a clue for collective-action towards the emergence of a new affirmative value system. Language could be identified as more a process of convivial *consensus-flow* rather than a mere tool for communication, as humans’ experience and understandings of the surrounding world tend to be shaped-by and co-dependent with languages which they belong to [1]. Furthermore, it bridges consensus and human behaviour, and enables new phenomena of reflection and consciousness [11]. Maturana named this process languaging, because it is not concrete manner, rather, it is *flux*. Adapting (and bringing about) to contextual and temporal change. We assume that this will be a crucial opportunity of design for futuring, as designers can create various communications effectively with both verbal and non-verbal languages. Languaging should obviously be collective process, and its interactive nature could nurture the emergence of new values within socio-cultural understanding.

## **2.6 Beyond-knowledge and future praxis?**

We shall now depart from the current-state design practice, and look at possible modes of seeding (see fig.3, section 2.8) and growing a virtuous future-state praxis. Through this stage we shall propose questions around design as discipline, identify potential paradigm-shifts internal to design practices, and identify those that are external, but directly relevant to the goal of growing virtuous praxis within future design communities. Therefore, if we can re-direct design practice, we (by direct association) re-direct future world-making, and can then make a move towards cultivating situations and relations for fostering happiness, eudemonia, seeding deep socio-cultural change in the fabric (the woven components, products and systems) of the world.

There are four new terms we would like to introduce: We use the term *apoietic* to stand for a pure abstract, a concept or idea that is yet to be made and continually remade. Apoietic things are implicit when dealing with activities of bringing about the not-yet; *Purposing* is to design (a) purpose rather than to design artefacts; *Wisdoming* is when a virtuous design process or praxis is folded back upon itself, shaping other practices around it both within and beyond it’s original scope or field. It becomes the designing of wisdom into future-state design and the world; the idea for creation of these words came out of a process called *design-languaging*, which is also our fourth term. *Design-languaging* is using elements of a language as a specific design tool for orienting oneself in a space of thinking that is yet-to-be grounded, or yet to exist. We have used words as provisional props allowing a negotiation-with apoietic (unmade) concepts.

## **2.7 Is purposing a catalyst for prudence?**

We argue that once we liberate design understanding from knowledge-making and disciplinary-thinking, we can start to reflect-upon and define enaction of ethical value into components of experiential realities including the causal emergence of new systems, disciplines, values and boundaries. This creates a process of defining and

developing ethical expertise within design by identifying knowledge-action. We propose this as a catalyst for prudence in design.

The reflection-upon and definition-of ethical enaction can be triggered in a design practice by the activity of purposing, as it involves the specific practice of designing purpose(s). This can shift an individual designer's understanding of their practice from investigations around and deliberation on universal truths into a space of understanding personal values and their implicit actions [15]. Purposing makes the enaction of value occurrent for the designer, allowing him or her to reflect-upon the implicit process in design of seeding value through choice of action. It is in this emerging space of awareness that the designer, with experience, guidance and practice can become prudent. The designer starts the journey towards becoming the ethical expert [13].

We can see purposing as a tool to shift a poetic-practice into the space of a poetic-praxis. It moves the explicit understanding of designing from a purely outwardly making and changing force, into a process of both outwardly making and inwardly remaking, design starts to redesign itself and becomes remarkable. The designer is being-to-change.

