UC Irvine
Connected Learning Lab
4100 Calit2 Building
Irvine CA 92697-2800
949 535 0039
connectedlearning.uci.edu

NASEF Internal Report: NASEF Parents

Constance Steinkuehler & Minerva Wu, Connected Learning Lab

NASEF

The North America Scholastic Esports Federation (NASEF) is a non-profit esports program for middle and high school students. What makes NASEF unique is its *enriched esports* model. NASEF uses student interest in esports as a context and means for learning, school affiliation, and social-emotional skills. The NASEF program accomplishes this through school-affiliated extracurricular clubs rather than just isolated competitive teams, engaging students not only in competitive play but also in esports-related intellectual and professional activities from shoutcasting to logo design, from expository writing to data analysis, from club leadership to team collaboration. The research detailed herein is part of the program's assessment and evaluation, funded by the Samueli Foundation to ensure that the program continues to make good on its stated mission and goals.

Study Goals & Design

One goal of our research this year was to better understand the attitudes and experiences of *parents* of students enrolled in NASEF. Ambivalence about videogame play among youth continues in the US. As a PEW Internet study shows, "a quarter of all adults (26%) think most video games are a waste of time, while 24% think most games are *not* a waste of time"; 17% of adults thought that most games help develop good problem solving and strategic skills, while 16% believed most games did not (Duggan, 2015). The NASEF league poses a new, remediated context for adults and parents' making sense of their children's gaming lives. Such contexts are worth investigation: While much of the literature has explored the ways parental concerns and regulation of children's gaming, very little has examined how they might support and enrich it (Steinkuehler, 2016). Our specific research questions were the following:

- How do NASEF parents make sense of gaming and esports?
- What concerns do they have about gaming and esports?
- What parenting strategies do they use at home in relation to games?
- What are their perceived benefits of the NASEF program?
- What are their perceived shortcomings?

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Methods

Toward answering these questions, we conducted survey interviews (Singleton & Straits, 2001) and long interviews (McCracken, 1988) with NASEF parents about the topics detailed in

the research questions above. Interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes total and were conducted by phone by a trained interviewer. Audio recordings were transcribed and uploaded to Dedoose coding software for analysis using inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) of themes related to the research questions above. Three trained researchers then coded the data corpus, with one researcher acting as primary coder for the entire corpus and the remaining two researchers coding a randomly selected 15% of the data to verify emerging themes at the beginning and then additional excerpts as needed to disambiguate interpretations, provide feedback on evolving codes, and reviewing within-code corpora for consistency and meaning.

Sample

Thirteen (13) NASEF parents participated in this investigation (which was closed early due to university shutdown of research during the COVID-19 pandemic). One pair of parents chose to be interviewed in tandem and one parent chose to be interviewed with their NASEF-participating child present. Table 1 below details the demographics of the overall sample.

The majority of parents interviewed were mothers (77%) and the majority of NASEF students they represent are male (84%). While the sample size was limited, interviewees were maximally diverse in terms of other key variables including location in the US, grade level of child, socioeconomic status (as represented by mother's educational attainment; Daly, Duncan, McDonough, & Williams, 2002), self-reported comfort level with technology, and size of household (measured in number of children).

Table 1. Demographics of participants in the study.

Interview #	Parent Role	Location	Grade of Participating Child	Gender of Participating Child	Mother's Educational Attainment	Comfort with Technology	Number of Children in Household
2	Father	WI	6	Male	Graduate (Father)	high	3
3	Mother	CA	9	Male	Bachelors	moderate	2
7	Mother	CA	9	Male	Bachelors	low	1
5	Mother	PA	10	Male	High School	moderate	3
10	Mother	WI	10	Male	Associates	low	4
1	Mother	NE	11	Male	Bachelor	high	6

4	Father	MN	11	Male	Professional Degree	moderate	2
12	Mother	Canada	11	Male	Bachelors	moderate	1
6[1]	Father	FL	12	Female	Associates	high	1
6[1]	Mother	FL	12	Female	Associates	high	1
8	Mother	CO	12	Male	High School	moderate	5
9	Mother	CA	12	Male	Professional Degree	moderate	3
11[2]	Mother	MO	12	Male	Professional Degree	moderate	2

[1] Parents interviewed as a dyad. [2]Parent interviewed with child present.

