davos: a Python package "smuggler" for constructing lightweight reproducible notebooks

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Abstract

Reproducibility is a core requirement of modern scientific research. For computational research, reproducibility means that code should produce the same results, even when run on different systems. A standard approach to ensuring reproducibility entails packaging a project's dependencies along with its primary code base. Existing solutions vary in how deeply these dependencies are specified, ranging from virtual environments, to containers, to virtual machines. Each of these existing solutions requires installing or setting up a system for running the desired code, increasing the complexity and time cost of sharing or engaging with reproducible science. Here, we propose a lighter-weight solution: the dayos library. When used in combination with a notebook-based Python project, davos provides a mechanism for specifying (and automatically installing) the correct versions of the project's dependencies. The davos library further ensures that those packages and specific versions are used every time the notebook's code is executed. This enables researchers to share a complete reproducible copy of their code within a single Jupyter notebook file.

Keywords: Reproducibility, Open science, Python, Jupyter Notebook, Google Colaboratory, Package management

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Required Metadata

Current code version

Nr.	Code metadata description	Metadata value
C1	Current code version	v0.1.1
C2	Permanent link to code/repository	https://github.com/
	used for this code version	ContextLab/davos/tree/v0.1.1
С3	Code Ocean compute capsule	
C4	Legal Code License	MIT
C5	Code versioning system used	git
C6	Software code languages, tools, and	Python, JavaScript, PyPI/pip,
	services used	IPython, Jupyter, Ipykernel,
		PyZMQ. Additional tools used for
		tests: pytest, Selenium, Requests,
		mypy, GitHub Actions
C7	Compilation requirements, operat-	Dependencies: Python \geq 3.6, pack-
	ing environments, and dependencies	aging, setuptools. Supported OSes:
		MacOS, Linux, Unix-like. Supported
		IPython environments: Jupyter
		notebooks, JupyterLab, Google Co-
		laboratory, Binder, IDE-based note-
		book editors.
C8	Link to developer documenta-	https://github.com/
	tion/manual	ContextLab/davos#readme
C9	Support email for questions	contextualdynamics@gmail.com

Table 1: Code metadata

1. Motivation and significance

- The same computer code may not behave identically under different cir-
- 3 cumstances. For example, when code depends on external libraries, different
- 4 versions of those libraries may function differently. Or when CPU or GPU
- instruction sets differ across machines, the same high-level code may be com-
- 6 piled into different machine instructions. Because executing identical code
- does not guarantee identical outcomes, code sharing alone is often insufficient
- s for enabling researchers to reproduce each other's work, or to collaborate on
- 9 projects involving data collection or analysis.
- Within the Python [1] community, external packages that are published in the most popular repositories [2, 3] are associated with version numbers and

tags that allow users to guarantee they are installing exactly the same code across different computing environments [4]. While it is *possible* to manually install the intended version of every dependency of a Python script or package, manually tracking down those dependencies can impose a substantial burden on the user and create room for mistakes and inconsistencies. Further, when dependency versions are left unspecified, replicating the original computing environment becomes difficult or impossible.

Computational researchers and other programmers have developed a broad set of approaches and tools to facilitate code sharing and reproducible outcomes (Fig. 1). At one extreme, simply distributing a set of Python scripts (.py files) may enable others to use or gain insights into the relevant work. Because Python is installed by default on most modern operating systems, for some projects, this may be sufficient. Another popular approach entails creating Jupyter notebooks [8] that comprise a mix of text, executable code, and embedded media. Notebooks may call or import external scripts or libraries—even intersperse snippets of other programming or markup languages—in order to provide a more compact and readable experience for users. Both of these systems (Python scripts and notebooks) provide a convenient means of sharing code, with the caveat that they do not specify the computing environment in which the code is executed. Therefore the functionality of code shared using these systems cannot be guaranteed across different users or setups.