## 2.8 Design process as ecological growth?

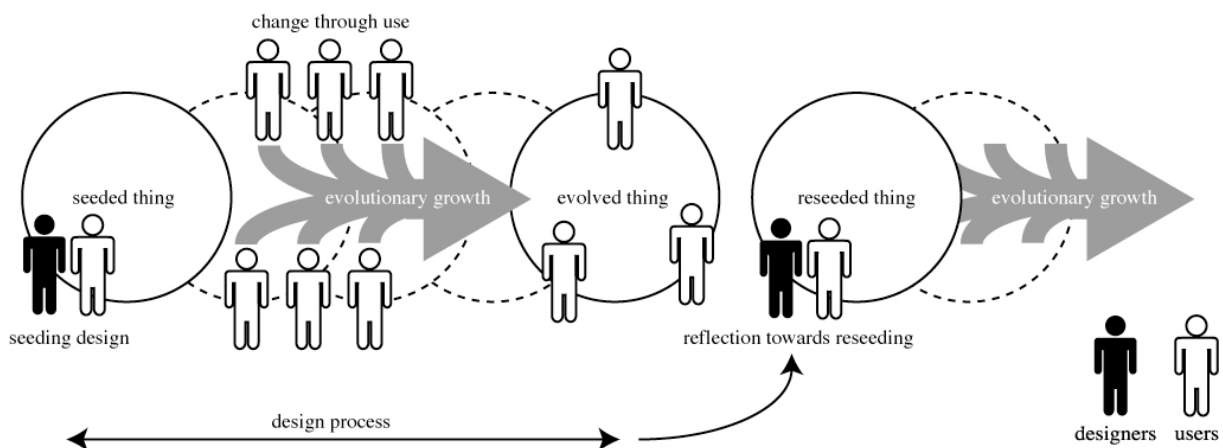


Fig.3 A design process model: seeding, evolutionary growth, and reseeding.

In purpose of achieving a catalytic role, designers should realise that they are the main actors of seeding in a process of ecological growth. It is apparent that purposing, the flow creation, will be engaged by not only design professions, but also by the users of the designed outcomes (Fig.3) That means, the design process is largely practiced by the others and designers are incapable of controlling the whole system. In other words, the growth cannot be guided by fixed or predictable design methods, rather, it can be more a procedure of organic realisation being initiated by designers.

Henceforth, interdisciplinary design investigations will be very useful to maximise the seeding practice, with knowledge and actions of the other expertises being essential for the designers' role. Wood addressed the immediate need of 'metadesign' which is 'extensive, holistic, consensual, ethical, eco-mimetic practice of

*design*' [14]. We share this view and believe that the process of designing design will function in the various aspects and levels of complex real world today.

## **2.9 Eudemonic future-action?**

If the designer is being-to-change, this causes a paradigm-shift of relevant knowledge (to, for, about and within design) from the cognitive-theoretical to the bodied (action oriented and local) understandings of world through specific world-making praxis. This shift itself creates interesting questions for current knowledge-making activities, as analysis focused approaches can limit the potentials of ethical enaction by distancing practitioners from reacting appropriately in the ever-changing world. Then, languaging this meta-epistemological praxis (world-making) and relative shifts between current and future-states fold back into, and cause paradigm-shifts in existing knowledge architecture and the mechanisms of its continual (re)production.

We are moving towards understanding design as an action-oriented activity concerned with localised bodily-knowing (i.e. deep value). Designing can then be seen and understood as a process of bringing-about values in the sites and situations of its practice. It is a phronetic activity, concerned with actions and acting in ways that bring about forms of worldly-change. Therefore we should be encouraging designs' practitioners to reflect on their knowledge-action, and hopefully allow them to identify how their values are reflected and brought-about through their design practice. Through this we can open the door to prudent design, with the designer as the virtuous agent of eudemonic change.

Moving from the individual designer to the design industry, we need to nurture and encourage the sharing of this virtue across all design professions, in order to harness the greatest world-changing potential. In order for this seed of knowledge-action in design practice to root, it must be understood through experience and manifested in a way which can be communicated by and with many. Languaging becomes an essential tool within this task, as it appropriates designerly making into a fundamental component of both cultural interaction and knowledge for the emergence of increasingly auspicious future.

