

Emergent Storytelling in Sandbox Games for *Old Trail*

RimWorld: AI Storytellers and Emergent Colony Drama

RimWorld is often described as a “**story generator**” – a colony sim where narrative emerges from complex systems rather than a scripted plot ¹ ². At its heart is the **AI Storyteller**, an algorithmic “game master” that tailors events (raids, disasters, trader visits, etc.) based on your colony’s state and a chosen style (e.g. Cassandra Classic for steady challenge, Randy Random for chaotic surprises) ¹. This ensures no two games unfold the same way, balancing player progress with unpredictable twists. For example, a minor incident like one colonist getting injured can snowball into a supply crisis, a morale collapse, and possibly the colony’s downfall – *all driven by the Storyteller layering challenges* ³. The Storyteller even adjusts to keep the drama going: if you’re on the brink of losing everyone, it might ease off or send help, since **the goal is tension and recovery, not a quick game-over** ⁴. In creator Tynan Sylvester’s words, “The game tries to hurt but not kill the colony... not just cut off the story, but let the spiral down into death play out over a long dramatic arc” ⁴.

Colonists (Pawns) in RimWorld have rich character properties that drive emergent behavior. Each is generated with a **backstory** (e.g. “Pop Idol” or “Civil War Medic”) and a set of **traits** that impact their stats and AI decisions ⁵. Traits inject personality: a **Pyromaniac** doctor might save lives one day but then randomly set fire to the base during a mental breakdown ⁵. A *Cannibal* gets a mood boost from eating human flesh (and will gladly do so), whereas a *Kind* pawn will refuse brutal actions. These traits aren’t just flavor – they cause unique behaviors and can conflict in darkly funny ways (like a pacifist who panics during every fight). **Needs and Mood** form another layer: pawns track hunger, rest, comfort, space, etc., and especially their **mood meter**. If morale drops too low (perhaps due to starvation, witnessing death, or even an ugly environment), a pawn may reach a “**mental break**” threshold and go berserk, binge on food, or wander in a daze. These unscripted mental breaks often create mini-stories (the depressed cook who sets all the food on fire, the stressed-out farmer who decides to go on a solo gold rush and abandons camp for a week). The key is that **individual AI simulation – of needs, mental states, health injuries – leads to unpredictable challenges** the player must react to ⁶.

Social relationships in RimWorld also fuel emergent storytelling. Every colonist has a **Social tab** tracking opinions of others, family ties, and relationships (friends, rivals, lovers, exes) ⁷. These values change through day-to-day interactions – colonists chat (gaining a bit of goodwill) or insult each other (leading to resentment) ⁷ ⁸. If someone’s opinion of another falls too low, they can even start a **social fight** on the spot, trading punches over an insult ⁷. Such brawls are out of the player’s control (similar to a mini “mental break”) and can result in injuries or lasting grudges ⁹ ¹⁰. On the flip side, high mutual opinion is needed for romance; pawns might flirt and become lovers or spouses if they get along well ⁷. This system creates soap-opera drama in your colony: a love triangle can spark jealous fights, or a husband falls into despair if his wife dies. Notably, pawns can even have **pre-existing relations** when generated (like arriving as siblings or former rivals), which instantly gives a narrative context to their teamwork or squabbles ². **Small groups with deep simulation** yield these personal story beats – RimWorld only gives you a handful

of characters, but that makes each relationship feel significant ². (See image below for an example of RimWorld's Social relationship tab, showing how one pawn views their allies and rivals.)



RimWorld's Social tab for a colonist, displaying their relationships and opinion values of others. Low opinions can trigger fights, while high opinions enable romances ⁷. Traits like "Beautiful" or "Ugly" also affect first impressions, adding more unpredictability ¹¹ ¹².

Another major ingredient is **event interaction and overlapping systems**. Events in RimWorld are designed to sometimes **happen simultaneously or consecutively in dramatic ways**. Sylvester notes that many incidents last for days – *toxic fallout* blanketing the map, *wildfires* spreading, or a *siege* by raiders ¹³. This allows crazy combinations: *What if traders arrive during a raid siege?* Or *man-eating wolves attack while a fire rages?* The game deliberately lets events collide, because **the richest stories emerge when crises compound and force creative problem-solving** ¹³. Players often share anecdotes of these cascades – e.g. a colonist losing an arm to a raider, then getting an infection during a volcanic winter, leading the player's best medic (who was also the injured colonist's lover) into a despairing mental break that further endangers the colony. None of this is pre-written; it's the *systems* (health, weather, AI storyteller, relationships) interlocking in an unforeseen way. In short, **RimWorld's narrative genius lies in its systems-driven approach**: an "intelligent AI storyteller" throwing curveballs, detailed pawn personalities (needs, traits, social bonds) determining how those curveballs play out, and a design that encourages "stories" to form through conflict, failure, and triumph ¹⁴ ¹⁵. It's a model example of emergent storytelling in games.

