

*Research*

## **CHILDREN PLAY WAR**

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**Abstract.** The article reflects the results from the author's research project on traditional and modern games of children in Bulgaria. Based on the life stories, interviews, media reports and other sources of information an ethnological reading of the memories of respondents during the Second World War and its impact on aspects of everyday culture, as is children's play, will be made. Through different types of narratives (anthropological, ethnographic, film and literary) the author represents the children's play of war as a reflection of the reality in which the children live and at the same time as one of the most vivid examples of how important the peace is for the comprehensive development of the human personality.

*Keywords:* children's play, war, family, education, everyday culture

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## **Introduction**

Children transform the branches of the trees into a house, the mud into food, the dolls into sons and daughters and themselves – into mothers and fathers. Anthropologists transform houses into patterns of settlements, food into natural production, mothers and fathers into kinship systems and people into cultures. Children's transformations are often described as frivolous and insignificant, because they are made with such ease that they seem like a child's play. Transformations of ethnologists are interpreted to be hard fieldwork followed by a thorough analytical work. But when it comes to the anthropology of the child's play or the play of the anthropologists, ethnologists and children continuously build and transform the contexts in which the play (child's or scientific) exists. And make strenuous efforts to rationalize and sometimes even remove the meaning of the world in which they reinvent themselves. And it is good that they never forget that in play as well as in research, a strong creative charge and a large dose of imagination is required.

“Children Play War” is a text that presents parts of the results from a three-year research project “Traditional and Modern Children's Games” carried out in the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IEFSEM – BAS) that was completed in 2016. Its goals were achieved by applying an interdisciplinary approach and specific ethnological methods (semi-structured interviews, participant observation) to study some of the main reasons for the change in the type, the content and the techniques that the contemporary generation of Bulgarian children between 3 and 16 years old use in play. I traced the means of imposing these changes, taking into account the main socio-cultural factors, the agents of the change like parents and representatives of the institutions, the influence of the media etc. I showcased the substitution of the “collective” model of play, prevalent in the traditional Bulgarian culture, with the “individual” play model that is typical nowadays. In the final stage of my work I presented some of its results

at the International Conference “War and Peace” organized by the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo.

**“À la guerre comme à la guerre!”**

When the resources are limited, the war can be fought with practically everything provided by everyday life. Thus, in critical situations, the goal can be achieved with the materials at hand. In play the situation is exactly the same. Even the most cursory look at traditional toys from the recent past will lead to the conclusion that the child can play with any object, and what is used as a toy in a certain period of time, in another might have completely different function. This is particularly true for improvised toys that children make from all kinds of materials themselves. With limited resources (time, space, participants, tools, etc.) children can play with anything, because they live and self-realize through play.

**Play is such an important topic for both childhood and ethnology**

There is a problem, of course, with definitions. We can assume that we all know what war is while practically none of us knows what play is. Professor Norbek (1974) created a list of topics, related to play, which are useful to be explored: the play as a mirror of pervasive values and attitudes in the society; play and social control; play and social psychological problem of Western society; play and linguistics, communication cognition and symbolism; religion and play; play and politics; play and law; play and aggression; the didactic and socializing value of play among children and adults; play and art; play and creativity or cultural innovation. However, the same list of topics can be compiled when studying war, or love, or religion.

This means that to seek a definition of play is pointless and counterproductive exercise. It is so doomed to failure that some researchers tend to, even terminologically, avoid this human activity, believing that if they do not name the problem, it will disappear by itself. In the Western culture the efforts are

focused on explaining not what play is but what it is not: play is not a job, play is not real, it is not productive and it is not serious. It will be “much more honest” (so would children say) if we admit, as did one of the best researchers of play Brian Sutton-Smith (1997), that play is one of those “omnibus categories” such as love, religion, art, war, politics and culture that cannot get a clear definition. But the rules (in both research and play) require to state what the author of this work will understand as “child’s play”. And as it should be written in a bible of the play “in the beginning there was” Johan Huizinga (1949) with the postulate

[F]irst and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity... Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom” (p. 8).