At another extreme, virtual machines [9, 10, 11] provide a hardware-level simulation of the desired system. Virtual machines are typically isolated such that installing or running software on a virtual machine does not impact the user's primary operating system or computing environment. Containers [e.g., 12, 13 provide a similar "isolated" experience. Although containerized environments do not specify hardware-level operations, they are typically packaged with a complete operating system, in addition to a complete copy of Python and any relevant package dependencies. Virtual environments [e.g., 6, 7 also provide a computing environment that is largely separated from the user's main environment. They incorporate a copy of Python and the target software's dependencies, but virtual environments do not specify or reproduce an operating system for the runtime environment. Each of these systems (virtual machines, containers, and virtual environments) guarantees (to differing degrees—at the hardware level, operating system level, and Python environment level, respectively) that the relevant code will run similarly for different users. However, each of these systems also relies on additional software that can be complex or resource-intensive to install and use, creating potential barriers to both contributing to and taking advantage of open science resources.

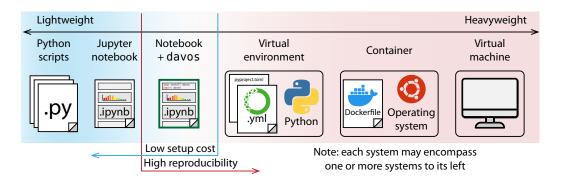


Figure 1: Systems for sharing code within the Python ecosystem. From left to right: plain-text **Python scripts** (.py files) provide the most basic "system" for sharing raw code. Scripts may reference external libraries, but those libraries must be manually installed on other users' systems. Further, any checking needed to verify that the correct versions of those libraries were installed must also be performed manually. Jupyter notebooks (.ipynb files) comprise embedded text, executable code, and media (including rendered figures, code output, etc.). When the dayos library is imported into a Jupyter notebook, the notebook's functionality is extended to automatically install any required external libraries (at their correct versions, when specified). Virtual environments allow users to install an isolated copy of Python and all required dependencies. This typically entails distributing a configuration file (e.g., a pyproject.toml [5] or environment.yml) that specifies all project dependencies (including version numbers of external libraries) alongside the primary code base. Users can then install a third-praty tool [e.g., 6, 7] to read the file and build the environment. Containers provide a means of defining an isolated environment that includes a complete operating system (independent of the user's operating system), in addition to (optionally) specifying a virtual environment or other configurations needed to provide the necessary computing environment. Containers are typically defined using specification files (e.g., a plain-text Dockerfile) that instruct the virtualization engine regarding how to build the containerized environment. Virtual machines provide a complete hardware-level simulation of the computing environment. In addition to simulating specific hardware, virtual machines (typically specified using binary images files) must also define operating system-level properties of the computing environment. Systems to the left of the blue vertical line entail sharing individual files, with no additional installation or configuration needed to run the target code. Systems to the right of the red vertical line support precise control over dependencies and versioning. Notebooks enhanced using the davos library are easily shareable and require minimal setup costs, while also facilitating high reproducibility by enabling precise control over project dependencies.

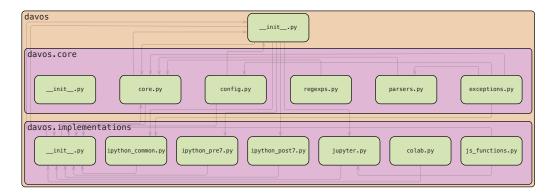


Figure 2: Package structure.

We designed davos to occupy a "sweet spot" between these extremes. davos is a notebook-installable package that adds functionality to the default notebook experience. Like standard Jupyter notebooks, davos-enhanced notebooks allow researchers to include text, executable code, and media within a single file. No further setup or installation is required, beyond what is needed to run standard Jupyter notebooks. And like virtual environments, davos provides a convenient mechanism for fully specifying (and installing, as needed) a complete set of Python dependencies, including package versions.

61 2. Software description

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The davos package is named after Davos Seaworth, a smuggler often referred to as "the Onion Knight" from the series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin.