Adapting RimWorld's Approach to Old Trail

Designing *Old Trail* – a wagon-party survival sandbox – to generate similar rich stories means translating those colony sim mechanics into a **westward journey context**. The player will control a party of 1–6 settlers

rather than a stationary colony, but we can still employ **procedural character generation, AI-driven behavior, and dynamic events** akin to RimWorld:

- **Procedural Characters with Quirks:** Each run should begin by creating a set of unique pioneers, each with **stats, backstories, and odd traits**. For example, a character might be a *former Gunslinger* (backstory: +shooting skill, feared by NPCs), or an *Ex-Missionary* (bonus to negotiation with religious factions, but “Incapable of Violence” like RimWorld’s noncombatant trait). We can introduce era-appropriate skills such as Marksmanship, Survival (for foraging/hunting), Medicine, Animal Handling, Navigation, Trade, etc., mapped to the needs of an Oregon Trail journey. **Backstories** provide both flavor and gameplay modifiers – e.g. a “**Runaway Scientist**” might start with knowledge of chemistry (crafting weird tonics) and a strange gadget, whereas a “**Barnum’s Circus Performer**” could have high charisma and an exotic pet. *Old Trail* can dial up the bizarre with backstories like “Lost Time Traveler” or “UFO Crash Survivor” to fit the alternate-history theme. **Traits** will further personalize behavior: traditional ones (Brave, Cowardly, Optimist, Quick-Tempered, Lazy) mixed with surreal ones (e.g. “Telepathic” or “Cursed by Ghosts”). A **Greedy** settler might secretly pocket gold from the group’s stash; a **Nudist** (why not in 1840s?) gets a happiness boost when unencumbered by clothes; a **Pyromaniac** could feel compelled to set campfires alight at the worst times (just as in RimWorld) ⁵. The procedural generator should also assign **relationships** among party members at the start – maybe two are spouses, or an old Civil War buddy pair, or a parent and teenage child traveling together. These pre-existing bonds imbue early decisions with more meaning (you’d risk more to save your character’s sister, for example) ². And of course, starting **equipment** varies by character: the ex-gunslinger carries a trusty revolver, the homesteader has farming tools and a hardy mule, the time-traveler might possess a mysterious future device (with unpredictable uses). The idea is that **every party is a grab-bag of personalities and tools** that will interact in unpredictable ways as hardships hit.
- **AI Logic for Camp Life and Crisis Management:** While the player will issue high-level commands (when to travel vs. rest, which route to take, etc.), *Old Trail* can borrow RimWorld’s **AI work scheduler** concept for camp activities. When you make camp, your settlers’ AI can autonomously handle chores based on priorities or traits: one person might **hunt** nearby game, another **gathers firewood** or **cooks** dinner, the doctor tends to the injured, etc., without the player micromanaging every action. This autonomous behavior leads to storytelling – e.g. the lazy character might shirk work and goof off, annoying the others, or two characters might collaborate on a task and form a friendship out of it. **Reactions to stress and morale** should similarly be automated in flavorful ways. Each character would have a **Morale (Mood) meter** influenced by factors like hunger, tiredness, weather exposure, interpersonal tensions, and weird events encountered. If morale drops too low, instead of RimWorld’s “mental break” we might call it a “**Meltdown**”: the character could refuse to continue marching, start an argument or fistfight, or indulge in a vice (e.g. drinking up precious whiskey rations) – whatever fits their traits. For instance, a settler with the “**Volatile**” trait might lash out and physically fight a comrade over a small insult if they’re already on edge ⁷ ⁹. A “**Melancholic**” trait character might become despondent and unable to perform tasks for a day, or *in game terms* gain a temporary stat debuff after a traumatic event. These AI-driven responses mean the player must deal with internal group drama in addition to external threats, much like managing RimWorld colonists’ mental breaks.