Findings

Parents Making Sense of Games

Generational Differences

Parents experience real generational differences when it comes to the gaming lives of their children, irrespective of their own comfort level and familiarity with technology. More than three-fourths of parents interviewed (n=10 or 77%) described the ways in which the contemporary landscape of interactive media is crucially different from the one they grew up with. Game technologies themselves are now more sophisticated (#3, #5), faster pace (#3, #11), increasingly cross-platform and cross-audience (#2), and more ubiquitous (#6). They are also far more *social* (#3, #4, #6, #9, #10, #12).

The ability to connect to friends within games presents a fundamentally new context for socialization of youth. Whereas the parent generation had to leave the home to hang out with groups of friends in parks and other venues (#3, #6, #9), their children's generation socializes predominantly online (#4) when not in school. In this way, multiplayer games are a vital setting for peer group interactions, providing a space for joint activity and talk, and this social capacity generates new and therefore unfamiliar forms of play (#10), self-presentation (#12), and peer interaction (#11, #12). For parents interviewed in this study, these new social forms are alien if not alarming. As one parent stated, "…it's a different era for me, I'm not thrilled with it. But in general, I'm okay with it" (#9).

Parents Own Gameplay

Perhaps as a result of these seismic shifts in the games industry, even parents with their own rich history of gaming (11 of 13 total or 85%) still *contrast* their experiences with those of their children as often as they draw on them as a resource for understanding (7 versus 4,

respectively). Both mothers and fathers report interest in and experiences with early gaming platforms including arcade games, the Commodore, Atari 2600, Genesis, Nintendo GameBoy and DS, and even Microsoft XBox. For more than half of parents (n=7), however, this personal background in games provides little common experience to draw from in order to make sense of the gameplay of their child. Parents differentiate their own early gaming from that of their kids based on the reported simplicity of earlier game titles (#4, #6, #11), their lack of immersiveness (#8), and a lack of access within the childhood homes (#3, #5, #12). They also point to perceived barriers to entry for today's game titles such as their quick pace (#10) and high level of prerequisite skill (#11).

For only a minority of parents interviewed (n=4) are early gameplay experiences a resource to draw upon to make sense of their children's game activities. But when they do, parents are able to view the medium as a means for connection and co-play (#1, #2, #5, #7). As one parent described it, "When it's the weekend and if they're at my house in particular, we are pretty much gaming all weekend. We really look forward to that time. That's our time to play together." (#2) From this perspective, titles such as Mario (#7), Minecraft (#1, #2), XBox Monopoly (#1), and even Overwatch (#2, #7) become contexts for bonding – a dynamic discussed in greater depth below.

Esports vs Traditional Sports

The most important organizing metaphor for parents making sense of esports is *traditional physical sports*, appearing across 9 of 13 (69%) interviews. Parents use what they know about conventional youth team sports to make sense of their child's interest, its benefits and drawbacks, and their own expectations from the school and the program. Here, esports are seen as providing youth who are not interested in physical sports (#1, #9) – or, as one parent put it, the "geeky kids" who are "you know, not rough" (#1) – a way to engage in teamsmanship (#6, #9, #11) and experience coaching (#7) that is less costly (#11), less tediously focused on drills instead of actual gameplay (#11), and more equitable (since all kids play and no one is stuck just sitting on the bench, #11).

This metaphor shapes parents' expectations, highlighting some benefits of participation and some drawbacks. Parents view esports as benefiting their children by strengthening their affiliation with school (#3) and sparking professional aspirations on or adjacent to the field (#3). But this comparison to other sports also highlights some of its shortcomings: the lack of established practice schedules (#11), explicit support from schools (#4) and parents (#11, #12), and structured ways for families to attend events and rally behind their child (#11). The constant accessibility of the field of play in esports can also be disruptive, interrupting home schedules by encroaching on other activities (#11) and bringing the rowdiness of field talk into the home (#11).

Parent Concerns About Gaming

While parents of NASEF students obviously allow their children to game and even compete, they also express concerns and misgivings. Figure 1 below shows the frequency of specific concerns mentioned when parents are asked directly in interview about any concerns they have with respect to videogames and esports.

