

If SLURP is the answer... what's the question?

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Abstract

*SLURP is a homegrown digital ingest system and by its very nature a disintermediation tool. The State Library of Western Australia sought to develop a way to manage and provide access to digital content. From labour intensive, hidden, and uncontrolled sets of discontinuous processes, we are now `SLURPing`, using the State Library's **Limber and Useful Reformatting Application**. This paper reflects on the multiple needs the State Library had in order to manage digital content and processes. It explores the development of SLURP and showcases the SLURP solution. It also identifies possibilities for the future and outlines opportunities through a `warts and all` approach to application development. In sum, this paper demonstrates how starting with a solution helped to frame the questions we should have asked at the start.*

Introduction

The State Library of Western Australia's strategic directions of 2009-2011 identified the priority to make our collections more accessible by capturing and preserving born digital material.

A major issue facing all libraries is the collection, management and preservation of digital information, including material that is the result of digital reformatting as well as information that is born digital e.g., documents published in PDF or word processed formats, digital photographs, digital maps, digital films, websites, databases. This material needs to be added to Library collections in a format that makes it accessible to staff and clients whilst preserving the rights of the creator, be described so that clients can find it, and then stored in a permanent location to allow for future access. However, given the changes in technology, preservation is no longer just the product of a single process but an ongoing program to ensure that it is accessible in the future. (State Library of Western Australia 2010, p22)

In 2009, the State Library of Western Australia embarked on a series of digital refresh projects under the banner: New Horizons. One component project within the digital refresh stable was to implement a digital asset management system, otherwise known as a DAM.

At the outset, the basic elements of a DAM were understood to be a system that enables:

- metadata and object ingest
- quarantine and virus checking
- creation of access and preservation derivatives
- management of format obsolescence
- digital preservation and ongoing digital integrity inspection
- an interface for managing digital objects

An external project manager was appointed whose task it was to corral the many and various people, practices, ideas, and tools and shape them into a strategy (or a product) that would satisfy the State Library's digital requirements. \$212,000 was allocated to the project (not including project management costs).

The state of play: the questions we asked at the beginning

A snapshot of the State Library of WA environment in 2009 depicts an organisation grappling with a range of digital challenges relating to collection, processing, storage,

diversity of approaches to material depending on its status of being legal deposit, published, unpublished, archival, born digital, or reformatted into a digital version.

The Library began digitising its collections in earnest in 2001, and by 2002 had produced some 9,500 digital derivatives of predominantly photographic and art images. Rather than set up a separate digital archive database, the Library opted to present these images within the existing library management system. By 2008, the Library had over 70,000 digital objects, but had linked less than half of those to their associated catalogue record. There was clearly a lag inherent in the procedure that indicated that digitisation was creating a high output, but the metadata creation and linking digital copies for access was more cumbersome and unable to meet the same rate of output.

While trying to manage the production and flow of digitised content, the Library was also managing the growing number of electronic or 'soft copy' serials. In the early stages, Library staff were printing the serials and adding them to the collection as if they were hard copy serials. Once printing of these ceased, a large number of soft copy serials had accumulated on a shared drive, waiting for a solution that would store, name, collect and add the resources to the catalogue. By early 2009, there were approximately 1,500 soft copy serials stored but inaccessible to the public.

Alongside the collection of locally published born digital content, the Library was also collecting electronic archival material. Donors were starting to contribute their personal electronic 'papers' via USB drives, email attachments and on disc. The Library did not have a digital quarantine strategy to ensure that existing data would be safe from incoming viruses; unlike the processes for incoming print materials that were routinely quarantined to safeguard the physical collections from pest and mould infestation.

With an increasing digital output, and increasing demand to ingest and present born digital resources, the State Library was faced with managing a collection of labour intensive, hidden, and uncontrolled set of discontinuous processes. Teams across the Library were involved in a diverse and distributed digital management environment where there was minimal reference to organisational outcomes and no appreciation of the need to develop a unified digital workflow. Operating in silos, there was a considerable amount of activity in relation to digital asset management: there was clearly a will, but no roadmap for achieving a coherent digital asset management strategy.

The DAM project provided an opportunity to address some of these issues and shape a digital asset management strategy for the State Library. The Library needed to develop a clear outline of where it wanted to head, which would provide the context in which to make decisions about the Library's digital future.