This freedom is very important not only for the player but also for his researcher; even more important is in what forms it is manifested in time and space. Were the children, in the years before World War II in Sofia, freer in their choice of time, place and partners for their plays; whether nowadays the strict control of the adults is impairing this freedom, especially in the choice of the type of the play? When today we often hear the prompt voice of a parent saying “Go play with the children!”, and we see a reluctance or inconvenience in the child to do that, don’t we lose this one element of free play so well defined by Roger Caillois (1958) – “nobody is obliged to play; if this is done under obligation, then the play loses its exuberance.” (p. 113). After the freedom and the pleasure, the thing that I will bear in mind about children’s play is its absolute unproductivity – the necessary element, justified by Garvey (1990). We cannot expect children to turn the elaboration of some items, the creation of drawings, master some skills (singing, recitation, etc.) into a play, if in the end of this process we frame the final result in a race or a competition and assign the adults to evaluate and determine the winner. I cannot accept the definition “business of childhood” that some “experts in the field of the play”, like Bruner et al.

(1976), use in order to show that it is not just the opposite of work, but “some other kind of work that children perform under the surveillance of adults” (p. 46). The control exercised by the adults that the children bear in the course of their play largely determines what risks are presumed by children’s autonomy. Therefore, it is very important to track the changes in the environment (or situation) in which the play takes place. I agree with the thesis of Chudacoff (2008) that nature, public places and the home (including the courtyard) have always been the three main spaces for children to play. Children often tend to modify the play space according to their needs – something that they may lack in modern times, when we observe the active expansion of the so-called children’s centers that are a mandatory component of the “mall” culture.

When considering the play as a component of children’s culture, the context of materials, tools, resources (or their lack) that facilitate or accompany the play, cannot be avoided. Apparently the most significant changes occurred here in a period of less than one century. In pre-modern times the toy is a gift from the parents to their child on an occasion. While bringing happiness and joy in most cases the gift has some educational value or the parent considers it useful – pencils and notebooks for drawing and writing, toolkits to imitate the activities of the adults, dolls (that are supposed to do company to the children) and their accessories to master housewife skills, plush toys for comfort etc. In the traditional Bulgarian culture, the toy also has its utilitarian value. Made by the father or the grandfather, bought from a fair or a market or even hand-made by the child, toys are very “peaceful”. The girls play with their “real” babies that they bathe in small tubs, dress them in clothes made from old pieces of cloth, decorate them with necklaces, bracelets and other accessories, weave baskets for them, cook them food in small pans, bowls and hot plates and then serve it (in bourgeois families in porcelain mini dishes with silver spoons). Every boy has a musical toy ranging from tweeter through whistle or squealer to wooden flute. They make boats from carved bark, put wheels on wooden logs thus making carts and so on. All children are happy to play with small horses, donkeys and

cars, swinging ducks, figurines depicting diggers with hoes in hands and acrobats on wooden stands all made from wood.

I would like to note (because this is essential, but I will not comment it in depth here) that there is another context that should be considered when reflecting on the children's play. This is the personal drama of the player: who are, what are and how many are the people playing, what are the relationships between them, who the solo players are and most of all – what is the risk for the physical condition and the psychological balance of the child in the particular play. I fully accept the opinion of Chudacoff (2012) shared in an interview that the risk, in a simplified sense, is something that the children decide for themselves and they should consider whether the possible reward is worth it. The potential danger, such as thin ice, fast-moving cars or a hot stove, exists and is beyond the control of the child (and of the adult too! – I would add). The ability to calculate the risk is an important part of growing up, but our modern society that seeks to avoid risks at all costs, too often do not trust the child's ability to understand and avoid the risk.

### **The topic of risk and the related topic of violence**

Obviously a play that resembles a war is often regarded by the parents as problematic. Firstly, because there is a risk of injury for those taking part in it, because it can easily transform into abuse and real fight, because it encourages the use of violence and weapons in solving problems. And last but not least, because this type of play is most often played by boys and this is accepted as a natural sign of their masculinity.

These are some of the conclusions of the participants in Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age – one of the largest contemporary research projects dedicated to children's play. A clarification is needed here that this project was limited to a study of playing under the strict supervision of adults with special education or vocational training in the limits of the playground or of the schoolyard.

But in reality, did the play of war has always been present in children's activities? What possible answer can we get from an *anthropological narrative* about the play?