2.1. Software architecture

The davos package consists of two interdependent subpackages (see Fig. 2). 66 The first, davos.core, comprises a set of modules that implement the bulk of 67 the package's core functionality, including pipelines for installing and validat-68 ing packages, custom parsers for the smuggle statement (see Section 2.2.1) 69 and onion comment (see Section 2.2.2), and a runtime interface for configuring davos's behavior (see Section 2.2.3). However, certain critical aspects 71 of this functionality require (often substantially) different implementations 72 depending on properties of the notebook environment in which davos is used 73 (e.g., whether the frontend is provided by Jupyter or Google Colaboratory, or 74 which version of IPvthon [14] is used by the notebook kernel). To deal with this, environment-dependent parts of core features and behaviors are isolated and abstracted to "helper functions" in the davos.implementations

subpackage. This second subpackage defines multiple, interchangeable versions of each helper function, organized into modules by the conditions that 79 trigger their use. At runtime, davos detects various features in the notebook environment and selectively imports a single version of each helper function 81 into the top-level dayos.implementations namespace, allowing dayos.core modules to access the correct implementations for the current notebook environment in a single, consistent location. An additional benefit of this de-84 sign pattern is that it allows maintainers or users to easily extend davos 85 to support new, updated, or custom notebook variants by creating a new 86 dayos.implementations module with any necessary tweaks to the existing 87 helper functions.

89 2.2. Software functionalities

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2.2.1. The smuggle statement

Importing davos in an IPython notebook enables an additional Python keyword: "smuggle" (see Section 2.3 for details on how this works). The smuggle statement can be used as a drop-in replacement for Python's built-in import statement to load libraries, modules, and other objects into the current namespace. However, whereas import will fail if the requested package is not installed locally, smuggle statements can handle missing packages on the fly. If a smuggled package does not exist in the local environment, davos will install it automatically, expose its contents to Python's import machinery, and load it into the namespace for immediate use.

2.2.2. The onion comment

For greater control over the behavior of smuggle statements, davos defines an additional construct called the "onion comment." An onion comment is a special type of inline comment that may be placed on a line containing a smuggle statement to customize how davos searches for the smuggled package locally and, if necessary, downloads and installs it. Onion comments follow a simple format based on the "type comment" syntax introduced in PEP 484 [15], and are designed to make managing packages with davos intuitive and familiar. To construct an onion comment, users provide the name of the installer program (e.g., pip) and the same arguments one would use to manually install the package as desired via the command line:

```
# enable smuggle statements
import davos

# if numpy is not installed locally, pip-install it and display verbose output
smuggle numpy as np  # pip: numpy --verbose

# pip-install pandas without using or writing to the package cache
smuggle pandas as pd  # pip: pandas --no-cache-dir

# install scipy from a relative local path, in editable mode
from scipy.stats smuggle ttest_ind  # pip: -e ../../pkgs/scipy
```

Occasionally, a package's distribution name (i.e., the name used when installing it) may differ from its top-level module name (i.e., the name used when importing it). In such cases, an onion comment can be used to ensure davos installs the proper distribution if the smuggled package can't be found locally:

```
# package is named "python-dateutil" on PyPI, but imported as "dateutil"
smuggle dateutil  # pip: python-dateutil

# package is named "scikit-learn" on PyPI, but imported as "sklearn"
from sklearn.decomposition smuggle PCA  # pip: scikit-learn
```

However, the most powerful use of the onion comment is making smuggle statements version-sensitive. If an onion comment includes a version specifier [4], davos will ensure that the version of the package loaded into the notebook matches the specific version requested, or satisfies the given version constraints. If the smuggled package exists locally, davos will extract its version info from its metadata and compare it to the specifier provided. If the two are incompatible (or no local installation is found), davos will install and load a suitable version of the package instead:

```
# specifically use matplotlib v3.4.2, pip-installing it if needed
smuggle matplotlib.pyplot as plt # pip: matplotlib==3.4.2

# use a version of seaborn no older than v0.9.1, but before v0.11
smuggle seaborn as sns # pip: seaborn>=0.9.1,<0.11</pre>
```

Onion comments can also be used to smuggle specific VCS references (e.g., Git [16] branches, commits, tags, etc.):

```
# use quail as the package existed on GitHub at commit 6c847a4
smuggle quail # pip: git+https://github.com/ContextLab/quail.git@6c847a4
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```

davos processes onion comments internally before forwarding arguments to the installer program. In addition to preventing onion comments from being used as a vehicle for shell injection attacks, this allows davos to take certain logical actions when particular arguments are passed. For example, the -I/-ignore-installed, -U/--upgrade, and --force-reinstall flags will all cause davos to skip searching for a smuggled package locally before installing a new copy:

```
# install hypertools v0.7 without first checking for it locally
smuggle hypertools as hyp  # pip: hypertools==0.7 --ignore-installed

# always install the latest version of requests, including pre-releases
from requests smuggle Session  # pip: requests --upgrade --pre
```

Similarly, passing --no-input will temporarily enable davos's non-interactive mode (see Section 2.2.3), and installing a smuggled package into <dir> with --target <dir> will cause dir to be prepended to the module search path (sys.path), if necessary, so the package can be imported

2.2.3. The davos config

The davos config provides a simple, high-level interface for controlling various aspects of davos's behavior. After importing davos, the davos.config object (a singleton) exposes a number of configurable options as attributes that can be assigned different values, checked at runtime, and displayed in the notebook cell output (see Fig. 4 for example usage). These include:

- .active: This option allows users to disable davos functionality (i.e., support for smuggle statements and onion comments) for subsequent notebook cells by setting its value to False. davos can be re-enabled at any time by setting this option to True (the default when davos is first imported). See Section 2.3 for additional info.
- .auto_rerun: This option controls how davos behaves when attempting to smuggle a new version of a package that was previously imported and cannot be reloaded. This can happen if the package includes extension modules that dynamically link C or C++ objects to the Python interpreter itself, and the code that generates those objects was changed between the old and new versions. If this option is set to True, davos will automatically restart the notebook kernel and rerun all code up to (and including) the current smuggle statement. If False (the deafult), davos will instead issue a warning, pause execution, and prompt the user with buttons to either restart and rerun the notebook, or continue running with the previously imported package version until the

next time the kernel is restarted manually. (Note: not configurable in Google Colaboratory).

- .confirm_install: If True (default: False), davos will require user confirmation ([y]es/[n]o input) before installing a smuggled package.
- .noninteractive: Setting this option to True (default: False) enables non-interactive mode, in which all user input and confirmation is disabled. Note that in non-interactive mode, the confirm_install option is set to False, and if auto_rerun is False, davos will throw an error if a smuggled package cannot be reloaded, rather than prompting the user.
- .pip_executable: This option's value specifies the path to the pip executable used to install smuggled packages. The default is programmatically determined from the Python environment and falls back to sys.executable -m pip if no executable can be found.
- .suppress_stdout: If True (default: False), suppress all unnecessary output issued by both davos and the installer program. This can be useful when smuggling packages that need to install many dependencies and/or generate extensive output. If the installer program throws an error, both the stdout and stderr streams will be displayed with the traceback.

The top-level davos namespace also defines a handful of convenience functions for setting and checking davos's active/inactive state (davos.activate(); davos.is_active()) as well as the davos.configure() function, which allows setting multiple config options at once.

2.3. Implementation details

Functionally, importing davos appears to make "smuggle" a valid Python keyword, similar to standard keywords like "import", "def", or "return". It also appears to fundamentally change how Python treats comments, suddenly allowing them to potentially influence code behavior at runtime if they conform to a particular syntax. However, davos doesn't actually modify the rules of Python's parser or lexical analyzer in order to accomplish this—in fact, modifying the Python grammar isn't possible at runtime, as doing so would require rebuilding the interpreter. Instead, davos leverages the IPython notebook backend to implement the smuggle statement and onion comment via a combination of namespace injections and its own (far simpler) custom parser.

The smuggle keyword can be enabled and disabled at any time by "activating" and "deactivating" davos (see Section 2.2.3, above). When davos is first imported, it is activated automatically. Activating davos triggers two actions: (1) the smuggle() function is injected into the IPython user namespace, and (2) the davos parser is registered as a custom IPython input transformer. IPython preprocesses all executed code as plain text before it is sent to the Python compiler, in order to handle special constructs like "magic and !shell commands. davos hooks into this process to transform smuggle statements into syntactically valid Python code. The davos parser uses a complex regular expression [17] to match lines of code containing smuggle statements (and, optionally, onion comments), extract relevant information from their text, and replace them with equivalent calls to the smuggle() function. For example, if a user runs a notebook cell containing