The Library's 'digital needs' related to digital capture, digital preservation, digital presentation, and digital standards. There was an urgent need to streamline and synchronise digital management processes and to improve skills and capacity in managing digital resources. Internal issues meant that the project was not necessarily able to seek improvements to workflows across the entire digital management process.

It should be noted that the State Library of WA was, and is, not alone in this struggle. Discussions across the National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) consortium of libraries at the time indicated that several NSLA libraries were asking questions of their digital future and their capacity to manage their digital assets.

The national environment at the time also highlights the strategic enablers that provided impetus for the State Library of WA to move in a particular direction when planning the DAM project. The 'Reimagining Libraries' suite of projects undertaken by the NSLA consortium highlight the national consensus towards initiatives such as:

- Description and Cataloguing – which focussed on increasing online access to collections by using more productive, streamlined ways of operating – with an aim to achieve faster, simpler, less resource-intensive record creation and agreed metadata standards.
- Community created content – which considered the ecology of participation that is driving the engagement of users – where libraries' collections and services were seen as a way of connecting users and content to open library collections for research, user contribution and re-use.
- Changing capability and culture – which highlighted the need to create a workforce culture that encourages innovation, exploration and agility – to better serve the new digital collections and expectations of users.
- Scaling up digitisation – to deliver digital content that people expect and maximise access.

(National and State Libraries Australasia: Reimagining Libraries, 2008)

Project management unplugged... or “build it and they will come”

On the surface of things, the task of the project was to implement a DAM (Digital Asset Management) system. Fundamentally, the project needed to address a range of business processes, workflows, standards, and assumptions that had been built around the Library's first forays into digital management.

The New Horizons Project steering group served as the reference group for the project but due to the broad range of projects that fell under the banner of this group, there were often issues with ensuring appropriate business engagement and analysis. Consequently early phases of the project suffered from timeline slippages relating to an understanding of roles, responsibilities and knowledge of cross-organisational business processes.

Phase One of the project observed that “organizationally, there is little understanding of the significance of digital workflows”. (State Library of Western Australia, 2009, p.2)

This observation led to a change in the project scope. Rather than build an entire digital asset management system, it was determined that the Library would gain more immediate value from improving existing processes relating to the ingest of digital objects; the time-intensive process for creating digital derivatives; and developing persistent identification and storage protocols that moved digital assets from individual PCs to a secure storage area. This change in project scope enabled the project to respond to a number of gaps in the Library’s processes at the time.

Without the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive business analysis of digital asset management operations, the project focused on developing a digital ingest application. On reflection, it is at this point that an orthodox IT project manager may have balked at the prospect of building an application without a set of fully specified functional requirements prescribed by a business area. However, this proved to be an opportunity to develop a product that would meet some immediate operational needs and challenge the Library to take up the real complex issues of digital asset management in a more coherent way.

This phase of the project was driven solely by the project manager who developed the specifications for a digital object and metadata ingest application, and the solo software developer tasked with building the application. A number of decisions relating to the descriptive metadata and presentation of digital assets to the public were made during this phase with specifications developed by a project officer. It should also be noted that a significant aspect of the thinking in this phase of developing the project was the belief that the application interface should be ‘user friendly’ and able to be used by non-Library users, with a long-term view that the general public would (in time) be able to contribute their own digital assets.

Result... the build

The end product of the DAM project was SLURP (The State Library’s Limber and Useful Reformatting APplication). This is an in-house application that allows rapid and simple ingest of metadata and digital objects. SLURP essentially ‘bundles’ open source tools and combines them to generate a series of processes that handle the steps involved in managing digital objects. These digital management processes typically include ingest of the digital object and associated metadata, virus checking, archival storage, the creation of access and preservation derivatives, and the creation of persistent URLs. The choice for open source was based on availability of internal development resources and the lack of an appropriate commercial alternative at the time.

SLURP interfaces automatically and seamlessly with the State Library's Millennium catalogue, automatically creates derivatives for Access (web) copies, and, where possible, creates archival derivatives. For example, SLURP aims to automatically create digital derivatives include flash video (.FLV) files as used in YouTube, audio (.MP3) file versions of oral history and music, image (.JPEG and .PNG) files for images, and digital preservation (.XENA) files for archival derivatives. The digital derivatives for each digital object are created at the time of ingest and stored on the Library's servers. The original digital object is stored on a separate preservation server. Technical and descriptive metadata resides in the SLURP system and is displayed in context associated with the digital objects. The metadata is not embedded in each digital object.