## **3. Conclusion**

To summarise this paper, we have moved from a designer's reflections of being constantly redefined in the current design industry, to an assessment of culturally limited individual design practices. By identifying designs' intentions upholding socio-cultural values and the mechanisms of their production, we have moved towards establishing an ethics of design practice. This manifested a need for the understanding of designs potentials to both bring-about and limit futuring, and henceforth the reintroduction of the term eudemonia. In terms of bringing forth a common future, we showed issues that existed around the use of language and analytic thinking in defining, explaining and educating design practice, and moved from problem-solving to possibility finding. By moving from truth-oriented knowledge to bodily knowing or deep value, we showed how reasonable purpose can become a futuring catalyst, defining the role of the designer on a path of ethical expertise, and locating prudence in being-to-change. Finally, by discussing processes of languaging, we have shown how designers have a responsibility to be provident and that attending to the future collectively, harnessing designs' effect for socio-cultural paradigm-shift and becoming virtuous agents of eudemonic change.



In conclusion, we hope that the ideas we have identified, offer some interesting questions for our practices and activities within our collective industry, as well as some of the pressing issues around the discarding of these responsibilities in terms of collectively fostering happiness in our world. We do not propose this paper as a truth-claim but as an example of questions and issues we believe important to finding and manifesting a currently unthinkable, but possible and preferable future for both our industry and our world.

#### **4. Acknowledgements**

We would collectively like to acknowledge both Mrs. Julia Lockheart (Writing-PAD) and Prof. John Wood (Attainable Utopias) at Goldsmiths, University of London, for their continued support and inspiration.

#### **5. Glossary**

*Apoietic* [a] relating to an un-negotiated and un-configured abstract or idea.

*Auspicious* [a] capacity to success, esp. in relation to a future-state.

*Beyond-knowledge* [n] knowing that exists beyond formal understanding, esp. tacit knowing and deep value.

*Catalyst* [n] a design action that accelerates a change beyond itself or its explicit context, without altering the state of action itself.

*Common* [a] shared by and belonging to a group, community, society or culture.

*Consensus* [n] a collective or collaborative agreement. An agreement by majority esp. in relation to a group of people.

*Convivial* [a] of a joyful, cheerful or friendly state of being.

*Deep-value* [n] the values or beliefs fundamental to a persons choice in action. An embodied agenda.

*Defuturing* [v] actions of sustaining the unsustainable literally individual actions against a collective future.

*Design-action* [n] the way that designers bring-about change in the manmade world.

*Design-languaging* [v] a process of using the alterations of language to affect common values, build consensus, and create new understandings or principles. A change in languaging is a measurable quality and can be used to benchmark paradigm shift.

*Eudemonia* [n] a choice to act for and with good-spirit, with the presumption that such actions will bring about both a future happiness and will-to-happiness.

*Flux* [n] a state of continual change.

*Futuring* [v] corrective and redirective action towards the Sustainment, specifically aiming towards creating a more eudemonic future.

*Knowledge-action* [n] the embodied knowledge that arises or emerges within an action or set of actions.

*Paradigm-shift* [n] a fundamental change in deep value, assumptions and approach at a socio-cultural level.

*Plastic* [a] of things that are easily moulded or formed.

*Poietic-flux* [n] a man-made continual and novel change.

*Proprioception* [a] relating to spatial and bodied knowing or knowledge specifically, knowing how to negotiate and orientate a body in a space.

*Prudence* [a] of acting with care and thought for the future.

*Purposing* [v] to design purpose instead of artefact.

*Seed* [n] a fundamental but latent value within an artefact which may manifest itself at a later date; [v] To plant or sow values for future effect.

*Virtue* [n] the desirable moral quality of goodness or usefulness in something.

*Wisdoming* [v] a process of designing-in qualities of wisdom.

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Fig.1 Fukuuchi, A. (2009) *Recursive iteration*.

Fig.2 Dalladay-Simpson & Yang, H. (2009) *The design and use of artifice:: The remarking of socio-cultural values*.

Fig.3 Yang, H. (2007) *Seeding, Evolutionary Growth, and Reseeding, A design process model*.

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