The famous American anthropologist and director John Kennedy Marshall, creator of “Cinéma vérité” trend, studied for several years the hunting and foraging culture of the !Kung Bushmen tribe living in the Kalahari Desert, on the territory of Namibia, Botswana and Angola. As a result, he created the film “Tug of War”, in which the well-known play yields different meaning. In contrast with the goal of the tug of war in our society (each side tries to pull the other over a line in order to win) there is no competitive element here.

One of the reasons for that, according to Marshall (1960), is the absolute disparity in age of the participants. Because of the size of !Kung bands the number of children in it is very small so children of all ages participate in the play and this makes the “duel” between them meaningless. Children have different levels of motor skills, motivation and cognitive development, and this makes the play impossible if it involves competition, rules or any complex strategy.

On the other hand, the adults don't tolerate the competition between children and put a quick end to any quarrel between them. But the most important thing is that the children have no understanding of the “winner” and “loser” concepts. According to the common law of !Kung if the children compete with each other they will destroy the harmony between them. Competition creates inequality, inequality would breed jealousy and jealousy could lead to violence.

All this is explained in a myth about how a long time ago the Bushmen and the Black people “the Bantu” (so were called all black people in South Africa during the apartheid) were one nation. One day the Creator commanded them to have a tug of war. The Black people were on one side, the Bushmen on the other, in equal numbers. The rope, the Creator made for them to pull on, had two parts to it, which were knotted together in the middle. One part of the rope, the part given to the Black people to pull on, was made of the hides of animals.

The half of the rope that was given to the Bushmen was made of !gwi (Sansevieria fibers). The tug of war began, and the rope broke. Thus the Black people got the best things: cattle, sheep, goats, and milk to drink as well as the knowledge of hoeing and planting. The Bushmen got the less-good things: they make their living as best they can with bowstrings and snares made of !gwi. The old man who told Marshall the story said that the Bushmen had been foolish to take the !gwi end of the rope. Laughing, he said that he wished the pulling could be repeated now. He would see that the Bushmen took the other end.

### **The world of children mirrors the world of adults**

But not everybody has the chance to be raised in time of peace among peaceful people. And if the period is the first half of the XX century and the place is the Balkans we will see how the themes about childhood, children's play and toys, relationships between children of same age etc. are replaced by the themes related to the complex family history like migration, broadening the connection with distant relatives, parting and rearrangement of family roles in time of war, when the child should accustom to a missing father, working mother and the care for his/her little brothers and sisters. To this we add the wartime state policy regarding children: the children healthcare and poliomyelitis, scarlet fever, meningitis and tuberculosis epidemics as well as the problems like systemic malnutrition etc. This objective reality inevitably leads to rearrangement of values. Their reflections are the changes in education and socialization of children and in the new paradigms of indoctrination, morality, behavior and values, different from the traditional "peacetime" norms, as well as strengthening of the influence of popular culture, radio, commercials, movies etc.

In the historical anthropology, which tries to "reeducate" anthropology through the severe measures of the historic positivism, the theme of childhood is often associated with studies of biographical stories. Mitterauer (2004) ex-

plains that with the interest of the researcher to the perceptions, attitudes, feelings, etc. of individuals and social groups. Also an important part is taken here by the *ethnographic narrative* understood as historical research, which aims to carefully unveil the past and interpretation built on cultural context i.e. ethnography of the world views, of the “versions” of the contemporary historical actors. This ethnography, according to Dresell (1996), at the same time links individual ways of behavior and actions of actors with certain results and reconstructs the history of the change of the world where the historical actors are situated.

The biographic stories of my respondents have always taken me in the crucial years of the First and Second World Wars. Miho, born in 1907, who I met in 1986 during my first ethnographic expedition in Gradinarovo – a village in the Varna region, explained all his woes with the years of his childhood.

[I] barely remember my father, who died in 1912 during the Turkish War. My mother died several months later from tuberculosis. My brother also passed away, before my mother at the age of 8. So I became an orphan at the age 5. My grandfather too cares of me, but when the war was over my uncles returned from the front and my aunts got married so one night I was kicked out from home. After I wandered for 2-3 days, I went into the yard of my mother's house and I lay down on the doorsteps like a dog.