The party’s **AI should also handle emergencies sensibly (most of the time)**. If someone falls ill or breaks a leg, your best medic should *try* to treat them; if the wagon catches fire, anyone with the *Firefighting* ability

will attempt to douse it (though the resident Pyromaniac might perversely ignore the fire – or even revel in it!). When danger strikes – say a **bandit ambush** – characters’ AI can exhibit **fight-or-flight** based on their traits and courage: your bravest or most aggressive member will return fire, the coward might dive for cover or even run into the woods. These unscripted behaviors can lead to tense and funny moments (picture a cowardly settler *literally* running off and you have to decide whether to chase them or finish the fight). After the dust settles, **characters remember what happened**: *Old Trail* can model a simple **“memory” or opinion effect** similar to RimWorld’s thoughts. For example, “X saved my life in that bandit raid” could give X and Y a lasting friendship boost, whereas “Y fled and left me to fight alone” gives a bitterness penalty. Over time, such memories shape relationships organically, creating either a tight-knit crew or a powder keg of resentments depending on player decisions and AI actions.

- **Emergent Social Drama on the Trail**: Just as RimWorld’s colonists gossip, bond, and feud, our wagon party members will **socialize and occasionally clash** during the long journey. We should encourage campfire conversations and random banter events among party members – these can be simple text vignettes that pop up during travel or rest, indicating two characters chatted about something (and perhaps adjusting their mutual relationship value). Some will be positive (discovering common interests, telling jokes, singing together) and some negative (an argument over how to pack the wagon, a political disagreement, or an insult about someone’s personal habit) ⁸ ¹⁶ . These little interactions add up, so that when a major crisis hits, you have context: *“Of course it was Jack and Diane who ended up brawling during the mutant wolf attack – they’ve been sniping at each other for days!”*

We can design explicit **social events** to trigger under certain conditions, representing **major drama moments** in the party. For example, if food is critically low and one character has the **Greedy** trait, an event might fire where that character is caught stealing rations. The player then must choose how to handle it – e.g. punish them (which could turn them resentful or even violent), forgive and ration remaining food, or maybe another party member intervenes. Similarly, **leadership struggles** could arise: if the designated leader has made a string of bad calls (multiple injuries, getting lost, etc.), a bold character with high Charisma might challenge their authority. This could be an emergent consequence of morale plus a trait like **“Ambitious”** or **“Natural Leader”** on another character. The outcome might split the party’s loyalty or force the player to side with one approach. **Romance** is another driver of emergent narrative – over weeks on the trail, two characters might fall in love (triggering a small cutscene of them confiding feelings). This can yield positive buffs (happiness, an extra reason to stay alive) but also risks **jealousy** if a third person was close to one of them. Indeed, love triangles or unrequited love could lead to anything from a comedic rivalry to a deadly duel at high noon. We should allow the extremes: maybe a jilted lover trait (akin to RimWorld’s “Ex-Lover” relationship) causes frequent arguments or even a betrayal at a key moment. **Betrayal** events fit perfectly in a frontier setting – a party member might secretly be in cahoots with bandits or a cult, and at some point tries to sabotage the mission (stealing the wagon at night, or poisoning the water). Whether this triggers likely depends on prior factors (e.g. that character’s mood, their relationships, perhaps an external bribe from a faction). The important design lesson from games like RimWorld and Crusader Kings is to **let character dynamics play out systemically**: give them motives and personality, then set conditions where those motives clash. A simple example: two settlers both have the **“Hot-Headed”** trait and low mutual respect – eventually, a minor incident will ignite a **fight** between them (with fists or even weapons). The player then has an emergent problem: a member might be injured by their own comrade, and the group’s cohesion is shaken.

In summary, *Old Trail* should treat the wagon party as a **traveling mini-society**, much like a tiny RimWorld colony on wheels. Each person has unique strengths and baggage, and the game’s AI and event systems

continually “poke” these characters to see how they’ll react. By combining **procedural character generation** with **AI-driven task and mood systems** and **relationship dynamics**, the game will naturally produce comedic, dramatic, and bizarre stories on the journey west.