In addition, the application creates unique, persistent identifiers (via a persistent URL resolver), and presents digital objects to end users as embedded objects within a web page.

The digital standards upon which SLURP was based were developed by the project team, and have been accepted as internal Library standards for digitisation. These standards are internal working documents and subject to change depending on the evolving workflows and tools used.

SLURP allows the Library to ramp up digitisation by the quick and simple ingest of metadata and objects and the ability to upload objects to existing bibliographic records. In all of this, cataloguer intervention is not required as the updates to Millennium (bibliographic and URL [linking] information) occur automatically.

Though the application creates MARC formatted records (to send to the Library's Millennium catalogue), it is not a fully-fledged cataloguing client. The records created by SLURP match, and in some cases exceed, the requirements of the Library's minimum record standard. As such, the application represents a step towards flexible cataloguing where the traditional methods of cataloguing are replaced by a standardised, web-based interface. The application was designed to present metadata fields in plain English, so no specific cataloguing knowledge is required.

Emphasis was placed on collecting as much information as possible from donors about their donations at the point of donation, and in removing manual processes in the reformatting of an object for public display. As SLURP is not a search interface, the existing local library catalogue (Millennium) remains the primary discovery layer. This was the result of a deliberate decision to ensure that the Library continued to maintain its metadata in one place, and in one metadata schema (MARC) to ensure interoperability with existing systems, future portability, and the benefits of ensuring the description and the presentation of digital assets are maintained alongside the Library's analogue collections.

SLURP does the following:

- Metadata ingest for both digital and analogue objects
- Digital object ingest
- Quarantines digital objects created externally
- Creation of derivatives for digital objects
- Creation of persistent identifiers to individual digital objects
- Management of persistence via a Persistent URL Resolver
- Management of embargoes and restrictions on access
- Streamlines manual processes
- Interacts with the local library management system to push metadata from the SLURP application to the local library management system without the need for operator intervention
- Presents the digital objects to users in as seamless a method as possible, via the local catalogue
- Provides a feedback space for users to comment on and add information to the digital objects.

Future enhancements and system development using industry standard programming languages and web application development techniques are enabled as the application was developed in-house and is based on open source applications.

Implementation... they will come

Following development of the SLURP application and the departure of the project manager from the organisation, the Library recognised the need to develop a plan for deploying SLURP into mainstream Library operations. Again, against all the correct impulses of project management orthodoxy, the implementation plan and a business needs analysis were conducted after the development of the application.

A SLURP Management Group was formed to oversee the implementation, development, and ongoing governance of the application. Initial activity was slow due to a drop in momentum after the departure of the project manager. The SLURP Management Group was faced with a steep learning curve to understand the tools and the potential transformative power of SLURP for the organisation.

Whilst the SLURP application had become a reality, the work practices surrounding collection, digitisation, description and physical processing were not realigned to feed into and out of this new application. The application existed but so did work practices that in some cases ignored its existence. Rather than the application being used in a piecemeal way, a plan was required to identify the steps required to review processes and realign these to ensure the functionality of the application was maximised and developed.

In the course of developing the implementation plan, the term `SLURP' came to mean the whole process of selecting, acquiring, describing, ingesting, and delivering digital assets. SLURP was no longer perceived as simply the ingestion tool. The implementation plan therefore related to the whole process from a donor or owner approaching the State Library through to client access of the material.

The implementation plan was completed in April 2010, which included a management and governance framework for the application and workflows, system support and administration, framework for developments and enhancements (in short, many of the aspects that would typically have been signed off at development stage of an IT project). Roll in and re-engineering work packages were identified to launch SLURP into work teams and a project team was formed to undertake a series of work packages identified to maximise the benefits of SLURP for the State Library.

In re-conceptualising SLURP as a process rather than a product, SLURP also presented significant opportunities to radically change the way in which the Library undertook the business of managing collections. The areas of selection, acquisition, resource description, and access are transformed if SLURP is deployed to its fullest extent. The initial focus of SLURPing was on born digital or digitised original archival material (predominantly pictorial resources and private archives). However, SLURP offered considerable scope to roll in published material, allowing streamlining of the full suite of acquisition and description processes.