The sister of his mother felt pity for him and took him inside the house. In order to feed himself he did all kinds of work – farm servant, apprentice, with the only thought not to be a burden to his relatives. “To have a roof above my head and one meal I worked. No one wanted to look after me.”

Toda (Todorka Nikova born in 1919 in Komarevo – a village in Varna region) didn't remember her father because he died during the First World War. Her mother had to take care alone for her and her older brothers, 3 and 5 years

old. They lived with her grandfather, the father of her father. They were so poor that when her brothers were 6-7 years old they “went quarrying to earn some money. Then one of my brothers started coughing from this job, spitting blood and so he died.” For most of the children of that time, who suffered the loss, the pain and the catastrophic changes that war brought to their families, the childhood ended abruptly to be replaced by hard work and providing of subsistence.

In the world of the play also occurred radical changes. The wooden whistles fell silent. In their place wooden sabers, swords and rifles were made in order to play war, to imitate the things with which the absent father or older brother was dealing with. Sometimes the play was seen as a waste of time, which can be used at the factory or in the field. And the little girls no longer imagined babies to take care of – they actually raised their younger brothers and sisters.

Elder, Jr. et al. (1994) draw attention to the huge importance of the age of the child who survived the war. For example, if the father is absent during the WWII, what matters is how old is the child: 1, 3, 6 or 10 years old. The age affects the way a child perceives and reacts to the occupation of the mother, to migration, to propaganda. The age determines the degree of understanding and hence the significance and impact of historical and personal experiences of the individual, the consequences they have on his/her further development as teenager and adult. Cunningham (2005) adds that for the Americans the WWII means, above all, fathers and older brothers who were mobilized and mothers left alone to raise their children.

While with their allies on the Eastern front things were more dramatic. The major themes there are loss, fear, absurdity, separation, compassion, consideration from strangers, mutual aid, dreams and psychodrama. There the children face their enemies face to face and become victims of violence.

In the “Last witnesses” Svetlana Alexievich (1987), a book collecting the stories of our contemporaries who survived WWII, we read:

[W]e had no childhood, we had no youth. I think I've always been old. I have always been doing work for adults (p. 290); ... It seems to me that everything before the war ever since I can remember, was nice: kindergartens, the mornings, the yard, the girls, the boys. I was reading a lot, I was afraid of worms and loved dogs (p. 293). ... As I later realized before the war I had lived a whole lifetime. Before the war I had had a childhood (p. 296).

The theme of childhood during the war reaches the next generations also through several brilliant *film narratives*. The first of them is “Ivan's Childhood” – a film shot in 1962 and directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. For the hero of the film Sartre (1965) has written:

[I]n fact, he is the most innocent and most poignant victim of the war: this boy who cannot be forced to love, is benumbed by cruelty, it has infiltrated him. The Nazis killed him when they killed his mother and shot to death the inhabitants of his village (p. 335).

According to Sartre the war kills the humanity in everyone, who witnesses its horrors – especially in children – because it deforms irreversibly their psychics, infecting them with the virus of hatred.

The next film narrative “Come and see”, created by the director Elem Klimov in 1985, takes us to Belarus in 1943, when the 16 years old Flyora, while playing after the battles has moved away, digs up the weapon of a fallen soldier. He goes with it to the partisans, despite the protests of his mother, in order not to fall behind the others. Initially, the life in the forest resembles the one which he knew from the war movies that he had watched. But soon the little partisan realizes that he has doomed all his relatives. And this would not be the worst that he is about to experience. As the film critic points out:

[T]his film simply blows up the brain of anyone who “comes to see it” as only a true masterpiece can do. Watching it one can be convinced one final time that the most important war movies are in their core antiwar, pacifist works of art.<sup>1)</sup>

A *biographic narrative* turned into a novel by James Graham Ballard, became the basis for the “Empire of the Sun” – Steven Spielberg’s masterpiece of 1987. Separated from his parents during the occupation of Shanghai in 1941, a boy finds himself in a Japanese concentration camp where learns how to survive through the horrors of war, losing the innocence of his childhood, but not his humanity. It really is a “lesson in tolerance and humanism which is taught to us with incredible intelligence”, as the film critic defines.<sup>2)</sup>

The psychological effects of the war including fear, insecurity, doom and death, are still present in the childhood memories of Sofia residents who survived the bombings during the Second World War. I interviewed more than 30 people from the generation born between 1933 and 1940 (Bankova, 2013). These senior citizens are still startled when they hear the howl of sirens over Sofia although they know that these are Civil Defense drills. Some remember the transportation of the few family belongings found among the ruins of their house on iron bedsprings turned into sleds. Others still talk about the “idyll” of the village or the small provincial town where they were evacuated.