Figure 1. Parent concerns about gaming by frequency.
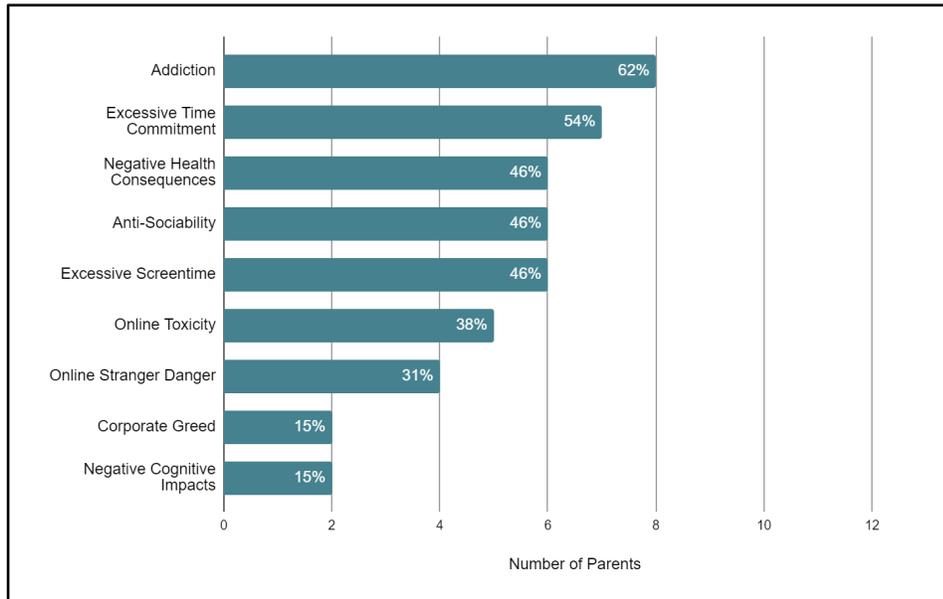
All 13 parents interviewed expressed at least one concern when prompted. The most frequently mentioned concern was *addiction*, often citing their child's inability or unwillingness to stop gaming when asked to do so (*#2, #4, #6, #7, #8, #10, #11*). As one parent explained, "I feel like it's an addiction too. That's why I have to set the timer on the wifi because if I don't he won't stop and even if I tell him, 'oh it's time to turn it off' he'll say 'okay' but then he'll be right back to it." (*#10*) A close second in concerns was, in one view, somewhat related: the *excessive time commitment* (*#4, #6, #8, #9, #10, #11 9*). Here, parents do not evoke the language of addition but do note similar patterns of game time disrupting other family and individual activities.

Other mentioned concerns with gaming include *negative health consequences* such as disruptions to sleep, lack of sufficient physical exercise, and strains on vision (*# 3, #4, #5, #6, #10*); *anti-sociability* or the concern that gaming is not social or at least not authentically social since the team plays online instead of in person (*#4, #5, #8, #9, #10, #11*); and *excessive screentime* due to the computer-mediated nature of the sport and pastime (*#5, #6, #7, #8, #10*).

Less frequent concerns mentioned include exposure to *online toxicity* due to team tilt, competitor trash talk, and overall negative social interactions among players (*#1, #5, #7, #9, #12*); fear of exposing teens to *strangers online* (*#2, #3, #5, #11*); *corporate greed* given the commercial nature of the game platforms (*#2, #82*); and potential *negative cognitive impacts*

of gaming such as the fear that games foster attentional issues or intolerance for delayed gratification (#10, #11).

Parenting Strategies in Relation to Games

Participants in the interviews described a wide range of parenting strategies around games that fell into three main categories: restriction, regulation, and enrichment. Few parents focused exclusively on just one type of strategy; instead, most parents used different strategies for different ends. We found no patterned relationship between type of parenting strategy described and any of the demographic variables examined, including self-reported comfort level with technology, socioeconomic status (as indicated by mother's education level), location, or grade or gender of the child.

Restriction strategies are those parenting strategies that limit, partially or in full, access to games and/or the hardware or internet connection they require. Just over half of parents (7 of 13 or 54%) interviewed used at least some form of restriction strategy when it came to games. Restriction strategies included three main forms:

- limiting or removing access to games and/or the internet (#3, #4, #5, #6),
- limiting game titles and/or content (#2, #6, #7), and
- limiting devices in the home (#12).