Dynamic Event Chains and Mythic Encounters

One-off random events are fun, but to really capture a narrative feel we’ll design **event chains** – sequences of related encounters that unfold based on player choice and chance. This approach is inspired by how Crusader Kings weaves stories: separate events can **“dovetail” into a larger plot if the same characters or themes are involved** ¹⁷. In *Old Trail*, with its surreal alternate-history setting, we have license to create some truly wild event chains that span hundreds of miles of travel. Here’s how we can structure dynamic events and mythic encounters:

- **Cause and Effect Across Time:** Certain events will set **flags/variables** that lead to follow-ups later. For example, early on the party might stumble upon a **crashed UFO site** – a smoking crater with strange metal debris. If the player decides to investigate and salvage a mysterious alien device, that choice triggers future possibilities: hours or days later, an event might occur where the device “activates,” attracting creatures or alerting a secret government faction. Alternatively, if the player left the crash alone, perhaps nothing happens immediately...but unbeknownst to them, a competing group (like a cult) retrieves it, and *they* might trouble the party down the road. The key is that **outcomes of one encounter reverberate**. Another example: imagine an event called **“The Cursed Burial Ground.”** The party can either pay respects and move on, or disturb it by looting valuables. If they loot, a curse might be marked on one character (flagged as “cursed”) – subsequently, that character could start suffering weird nightmares, and later the whole party might get ambushed by undead or an angry spirit seeking vengeance. But if they did the respectful thing, a later event might *reward* them, like a ghost of a pioneer appearing to guide them safely through a storm (a blessing for their kindness). These sorts of chains turn isolated events into **emergent story arcs** that give the player a sense of progression beyond just traveling distance.
- **Multi-Stage “Quests”:** Some mythic encounters can be designed almost like short quests that generate dynamically. Take the idea of a **rogue time traveler** in the Oregon Trail. The party meets a frantic man in odd clothing who rants that he’s from the future and needs help repairing his “time device” – this is stage 1, a strange request. The player decides whether to help gather some rare materials (maybe “Harvest lightning in a bottle” or find a specific mineral at the next landmark). If they succeed, stage 2 occurs: the time traveler opens a small time rift to test his device... which accidentally causes one of your party members to vanish (pulled into another time!). Now a new problem arises: perhaps a few days later (stage 3), a portal opens and your missing member returns, but aged significantly or with some futuristic modification (e.g. a cybernetic arm), along with an angry time-police agent following them. The chain could resolve in a number of ways depending on choices (fight the time agent, flee, or convince the traveler to fix things). The idea is **to escalate a single quirky premise into a series of events** that tell a memorable tale. We can keep these chains semi-rare and modular, so each playthrough maybe sees one or two multi-stage stories among many simpler events.
- **Mixing Randomness with Scripted Story Bits:** Following Paradox’s approach with Crusader Kings, we should let **random chance spice up scripted sequences** ¹⁷. For instance, the outcome of that time traveler’s experiment could have several variants (who gets pulled into the rift, what comes out)

decided by randomness or character stats. This ensures even if a player encounters the “same” chain in another run, it can play out differently. In *Crusader Kings*, a famous emergent story had a player’s daughter revealed as the spawn of Satan, who then mysteriously started killing her siblings – this emerged from two separate event chains coincidentally aligning ¹⁸. We can emulate this by **allowing overlap**: if two event chains involve the same character or theme, they might intersect. Suppose one of your settlers is secretly a werewolf (trait gained from a “Bite in the Night” event), and later you enter a “Blood Moon” event – that character might then transform and become the very creature you must deal with in the Blood Moon encounter, rather than a random external werewolf. By detecting these conditions, the game creates a “wow” moment that feels like a cohesive plot, when in reality it was emergent from **systemic combination** of events and traits.