The *photographic narrative* of these years shows us different ways of dealing with the consequences of war (Figs. 1-3)

Regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the grownups’ plans for them, regardless of scarcity or danger, the children find a way to remain children. By playing. Now playing war more often than before.

### **Do children play war in times of peace?**

“Peace” also belongs to those concepts that are difficult to define. And what is even stranger, in the common sense, “peace” is determined by the characteristics of the war, i.e. peace is the state of absence of war. The lack of conflicts, disagreements and violence and the existence of freedom and opportunity for people to live and work together in agreement are crucial for peace. So every historian (and unfortunately every politician) will stipulate that peace is relative and the history after the Second World War till this very day is strewn with the blood of the innocent by military conflicts (though not so large in scale).



**Figure 1.** London children wear their gas mask as they skip in the park at their temporary homes on the south coast of England in 1940



**Figure 2.** One of the most mysterious photographs: children playing war in front of German soldiers. Probably these are Ukrainian children in 1941-1942

Because soon after the World War II “broke” the Cold War. And undoubtedly it found its reflections in children's play and toys.

I was born in Sofia in 1964. One of my favorite childhood games was “cops and thieves.” The rules of that game had survived over the years and this game links several generations. Each one leaves random object on the ground. The designated to choose the teams counts to ten with his/her eyes closed and then choose according to the objects who will be cop and who thief. The cops count to ten and in this time the thieves hide. Then the cops look for the thieves and a chase follows when they are found. To protect themselves the thieves, devise real and fake passwords. When the cops catch a thief they say “With a

cops' mark I seal you now and my brother you become.“ Then the thief is “tortured” by tickling to give up the password. And so the captured thief becomes a cop. This game was always criticized by parents because when playing it the children crossed the boundaries of the allowed perimeter into the adjacent neighborhoods and spent a lot of time playing it. It allowed the participation of girls and boys of different ages. Unlike the “war with cones” (the goal of the game is to “take down” all members of the opposite team by hitting them with paper cones blown through a thin tube), which was totally reserved for boys.



**Figure 3.** Children playing in Berlin in 1945

Another game was also managed to move through time and space, through communist ideology and through the years of transition from totalitarianism to democracy – the game “of states.” According to the modern rules the children draw a circle on the asphalt. The circle is divided into a number of sectors corresponding to the number of the participants. Each child chooses a

country which he writes in his/her sector of the circle. One child counts to 3 and the others break up with the goal to run as far as they can away from the circle. Then the child who counted chooses another child and says, "I'll reach you with 5, (7, 10 ...) giant (mouse, human, rabbit etc.) steps." If he/she reaches the chosen child with the stated number and type of steps the state of the "reached" child is "conquered" by the child who counted.

"Playing war" was a generic term and included all sorts of "fighting" with all kinds of "weapons" determined by the season (snowballs, bombs made from plastic bags filled with water, rocks, slingshots, bows, water pistols, eggs etc.). At home or in the yard everyone pulled out their plastic, steel or wooden Indians, cowboys, soldiers, officers, arranging them against the opposition and started the war...