Restriction strategies rely on clear cut and well defined, a priori definitions of what forms of media engagement are acceptable, appropriate, right. In some cases, they define the consequence for children's noncompliance with other rules in the home. In others, they delimit safe versus unsafe behavior. But across all three types of restriction strategies discussed, we find a language of safety, consequence, and control. For example, in the words of one parent, "I said, you know, this is my line. I didn't want an excessively violent or scary video game to be a part of our video game culture. So there were video games that I limited and said he couldn't play at all"(#7). In the words of another parent, "it's always the ultimate punishment for me to, you know, pull the power strip and take away all Internet in the room" (#4). In these ways, restriction strategies allow parents to set clear terms for their children's media behaviors and exposure and, in so doing, maintain control within the home.

Regulation strategies, in contrast, are policy focused strategies, setting constraints on children's activities in terms of who and what and how much, that require active monitoring and negotiation. All 13 parents interviewed in this study (100%) actively engage in regulation strategies when it comes to their children's gameplay. Such strategies included three main forms:

- regulating screen time (#1, #3, #4,#5, #6, #7),
- monitoring what their child plays (#1-#12), and
- monitoring who their child plays with (#2, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8 #9).

Regulation policies are not determined a priori but instead evolve and emerge in conversation with the child and their interests. Parents establish gameplay policies in conversation with their children that are contingent on other family and home expectations, including homework completion (#1, #3, #4, #7), school grades (#3, #7), chores (#4), sleep (#7, #10), compliance with house rules (#1, #8), and participation in other extracurricular commitments (#9, #11). Yet these policies are responsive, not predetermined. As one parent explained, "this computer gaming thing is something that has taken a lot of conversing back and forth to reach an understanding about" (#12). As another parent advised, "...honoring the importance of play, but also saying, 'Hey, you know, we have to do other things.' We have to, being able to talk to them, about the boundaries. Don't just make- because something makes you uncomfortable, don't just turn it off" (#2).

Enrichment strategies, in contrast, build on kids' interest in games as a means for connection, collaboration and learning. Again, all 13 parents interviewed in this study (100%) actively engage in enrichment parenting strategies related to games. Given what we know about parents' attitudes toward games (discussed above), it may be that this pattern reflects something about the kind of parent who volunteers to be interviewed about their child's participation in esports more than something about parenting and games more generally. Regardless, the enrichment strategies reported on by parents in this study take four main forms:

- taking an interest in their child's gaming by asking questions, watching them play or compete, or listening to their stories and in-game escapades (#2, #3, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11, #12),
- allowing their child to be the expert who teaches the parent about gameplay (#2, #10, #11, #12),
- playing games jointly with their child as a context for family bonding and shared experience (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #10, #12) (Gee, Takeuchi, & Wartella, 2018; Siyahhan & Gee, 2018), and
- building on kids' interest in games as a way to develop other core competencies (#1, #2, #9).

When asked what parenting tips she would offer to others, one participant responded with the following illustrative advice:

> But what if you have absolutely no interest in playing those games? Then how do you maneuver that difference of opinion? And how do you progress safely? I think it takes grace. I think that you both have to accept sort of parent, child reversal almost because in this case they become your teacher. If you can't accept the fact that your child is going to be teaching you something, then it's going to be an uphill battle. [My son] has to be gracious enough to care about sharing it and patient with me and persevere through the difficulties of explaining something for 15 minutes that takes half a second to do. So just recognizing where people are putting in the effort and the energy required to be able to care about what the other person is involved in. (#12)

This final enrichment parenting strategy, *building on a child's interest as a means to develop other valued knowledge, dispositions, and skills,* is reminiscent of the parenting practices of middle class parents investigated in Lareau's (2003) study of the ways in which social class reproduces itself through parenting practices in the home. In a comparative ethnography of lower class and middle class child rearing, Lareau concludes that lower class families rely on a model of "natural growth" of the child whereas middle and upper middle class families rely on a model of "concerted cultivation." In this latter model, children's interests are construed as fertile ground for the development of social and cultural capital. Enrichment parenting is, from this view, a form of concerted cultivation. For example, one parent interviewed in this study explained how her enrichment parenting strategies encouraged her child to, in Lareau's terms, negotiate with authority and advocate for them themselves: "You see, I have a smart, articulate child. He has good arguments because this is one of the reasons. And that's fine" (#11). In our study, we see a similar pattern in parenting as in Lareau's study of the middle class, except here we find no relation to socioeconomic status indicators. Given our very small sample size, however, it remains an open question as to whether such class differences exist in relation to concerted cultivation in relation to games but are just not yet detected.