Community contribution

Underlying the implementation of SLURP was a goal to move toward donors or content creators providing the Library with material that is 'SLURP ready'. Much of the work identified in the implementation work packages was the development of online forms and guidelines, standards and assessments that would alleviate the need for staff intervention in decision making; i.e. the decisions would then be dictated by the type of material or collection being acquired, and resulting actions are obvious. Disintermediation of workflow processes and the functionality of direct access to contribute content were key drivers for the implementation of SLURP.

Once the online forms, guidelines, standards, and online assessment tools are in place, the potential for direct load by donors or creators where material is 'SLURP ready' is enormous. Receiving material in a format acceptable to SLURP allows flexibility in the use of staff resources. The goal is to streamline the process to such an extent that ultimately donors could contribute digital content and metadata directly (and remotely) to the Library.

Achieving this aim would have a fundamental change on the role of staff involved in the existing process. Rather than processing and describing collections being a key component of their responsibility, their role may be transformed to more of a contributor liaison or process management role, with staff involved in direct training

and in developing kits and guides to facilitate this process. This should allow staff resources to be re-focused on processing highly significant material and backlogs of collections.

The logical consequence of work identified in the implementation plan was the resulting increase in the acquisition and access of newly acquired material in a digital form. Disentangling staff from the routine data management and processing tasks associated with controlling physical and digital objects leaves staff free to negotiate to receive as much material as possible in a format acceptable to SLURP.

SLURP, as a reconceptualised process, created the right space for the State Library to enter into a new paradigm of collection assessment, acquisition, description and management. The potential of SLURP offered a new platform to untangle and streamline the cumbersome work processes that had become embedded in daily workflows.

Beyond the State Library, SLURP offers the potential to connect in new ways with the wider community, public libraries and other external agencies. Being a web-based tool, SLURP opens up a wealth of opportunities for the Library to engage with external parties, from individual end users to other more formal networks. For example, using the scenario of a public library in the process of digitising their oral history collection: there are no technical reasons stopping the State Library from providing the public library with access to SLURP. This would provide the public library with digitised content. The contributing library could, in return for their efforts, collect a MARC record for their local catalogue, know that the digital object was archived, and, if it suited their business, link to the record via the SLURP resolver.

Policy fallout

The implementation plan also identified several policy issues that remain to be addressed before SLURP can be maximised. These policy questions are:

- When and what to digitise? With a preferred option to digitise materials as soon as they enter the State Library building (adopting the principle of handling the object once and treating digitisation as part of the routine processing of preparing materials into the collection), the reality of this poses challenges for adopting and adapting workflows in acquisitions areas to expand the skill set of the team, and the physical infrastructure to accommodate this change.
- What licensing rights will the State Library support and what risk is the Library willing to accept in relation to these rights?
- Is the State Library willing to decline offers of collections if they are not organised/listed or 'SLURP ready'?

To date these policy challenges have only partially been addressed. The Library has adopted Creative Commons but has not yet activated this within the SLURP application or assimilated it into work practices. The Library has also adopted a 'risk management' approach to orphan works following principles endorsed through the work of Reimagining Libraries and the Library's internal Copyright Policy. A three-tiered access strategy was enabled within SLURP to accommodate 3 categories of access restrictions on digital objects. These are: Public (full access); Internal (access by internal staff use only); Archive (usually restricted objects, or those embargoed [with an automated release date determined at the time of creating the object]).

However, while the other policy issues have yet to be tackled the inactivity relates to improvement of business processes and has not affected existing processes or access to the Library's digitised content. The questions of 'when to digitise?' and the Library's tolerance for accepting unprocessed collections remain to be answered as part of ongoing business improvement activities.

Open Sourcing and ongoing development

While SLURP was built using open source components to enable future enhancements and growth, the reality of ongoing management, development, and promulgation of an in-house application, and its associated intellectual property, differed from the heady vision of the early days of development.