- **Mythic and Surreal Encounters:** The *Oregon Trail* setting gives us a backbone of classic survival events (river crossings, wagon breakdowns, disease, supply shortages) which we’ll absolutely include. But what will set *Old Trail* apart is injecting **legendary creatures, supernatural happenings, and sci-fi oddities** into that framework. We should craft a rich table of mythic encounters that can occur in appropriate regions or times. Some ideas:
- **Legendary Beast Hunts:** Perhaps in the high mountains, there’s a chance of encountering **Bigfoot** (or a “Mountain Yeti”). The event might begin with finding enormous footprints around your camp. If the party chooses to track it, they enter a mini scenario of either hunting the creature or being ambushed by it. Success could yield a pelt with magical properties; failure might mean injuries or a member dragged away. Similarly, desert areas might have a **Chupacabra** stalking your livestock at night, or the plains could have a ghostly **Thunderbird** sighting that terrifies the oxen.
- **Weird Towns & Cults:** Now and then, the party might arrive at what appears to be a normal frontier town – except something is *off*. For example, **Prosperity** is a town where nobody eats (they all smile and insist they’re “full”...turns out they are feeding on an alien power source buried under the town). Or a settlement where an eerie cult has taken over, like the **Church of the Open Eye** that welcomes you warmly only to try to indoctrinate (or sacrifice) your group. These could be multi-part events: first the social visit, then discovering the danger, then deciding whether to escape or fight. The **cult** storyline might recur; if you anger them, cultists could stalk you later on the trail.
- **Supernatural Weather/Phenomena:** We can spice up the usual weather events with paranormal twists. Instead of just a thunderstorm, how about a “**Frog Rain**” event (it literally rains bizarre flopping frogs, referencing the biblical plague or X-Files-esque weirdness)? This could affect morale or attract predators. A **full lunar eclipse** might trigger restless dead to rise from shallow graves at a nearby battlefield site (surprise, a zombie skirmish!). A **will-o’-wisp** light could lead the party off-path at night towards either a helpful shortcut or straight into danger, depending on a random roll or some character’s lore skill.
- **Treasure and Time Warps:** The frontier loves a good treasure hunt. One event could be finding a tattered journal of a Spanish Conquistador pointing to a “cursed gold” location. If the party detours to seek it, they might face a series of tests (traps in an Aztec ruin? a guardian spirit?). If they succeed, perhaps they really do get gold – but anyone who takes it is now cursed (leading to later misfortunes). **Time rifts** can be especially surreal: you might camp in a valley where time is distorted – the party wakes up and finds a week has passed in one night, or they encounter dinosaurs or ancient natives from centuries past due to a temporal flux. These one-off events emphasize the “*alternate history*” vibe and give players wild tales to remember.

Designing these encounters, we must keep things **dynamic and replayable**. We’ll utilize **random triggers** (some games one event appears, other times not), **branching outcomes** based on choices or character

abilities, and a healthy dose of **the unexpected**. We also ensure that events tie back into gameplay: mythic encounters can grant special items (alien tech, enchanted talismans) or impose challenges (curses, enemies) that persist. By chaining events into arcs and letting them influence each other, *Old Trail* will feel like you're **writing your own bizarre western saga** as you go – much like how a game of Crusader Kings or King of Dragon Pass produces a narrative tapestry from a series of smaller threads ¹⁷ ¹⁹ .

Replayability and Chaos: Systems for a Unique Journey Every Time

One of the joys of sandbox narrative games is *replayability* – the sense that each run is a new story with new challenges. *Old Trail* should embrace **procedural generation and world state randomization** to keep the experience fresh and chaotic (in a fun way). Here are key systems to maximize replay value:

- **Randomized Trail and Map:** Although the broad route follows the Oregon Trail's real landmarks, we can randomize the specifics of the map each playthrough. The distances between forts, the locations of rivers or mountain passes, and the weather patterns could all be generated. Perhaps one playthrough you face an extra long desert section with scarce water, while another time the route detours north into colder climates. The **biomes** you traverse might shuffle – e.g. sometimes you hit a vast enchanted forest (with its own events) that simply wasn't there in another timeline. RimWorld uses **procedurally generated worlds and biomes** to change survival conditions each game ²⁰ ; *Old Trail* can do the same on a continental scale (within alternate-history plausibility!). Additionally, **resource placement** (where wild herds roam, where berry patches or herb medicinal plants grow) should be random, so you can't always rely on "there's always hunting in area X" – you'll have to scout anew each time.
- **Dynamic Faction Presence:** We'll design a variety of **factions and NPC groups** (e.g. bandit gangs, trading caravans, native tribes, traveling carnivals, secret government agencies, cults, etc.), but not all of them appear every game. At world generation, the game can **roll which factions are active** and how powerful they are. Maybe in one run, the "Dust Devil Gang" of outlaws is terrorizing the plains, while in the next they don't exist but a rival group does. Some factions might always exist but have *randomized attitudes*: that tribe you meet might be friendly in one timeline (willing to trade and help) but in another, something happened that made them distrust settlers, leading to potential conflict. This way players can't predict exactly who they'll run into. Crusader Kings' landscape of ever-shifting kingdoms is analogous – each playthrough, the map's politics evolve differently, which in our case translates to **different power dynamics on the frontier**.
- **World Modifiers & Weirdness Sliders:** To really amp up the alternate history chaos, we could implement **world modifiers** or scenario toggles at the start of a game. For instance, a slider for "Weirdness Level" could determine how frequently surreal events occur. At low weirdness, the game is closer to realistic Oregon Trail with an occasional tall tale; at high, you're in full **Deadlands**-style supernatural west. Other modifiers might include "Alien Influence High/Low" (affecting how common UFO/alien events are) or "Magic Aura Present/Absent" for mythic creatures frequency. These essentially change the **seed conditions** of the world. We can also randomize one major world condition per game: e.g. one playthrough might have an ongoing **"Mutant Uprising"** (a failed science experiment at a military fort unleashed mutants that roam certain areas), another might have a **"Eternal Winter"** year (snowy conditions all the way, making survival tougher and bringing out different events). By informing the player of a unique world modifier at the start, we set the stage for that run's special theme – and combined with everything else, it will produce distinct