```
smuggle numpy as np # pip: numpy>1.16,<=1.20 -vv</pre>
```

the code that is actually executed by the Python interpreter would be

The call to the <code>smuggle()</code> function then carries out <code>davos</code>'s central logic of determining whether the smuggled package should be installed, doing so if necessary, and subsequently loading it into the namespace. This process is outlined in Figure 3. Because the <code>smuggle()</code> function is defined in the notebook namespace, it is also possible (though never necessary) to call it directly. Deactivating <code>davos</code> will delete the name "<code>smuggle</code>" from the namespace, unless its value has been overwritten and no longer refers to the <code>smuggle()</code> function. It will also deregister the <code>davos</code> parser from the set of input transformers run when each notebook cell is executed. While the overhead added by the <code>davos</code> parser is minimal, this may be useful, for example, when optimizing or precisely profiling code.

3. Illustrative Examples

Figure 4 illustrates how one might use davos in a real-world setting to facilitate reproducible data analyses. In this scenario, a user has acquired a dataset and pre-trained semantic model (possibly shared by a collaborator, or downloaded from a public repository) with which they want to run a set

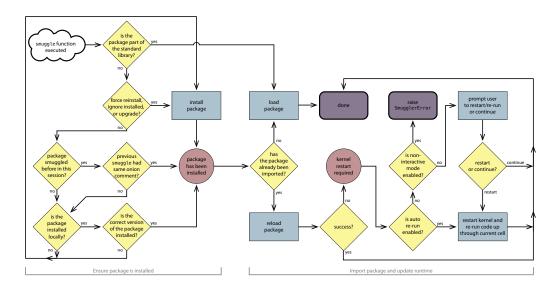


Figure 3: smuggle() function logic.

of analyses in an IPython notebook. The hypothetical dataset (a pandas [18] DataFrame) and model (a scikit-learn [19] Pipeline) were created and saved using the latest versions of each package available in December 2019 and, due to their age and the formats in which they were provided, now pose certain challenges to loading and using them. The code in Figure 4 would be included at the top of the user's analysis notebook, and demonstrates how davos enables them to overcome these issues cleanly and efficiently, while simultaneously constructing a reproducible Python environment that ensures their analyses are always run under the same conditions, both by the user themselves and anyone with whom they share their code.

After importing davos (line 1),

Line 7 then enables davos's auto_rerun option, as the next two packages

4. Impact

Like virtual environments, containers, and virtual machines, the davos library (when used in conjunction with Jupyter notebooks) provides a light-weight mechanism for sharing code and ensuring reproducibility across users and computing environments (Fig. 1). Further, davos enables users to fully specify (and install, as needed) any project dependencies within the same notebook. This provides a system whereby executable code (along with text and media) and code for setting up and configuring the project dependencies, may be combined within a single notebook file.

We designed davos for use in research applications. For example, in many