While at school the war was not a game, it was politics, ideology, meaning and purpose of our existence. As little soldiers, we lived from the first school day in organizations, we followed the statutes and rules, performed tasks and followed orders imposed on us by the commanders. And of course we wore uniforms. Such uniformity is impossible without an orderly organization which is hierarchically structured and operates from the first school day. Each first grader on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March stated its desire to enter the ranks of the first organization which incorporated all (absolutely all!) children from first to third grade. It was called Chavdarska organization. Its name derives from the name of Chavdar voyvoda – a famous Bulgarian rebel who together with his band of more than 300 people operated in the regions of Macedonia and Sofia of the late 16th century Ottoman Empire. Alas the ideals after which the 7-8 year olds were shaped had nothing to do with this legendary figure of a fighter against the foreign invader. On the first page of their statute were printed the well-known waving red flags with the hammer and sickle and the following verses were lining next to them: "Lead me Party, lead me under your aloft flags! Shine with your red name through the thousands of names!" All respondents remember these verses, some also remember the "promises" that every "chavdarche" spoke

aloud when joining the organization: “The chavdarche loves his/her free fatherland as his own mother”; “The chavdarche the labor loves, to your aid he/she always comes”; “The small chavdarcheta are good buddies” but mostly “The chavdarche is an example at home and in class, he/she remembers: Pioneer I will become!” This was also mandatory and inevitable! In the beginning of third grade on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September every child pronounced the oath: “I, the Dimitrov’s pioneer, solemnly promise to be faithful to the covenants of Georgi Dimitrov, dedicated to the fight for the cause of the Bulgarian Communist Party, for the victory of communism. I promise to learn and work tirelessly to be worthy citizen and defender of my dear fatherland – People’s Republic of Bulgaria.” Like the acceptance in the Chavdarska organization the subsequent promotion to a pioneer usually happened in a place outside school like a monument of dead partizans (guerrilla fighter – P.B.) where every child got a blue, respectively red for the pioneer, tie. The tie’s three tips and the knot symbolized the unity of the communists, komsomoltsi (members of youth communist organization – P.B.) and pioneers. The continuity is stressed upon even in the song with which the children marched: “The communists build our fatherland, the komsomoltsi build after them, pioneers, pioneers a glorious road awaits you, a labor road! Communists, komsomoltsi, pioneers, we are in one and the same formation. Communists, komsomoltsi, pioneers together in work and fight.” (Bankova, 2014).

On the other side of the “iron curtain” in the same 1964 the American company Hasbro, famous for producing toys and games, introduced a new type of toy into the world of play. Named G.I. Joe after ordinary soldiers of World War II, the 11 1/2-inch male figure wore uniforms representing the U.S. military and had 21 moving parts. Hasbro branded it an “action figure” to distinguish it from dolls and created a variety of vehicles, equipment and play sets to accompany it. G.I. Joe established his success in the first year as millions of boys found him a compelling toy for imaginative play.

Because of his popularity, G.I. Joe has been both a battle-scarred soldier of America’s culture wars and an influential toy prototype. For some critics,

Joe's message of "might makes right" is the wrong one to share with children. Other adults counter that Joe encourages kids' stories of good triumphing over evil and fosters creativity, imagination, and self-esteem. But while grown-ups argue over Joe's merits and flaws, kids play on and hundreds of other "action figures" people the toy landscape.

After the era of the Star Wars and the massive influx of computer games, today's children play war with their peers in the global network. They chat freely and comment on any subject while shooting, demolishing, surviving, upgrading etc. And their activities nourish furious scientific debates about the benefits and harm of computer games, the need for limiting the element of violence in children's games and so on.

Children play war. And for them it is an expression of some kind of natural necessity – imitating adults, testing themselves in a duel with others, fantasizing their enemies, battles and victories. But they are not the ones who make the war real. Because the real war means the end of the games. And a childhood without play is impossible. So maybe it's about time for the adults to stop playing politics and diplomacy with abusers, aggressors, terrorists and usurpers. But to listen to the wisdom of their children who prefer the real childhood instead of the real war.

**Acknowledgments:** This text would not be possible without my strong emotional involvement with the academic community of the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo, without the remarks and comments of my fellow historians and ethnologists there. I want to express my gratitude to the friends and the classmates of my son Diman Bankov who conceded to be this project's "control group" by talking about their children's play from the point of view of 20 years old young people living in the capital of Bulgaria. All contributions of this work are theirs, all inadequacies are mine.

## NOTES

1. <http://drugotokino.bg/content/filmite-za-vtorata-svetovna-voina?tid=29>
2. <https://leschroniquesdecliffhanger.com/2016/07/21/lempire-du-soleil-cri-tique/>

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