Perceived Benefits of NASEF

Parents saw multiple benefits for their children as a result of their participation in the NASEF program. Figure 1 below shows the frequency of specific benefits discussed.

Figure 2. Parents' perceived benefits of NASEF by frequency.
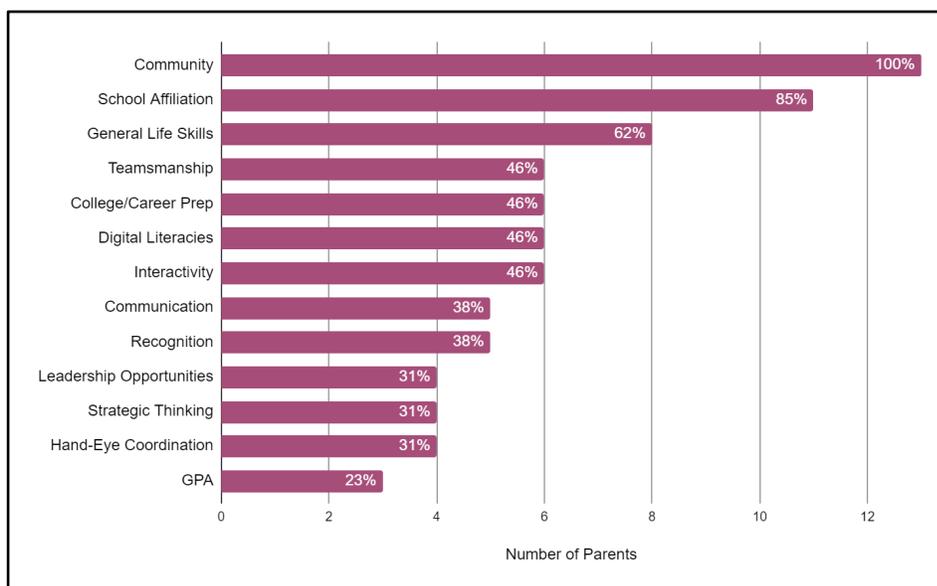
All 13 parents interviewed said that *community* was the number one benefit of NASEF for kids (#1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11, #12). As one parent aptly put it, "It's good for [my son] socially. I've seen him expand since he's joined the video game club. He has friends now that he talked to online in [different states]. They talk on a regular basis." (#5). The second

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most frequently mentioned benefit was *school affiliation* (#1, #2, #3, #6, #7, #8, #9, #10, #11, #12), often using terms related to community-related to community and belonging here as well, such as the following elaboration by one parent: "[Kids] don't always feel a sense of autonomy at school. The space, the gaming space, they feel a sense of autonomy, and they also feel that this is there for them. It's their community." (#2)). Thus, it's the school-sponsored and social community aspects of the club that, for parents, provides the largest benefit to their children. Here, we see NASEFs' values well reflected in parent perceptions.

Other notable benefits were equally aligned with the mission of the NASEF program – in order, *teamsmanship* (#1, #4, #5, #7, #10, #11); *general life skills* such as building confidence and time management skills (#1, #2, #6, #7, #8, #9, #12); *college and career preparation* ranging from scholarship opportunities to informing college choice (#1, #3, #7, #9, #11, #12); *digital literacies* such as digital reading and writing for interest, technology skills, and deeper programming interests (#2, #5, #7, #8, #9, #12); *communication skills* such as interpersonal communication, team communication, and inclusive joint decision-making (#5, #7, #10, #11, #12); and *interactivity* by comparison to other, more passive forms of media consumption.