storytelling. This is similar to how some roguelikes or strategy games have random world parameters (like *Civilization* map scripts or *RimWorld*'s choice of storyteller and seed that lead to different experiences ¹ ²¹).

- **Embracing Chaotic Event Overlap:** As discussed earlier, allowing multiple events to hit at once can create unexpected scenarios. *Old Trail* should not be afraid to throw overlapping challenges, especially for higher difficulties or as the journey progresses. Imagine the chaos (and dark humor) of your wagon axle breaking **during** a zombie attack at the same time a thunderstorm breaks out. You can't script that—that's pure emergent mayhem. But the system can facilitate it: certain events can be flagged as able to co-occur. We'll just ensure that the player isn't completely overwhelmed without recourse; much like *RimWorld*'s storyteller eases off after extreme trials ⁴ , *Old Trail* could have a behind-the-scenes "pity timer" to not stack too many catastrophes in a row unless you're doing relatively well. Still, **some of the best stories come from unlikely combinations**, so the more modular and combinable our events are, the better. Players will talk about "that time the cultists attacked us in the middle of a sandstorm and then wolves showed up" for years.
- **Persistent Consequences and Adaptation:** To enhance replay narratives, ensure that **player choices have lasting effects** that carry forward to new regions. If you ally with a faction (say you befriend a hidden community of scientists in one game), maybe on that run you'll get access to their help/trade later. In a different run you might have alienated them or they never spawned – completely different outcome. *King of Dragon Pass* was great at making earlier decisions affect later random events in subtle ways (characters remembering your past actions, later events referencing earlier ones) ¹⁹ . We can employ a similar *event memory* system: keep a log of notable actions (e.g. "you helped the Snake Oil Merchant" flag), and weave those into future encounters. This not only increases coherence in one run, but also pushes replay because players will want to see alternate timelines where they *didn't* take that action.
- **No Victory the Same:** Finally, consider multiple **endgame variants**. The classic *Oregon Trail* goal is to reach Oregon alive. In *Old Trail*, perhaps there are a few different "finales" depending on what happened: you might arrive and decide to settle down peacefully (if everything is normal-ish), or maybe you end up taking over a frontier town and ruling it (if you leaned into a conquest/leadership path), or you actually repair that UFO and fly to another planet – who knows! The existence of different endings, or epilogues for each character (much like *Crusader Kings* gives each character a story summary when they die, or *Dwarf Fortress* legends mode generates history), will encourage players to replay to see new outcomes. And because the journey is system-driven, **the journey itself is the reward** – even if you fail halfway, the stories that emerged are your "score". (*Dwarf Fortress* famously says, "*Losing is fun!*", highlighting that a chaotic failure can be as entertaining as a victory.)

By implementing these systems, *Old Trail* will have **extreme replayability**. Players will experience a different alternate-history West each time – today a steampunk zombie cowboy saga, tomorrow a cosmic horror on the plains, next a relatively historical trek with one or two X-Files moments. The combination of **procedural world elements, varying factions, random events, and adaptive storytelling** ensures longevity. Crucially, it provides the **"one more run"** appeal: you finish a game and immediately imagine all the *hilariously different* things that could happen on the next journey.

Lessons from Other Emergent Narrative Systems

We've drawn a lot from RimWorld, but there's a wealth of inspiration in how other games generate emergent stories. *Old Trail* can borrow and adapt lessons from these classics:

- **Dwarf Fortress – Deep Simulation, Every Detail a Story:** Dwarf Fortress is the progenitor of emergent narrative in gaming. It builds a massive simulated world with rich detail – every dwarf has a personality, preferences, and a long memory; the environment runs on complex physics and ecology. The result is often wild, **absurd chain reactions** that players interpret as stories. For example, in one tale a dwarf got flung by a closing drawbridge, hit the ceiling, and died – then returned as a vengeful ghost haunting the fortress, while his loyal pet dog kept following the ghost around. The players eventually built a shrine to honor them ²². This isn't a scripted quest; it's just the game's logic (momentum physics, ghost spawning from unburied dead, pet AI) creating a touching (and darkly funny) narrative. Another player ignored warnings of digging into damp rock and accidentally flooded their fortress; a **year later**, during an orc siege, the water they'd diverted came back to literally wash the invaders away ²³. **Lesson for Old Trail:** Embrace simulation depth where feasible. Small details – like individual injuries (a lost arm affecting someone's capabilities), or persistent environmental effects (mud from rain slowing the wagon) – can compound to form unique stories. *Old Trail* might not reach DF's insane complexity, but the philosophy “simulate to generate narrative” is key. Even failure should be interesting: a string of bad decisions leading to a Donner Party situation (cannibalism, madness) should be horrifying *but memorable*. As Dwarf Fortress shows, players often cherish the narrative of downfall as much as success, provided it was *their story*. So, we should not shy away from letting the simulation create tragic or weird outcomes. The game's job is to give enough context for players to connect the dots. DF players use their imagination to explain *why* something happened (apophenia – humans seeing patterns in chaos ²⁴); *Old Trail* should likewise provide rich fodder for the player's imagination through its systems.

- **Crusader Kings – Characters, Relationships, and Drama:** Crusader Kings (especially CK2 and CK3) turned grand strategy into a personal story generator by focusing on **people and their relationships**. Every noble has traits (Just, Cruel, Lunatic, etc.), desires, secrets, and a family. The emergent stories feel like a medieval soap opera: a virtuous king's wife betrays him with his brother, a son plots to kill his father for the throne, a courtier turns out to worship Satan and curses the lineage. These arise from the interplay of **trait-driven events and relationship webs**. Notably, CK3 introduced a **stress system**: if you force your character to act against their personality (say a compassionate character executes someone), they gain stress, which can lead to mental breaks – very similar to RimWorld's mood breaks but in a feudal drama context ²⁵ ²⁶. CK is often lauded as “a machine for emergent storytelling. It generates drama out of simple interactions: a cousin with a claim, a secret lover, a heretic vassal... These aren't quests, these are your life.” ²⁷. The takeaway for us is the importance of **interpersonal narratives**. *Old Trail* can emulate this by investing in the **backstories and relationships of our party members** (and even NPCs they meet). We should allow characters to have secrets (maybe one is an ex-bandit in hiding, or someone is terminally ill but hasn't told the group). When events bring these to light, it feels like a plot twist but is really just emergent from character generation. We can also learn from CK's use of **random events that reference relationships** – e.g., an event might pop up that two characters in the wagon have become close friends (giving bonuses) or bitter rivals (increasing stress) based on time spent together. **Dynasty and legacy** are big in Crusader Kings; in *Old Trail*, the journey is shorter, but if the game ever spans generations (or if party members have families back East sending letters, etc.), we could incorporate

some dynastic storytelling on a smaller scale. Overall, the lesson is to treat characters not as anonymous units but as **protagonists with desires**, and to use **emergent event logic that reacts to those desires** (like a jealous character getting a special option to cause trouble when two others get married). This will yield very engaging drama.

- **King of Dragon Pass – Event-Driven Narrative and Mythic Context:** King of Dragon Pass is essentially a storytelling strategy game – it presents you with hand-crafted events where you choose an outcome, and those decisions plus some behind-the-scenes rolls determine what happens. While not as purely simulated as RimWorld or DF, KoDP achieves emergent narrative through **random selection of events and long-term consequence tracking**. It's set in a fantasy world steeped in mythology, and many events have a magical or spiritual element (omens from the gods, mythic challenges, etc.). A hallmark of KoDP is that **choices can have delayed, non-obvious effects** ¹⁹. You might agree to help a neighboring clan now and only later realize that made your own clan vulnerable to another foe – or a spirit you offended early on might cause crop failures much later. The game doesn't telegraph everything, so it feels like your clan has a genuine history of cause and effect. Also, KoDP makes heavy use of **advisors** (each with a personality and skill) who will give you advice or open up options during events. Sometimes their advice is contradictory, and you have to make a call, which invests you in the narrative. **Lesson for Old Trail:** We should incorporate a robust **event system with meaningful choices**, not just random happenstance. While our game will rely on simulation, we can still present certain scenarios in a choose-your-own-adventure style (especially for complex story moments). We should ensure some **decisions have long arcs** – e.g., deciding to mercy-kill an infected traveler now might avert immediate danger but could haunt the party's morale or reputation later. Or choosing to bargain with a mythical creature could save your party at the cost of a "debt" that must be paid at the journey's end. KoDP also shows the value of **integrating lore and magic** seamlessly: *Old Trail* can do the same by having events that draw on American folklore, tall tales, or invented alternate lore (like a mini-saga where you reenact a legend to gain a boon). And just as KoDP's clan members had skills influencing event outcomes (a wise Lawspeaker improving the outcome of a legal dispute event, for instance), our party members' stats/traits should unlock special options or influence success chances. For example, a character with a **"Mythology Expert"** trait might recognize that a weird idol you find shouldn't be touched, providing a new choice to safely neutralize it that others wouldn't have. This links the emergent character system with the event narrative system, making the story truly responsive to your unique party. In short, KoDP teaches us to blend **scripted story vignettes with emergent state**, creating a narrative that feels authored yet unique each time ¹⁹.