The 'owner-builder' advantages of software development are clear and create a potentially agile and responsive environment in which the Library can develop the product to meet new needs and transform workflows as needs arise. But the hazards of managing development, appropriate documentation, change management, questions of marketing, branding, maintenance, succession planning, ongoing support, resourcing, and questions about corporate responsibility if the product were to be released raised another set of questions that ultimately challenged the Library to consider whether the level of effort involved was serving our core business.

To respond to these questions, the Library developed a 'Buy vs. Build' position paper intended to guide business analysis in future scenarios. For SLURP as it now stands, the application is in a holding pattern and maintenance mode. Future development of SLURP has been suspended.

One of the key questions the Library is considering in the post-SLURP world is 'if we were making the choice now – would we buy or build?' The digital asset management landscape has changed considerably since 2008 where we were faced with a lack of appropriate alternatives. Now that commercial alternatives for digital asset management of cultural collections have emerged – what would we do? In 2012 the decisions may be driven more by costs than functionality.

Total Digital Asset Management

Whilst the SLURP application has been developed and the workflows examined as part of the implementation plan, it is recognised that total management of digital assets is still not complete. True management of digital objects has not been incorporated into SLURP e.g., management of format obsolescence and translation to current technologies, monitoring of degradation, alerts to changes in digital integrity. Issues such as backup, integrity checking, and monitoring of storage capacity have not been fully addressed and more work is required in this area

Learning... We should have asked other questions

Early in the project, the State Library identified that it did not have the capacity to implement a DAM and the project was re-scoped to develop a digital ingest system. However, the project never formally defined what was meant by a DAM.

Upon reflection, the development and implementation phases of the project worked on the assumption that a Digital Asset Management system was a standalone application and that the project was tasked to deliver an application: a standalone system.

The DAM Implementation project worked on the assumption that SLURP is not a DAM. Or is it? If we define a DAM as a framework for managing digital assets, then SLURP and the associated processes, standards, procedures, training, documentation, back up protocols, and so forth form a digital asset management framework that ensures streamlined methods of collecting, presenting and preserving our digital material for the benefit of clients.

More than simply managing a digital asset workflow, or the lifecycle of digital assets, digital asset management is about managing the entire ecosystem of digital assets within an organisation.

Perhaps the State Library of Western Australia built a DAM after all?

Broader observations... beyond the IT build

Developing a digital asset management strategy is fundamentally about implementing organisational change. For the State Library, the move from managing analogue to digital resources was a major cultural shift that challenged individuals' perceptions about their role in the State Library, notions of the pre-eminence of print, and the very role of the State Library in preserving the state's digital heritage. Provoking questions about digital object collection and description posed challenges to the analogue paradigm that the State Library had been working within for the past

7 years. Despite being involved in the digitisation and management of digital objects since 2001, the Library as an organisational entity was not ready for the questions that were turned onto the associated analogue processes. Asking questions about the management of digital assets necessarily threw the spotlight onto the management of analogue/print assets.

The project challenged workflows and understanding of analogue materials as much as it posed questions of digital object handling. In developing strategies for managing digital assets, the project was committed to developing a unified approach to managing all collections, irrespective of their digital status. This meant that the pre-eminence of analogue/print formats and the way they were handled was fundamentally challenged.

Ultimately, the “build it and they will come” strategy proved to be an effective tool for unlocking the potential of ‘process innovators’ within the Library, that is those people with vision and instances of workflow process triggers that prompted questions and served as innovation points to extend thinking beyond the current paradigm. Also, the strategy encouraged a heightened breadth of thought about what it means to manage all collection assets. This strategy created the right amount of change incentives to initiate communication across digital asset management silos across the Library to encourage cooperation and shared endeavour.

As part of the implementation plan, a series of principles were developed that addressed this challenge. The principles were:

1. Material is accessible to the widest audience
2. Creation of access copies preserves originals
3. The future is change focused
4. Implementation of SLURP will significantly change existing processes
5. Successful change is workable and achieves specified outcomes
6. Effective workflows are singular with minimal deviation and standard for all material
7. SLURP is a process, not an application
8. The SLURP process starts when material is identified for collection and finishes when the material is accessible to the client
9. Material should be handled only once - Exceptions should be justified and consistent
10. Some material is more significant than others
11. Significance is consistently understood
12. Staff resources are finite