Less frequent but noteworthy mentions from parents include the benefits of *recognition* for youth including the various NASEF award programs (#1, #6, #8, #9) and *leadership opportunities* that NASEF offers such as captain positions, mentors, and other leadership designations (#4, #7, #9, #11); *strategic thinking* within the game and beyond it (#2, #5, #10, #11), improved *hand-eye coordination* and reflexes (#6, #10, #11); and finally overall improved and/or maintained student grade point average (GPA) (#3, #8, #9). In the words of one parent," Academically, this is helping them. Trust me... not being able to play if your grades aren't up is a big motivator." (#9) In this way, many of the very benefits targeted by the program are reflected in parent perceptions of its value.

Perceived Areas for NASEF Improvement

Parents expressed surprisingly few concerns or frustrations with the NASEF program in the interviews. Across the entire data corpus and even when explicitly prompted, only two major criticisms were discussed: a need for more ways for parents to participate and increased support from participating schools.

First, 38% of parents (n= 5) want more ways to participate in NASEF programming as a means for supporting and championing their child. Just as with traditional sports, parents are interested and invested in their children's practices and performances. As one parent commented,

> "The greatest fan is going to be a parent or a family member. The people that know that child, that know the investments, that know the hard work, the sacrifice, the commitment, the passion. I mean, there's not one other person I think besides my son himself that would say that they're as invested as I would be. So I don't know why video games don't have that same kind of parent involvement" (#7).

Given this investment, parents want more opportunities to get involved in the club (#4, #7, #9) and meet the coaches or other parents (#7, #11, #12). They expressed an interest in resources or information to support not only players but also parents themselves in this new and less familiar domain (#9, #11). For example, one parent felt that the time taken to practice esports was "isolating…[because] unlike watching a basketball game or a baseball game, the family can't watch and cheer you on" (#11). As this parent explained, another child in the family later had to walk her through how to view the gameplay field, what to look for, and when to cheer when watching a stream of her son's tournament; she lacked the game knowledge in order for her to participate or even cheer her son's team on the way she might with a more traditional sport.

The second concern parents raised was increasing support for teams within participating schools (n = 4 or 31%). Here, traditional athletics was again a major point for comparison: Parents want to see more school financial support for personnel (#4), computer equipment (#10, #11), and team paraphernalia (#4). Simply ensuring that the necessary game works on school campus was also raised – for example, having the wifi or permissions to access the game during club or match times (#11, #12), even if the students had to bring their own equipment to school. Parents want school authorities to recognize the esports team and "treat them like an actual team" (#4), stating:

> "It would be great to see schools provide more support for faculty too. For athletics, we provide no end of financial and facilities and other support… And then actually provide sponsorship like for the jerseys or t-shirts or something" (#4).

Although less commonly mentioned, parents also requested more communication about the schedule and organization of games (n=2 or 15%) and more outreach to the broader community participating about the value of esports overall (n=2 or 15%). While both requests were less common, they are also both easily addressed as programming expands and scales.

Implications

Parents are excited about the NASEF program and the benefits they see for their children, and many of those benefits resonate with the program mission and values as stated overtly on program materials, in staff training, and in interactions with students themselves. Yet these conversations also point to ways we might augment and amplify future programming for greater student and family benefit and engagement, including especially augmented educational materials for parents and increased events that parents can attend.

First, we can create and better disseminate educational multimedia materials for parents. Such materials might include *enrichment parenting strategy tips* to support parents in building on student interest in esports; a *beginner guides for parents* (such as "noob streams" of gameplay) in which players and/or experts explain the gameplay for beginning viewers, rendering it more accessible and easier to watch; and *better communication of research findings* as to the *benefits* of NASEF specifically and the *concerns* about videogames and esports in general. Many of these materials already exist at least partially, making it merely a

matter of augmenting what we have, amplifying their profile among our resources, and seeding materials as press releases on the parents' facebook group.

Second, parents want more and better ways to participate and support their NASEF students. Again, there are immediate and easy program additions and revisions we can make to meet these ends. Parents want to be able to spectate and champion their children in the same ways as they can do for other, more traditional sports. More in-person events such as viewing parties or co-play gaming nights in addition to playoffs and championships – coupled with lowered barriers for understanding what's going on in the game and outside of it – would help us leverage the community beyond just teachers, coaches, and players.

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