```
import davos
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3
    from os.path smuggle is_file
    smuggle joblib
    from tqdm.notebook smuggle tqdm
                                        # pip: tqdm==4.62.3
    davos.config.auto_rerun = True
7
8
    smuggle numpy as np
                                          # pip: numpy==1.21.6
9
    if not is_file("~/datasets/data-new.csv"):
10
11
      smuggle pandas as pd
                                        # pip: pandas<1.0</pre>
       tmp_data = pd.read_pickle("~/datasets/data-old.p")
12
        tmp_data.to_csv("~/datasets/data-new.csv")
13
14
15
    smuggle pandas as pd
                                          # pip: pandas==1.3.5
16
17
    davos.configure(auto_rerun=False, suppress_stdout=True, noninteractive=True)
                               # pip: tensorflow==2.9.2
    smuggle tensorflow as tf
19
    smuggle hypertools as hyp
                                        # pip: hypertools==0.8.0
    davos.configure(suppress_stdout=False, noninteractive=False)
20
21
    smuggle matplotlib.pyplot as plt
22
                                         # pip: matplotlib==3.5.3
23
    smuggle seaborn as sns
                                          # pip: seaborn==0.12.1
24
    if davos.config.environment != "Colaboratory":
        davos.config.pip_executable = "~/envs/nb-server/bin/pip"
26
27
        smuggle widgetsnbextension as _ # pip: widgetsnbextension==3.5.2
        davos.config.pip_executable = "~/envs/nb-kernel/bin/pip"
28
        smuggle ipywidgets
                                         # pip: ipywidgets==7.6.5
29
30
31
    data = pd.read_csv("~/datasets/data-new.csv")
32
33
                                          # pip: scikit-learn==0.22.0 --no-use-pep517
    smuggle sklearn
    transformer = joblib.load("~/models/text-transformer.joblib")
34
    smuggle sklearn
                                          # pip: scikit-learn==1.1.3
```

Figure 4: Example use case for davos's functionality.

settings, davos may be used as a drop-in replacement for more-difficult-to-set-up virtual environments, containers, and/or virtual machines. For researchers, this lowers barriers to both sharing code. By eliminating most of the setup costs of reconstructing the original researchers' computing environment, davos also lowers barriers to entry for members of the scientific community and the public who seek to benefit from shared code.

Beyond research applications, davos is also useful in pedagogical settings. For example, in programming courses, instructors and students may import the davos library into their notebooks to provide a simple means of ensuring their code will run on others' machines. When combined with online notebook-based platforms like Google Colaboratory, davos provides a convenient way to manage dependencies within a notebook, without requiring any software (beyond a web browser) to be installed on the students' or instructors' systems. For the same reasons, davos also provides an elegant means of sharing ready-to-run notebook-based demonstrations or tutorials that install their dependencies automatically.

Since its initial release, davos has found use in a variety of applications. In addition to managing computing environments for multiple ongoing research studies, davos is being used by both students and instructors in programming and methods courses such as Storytelling with Data [20] (an open course on data science, visualization, and communication) and Laboratory in Psychological Science [21] (an open course on experimental and statistical methods for psychology research) to simplify distributing lessons and submitting assignments, as well as in online demos such as abstract2paper [22] (an example application of GPT-Neo [23, 24]) to share ready-to-run code that installs dependencies automatically.

Our work also has several more subtle "advanced" use cases and potential impacts. Whereas Python's built-in import statement is agnostic to packages' version information, smuggle statements (when combined with onion comments) are version-sensitive. And because onion comments are parsed at runtime, required packages and their specified versions are installed in a just-in-time manner. Thus, it is possible in most cases to smuggle a specific package version or revision even if a different version has already been loaded. This enables more complex uses that take advantage of multiple versions of a package within a single interpreter session. This could be useful in cases where specific features are added or removed from a package across different versions, or in comparing the performance or functionality of particular features across different versions of the same package.

A second advanced use case is in providing a proof-of-concept of how one can add new "keyword-like" operators to the Python language by leveraging notebooks' error-handling mechanisms. This could lead to exciting new

tools that, like davos, extend the Python language in useful ways within 295 notebook-based environments. We note that our approach to adding the 296 smuggle keyword to Python when davos is imported into a notebook-based 297 environment also has the potential to be exploited for more nefarious pur-298 poses. For example, a malicious user could use a similar approach (e.g., 299 in a different library) to substantially change a notebook's functionality by 300 adding new unexpected keyword-like objects (e.g., based around common ty-301 pos). This could lead to difficult-to-predict changes in a notebook's behavior 302 once the malicious library was imported. This highlights an important rea-303 son why security-conscious users would be well-served to only make use of 304 libraries from trusted sources, or whose code is publicly available for review.

5. Conclusions 306

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The davos library supports reproducible research by providing a novel lightweight system for sharing notebook-based code. But perhaps the most 308 exciting uses of the davos library are those that we have not yet considered or imagined. We hope that the Python community will find davos to provide a convenient means of managing project dependencies to facilitate code sharing. We also hope that some of the more advanced applications of our library might lead to new insights or discoveries.

Author Contributions 314

Paxton C. Fitzpatrick: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, 315 Validation, Writing - Original Draft, Visualization. **Jeremy R. Manning**: 316 Conceptualization, Resources, Validation, Writing - Review & Editing, Su-317 pervision, Funding acquisition. 318

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Declaration of Competing Interest 323

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