13. Significance determines priority and treatment and staff resources are focused on significant material
14. Donors are the primary source of information about their material
15. Donor knowledge is capitalised
16. Donors will assist in all stages of the process
17. Collections are kept together
18. Automated processes are trusted and effective
19. System improvements are user initiated
20. SLURP will evolve
21. Effective workflows are not point sensitive and knowledge of the process is widely shared
22. SLURP is the preferred 'ingestor' of metadata
23. The LMS is the preferred access tool
24. Metadata is created at the earliest stage of the process
25. Metadata is created in one place and built on as necessary
26. Administrative, descriptive, and technical metadata is kept together
27. SLURP has a wide organisational reach
28. The carrier is not the content (the carrier is only important if it provides contextual information)
29. SLURP is not replicating or replacing the LMS.
30. LMS is the preferred tool for managing resources

In articulating these principles (albeit retrospectively), the State Library was able to articulate the context in which a digital asset management framework would reside, and in doing so, enunciated the context in which all resources, irrespective of their status as digital or analogue, should be managed.

Identifying SLURP as a process, rather than an application. speaks to the fact that the result of the DAM project may in fact have been a DAM after all.

If SLURP was the answer... what was the question?

The State Library's digital questions were unarticulated and to a certain extent unknown at the beginning of the DAM project. While there was an identified need to 'fix' existing digital management processes, building a digital ingest application in-house allowed the Library to explore and discover the real questions along the way. The SLURP implementation process has continued to pose questions about how the Library could be managing both digital and analogue collections in the global information environment.

Some of the questions involve the ongoing streamlining and synchronisation of collection management workflows; engaging the general populace to submit their collections, managing our local metadata footprint (residing in the SLURP and Millennium) and propagating our global metadata presence to expose our collections more effectively.

Apart from an improved digital management infrastructure, the development and implementation of SLURP has generated tangible benefits for the Library – most notably the doubling of digital objects made available in 2010-2011 (41,549 objects processed) compared to 2009-2010 (23,650 objects processed).

Currently, a number of current business processes feed to and from SLURP. These are:

- Recording of acquisitions of archival collections, digital and analogue, into SLURP and automatic population of the Library Management System (Millennium). This has enabled the public to find collections as soon as they are received.
- Linking of 'soft' copy serial to existing catalogue records (previously stored on the shared drive with no public access and no management of objects). This has exposed a greater number of online collections to the public.
- Linking of digitised photographic images to existing catalogue records, and the automatic creation of associated derivative forms.

While donor submission has not eventuated, a broader cross-section of staff, especially 'non-cataloguing' staff) are able to record the receipt and descriptive metadata of collections directly into the system. The goal of a user-friendly interface has been achieved to some extent, and workflows for digital and analogue accessioning have been synchronised. Twenty-seven staff across six teams within the Library have personal logons to the system and are active users. The development of SLURP has greatly increased the capacity and knowledge within the organisation to process both digital and analogue collections. It has in effect enabled the Library to 'set the collections free'.

As of January 2012, the SLURP status is one of maintenance rather than expansion. Active development of SLURP has been frozen. The digital management landscape has shifted since SLURP was developed. New commercial players have emerged and internal resources have shifted. A review of digitisation processes at the State Library was commissioned in 2011 and the recommendations will be implemented in 2012. While some of the vision of SLURP did not materialise, such as direct donor submission and local library engagement, the benefits of SLURP are felt on a daily basis. A fundamental goal to enable capture, ingest, storage and access of digital objects has been realised. While our digital future has not been completely mapped we stand in a better place from which to chart the 'known unknowns' of the digital management minefield.

Despite all the things the State Library omitted to do in terms of the timing of conventional business analysis and project methodology... did we get it wrong? No. The State Library has implemented an open system that is able to ingest digital objects along with their metadata. It is a system that supports the Library's collection development strategy to collect and provide access to the State's digital heritage. The SLURP system, and the attendant management processes, standards, protocols that have been wrapped around that system have created a framework within which the State Library is now better able to manage the digital resources it cares for. SLURP has enabled the Library to digitally expose a larger part of the collection, contribute significantly to a number of national projects, provide a fuller end user experience, and refine a number of procedures that did not support changing requirements of the Library's collections

So, what are our digital questions? The answer is: many and varied. However, the implementation of SLURP has demonstrated that the question is not a digital question at all. Rather, the fundamental question is: how do we best manage our resources?

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