- **UnReal World – Survival and Atmosphere as Story:** UnReal World is a single-player survival roguelike set in Iron Age Finland – very simulation-heavy about living off the land. While it doesn't explicitly craft narrative arcs, the **minute-to-minute survival gameplay itself becomes a story**: you struggle through winter hunting deer and making fur clothes, or you get injured by a bear and must recuperate alone for weeks. It's emergent in a very grounded way, and it proves that **realistic survival mechanics and environmental interaction can be compelling narrative elements**. URW also includes NPC interaction in the form of villages and occasional quests (like a village asking you to track down an aggressive woodsman or deliver goods), which break up the solitude. The game is described as *"a unique low-fantasy roguelike... highly realistic, rich with historical atmosphere and emphasizes survival in the harsh wilderness"* ²⁸. This attention to realism and atmosphere causes players to fill in narrative: "the winter of who had to eat his beloved ox to survive" could be an emergent story from just the hunger mechanics and a tough season. **Lesson for Old Trail:** The basic

survival systems (hunting, weather, foraging, illness) shouldn't be seen as separate from the narrative – they *are* a critical part of it. *Old Trail* can increase immersion by simulating things like weather effects, animal behavior, and the physicality of travel (pace, injuries, exhaustion), much as *UnReal World* and *The Long Dark* do ²⁹ ³⁰ . When a blizzard hits and your party is forced to huddle for days eating the last hardtack, that experience becomes a story you remember. We should also incorporate **emergent survival events**: e.g., over-hunting in an area might mean later you encounter starving predators (since you killed off their food), or if you don't boil river water you might get dysentery in a couple of days (*Oregon Trail* classic!) ³¹ ³² . *UnReal World*'s subtle inclusion of low-fantasy (there are occasional supernatural elements, but rare) shows a calibrated approach – *Old Trail* will lean more into fantasy, but we can still have long stretches where it's just man vs. nature. That contrast will make the occasional surreal event pop even more. Another takeaway is **player agency in approach**: URW lets you tackle survival however you want – trap animals, fish, become a trader, etc. *Old Trail* can allow multiple strategies too (stick to main route vs. venture for side quests, trade vs. hunt, fight vs. sneak past threats). The narrative then emerges from *how* the player chooses to survive.

In summary, each of these games emphasizes different facets: *Dwarf Fortress* the power of simulation detail, *Crusader Kings* the drama of character relationships, *King of Dragon Pass* the impact of choices and integrated lore, and *UnReal World* the storytelling inherent in survival. *Old Trail* as an eclectic, comedic survival sandbox can take a page from all of them – **simulate enough to allow surprising outcomes, focus on characters to drive drama, use event choices and mythos to enrich the world, and make survival itself an engaging story.**

Surreal Oregon Trail Inspirations: Traits, Events, and World Features

To ground these ideas in concrete examples, here's a collection of **specific traits, events, and world features** that would fit *Old Trail*'s comedic alternate-history West. These illustrate how the above systems could manifest in-game:

Quirky Character Traits (Examples): The character trait pool can mix typical frontier personalities with bizarre twists. A few possibilities:

- **Time-Lost Traveler** – This character claims to be from a different time (past or future). They might occasionally spout anachronistic knowledge or references that others find odd. *Gameplay*: Small boost to a random useful skill (they've "seen things"), but sometimes causes strange occurrences (perhaps they know things they shouldn't – e.g. warning the party about an upcoming event due to "future knowledge").
- **Mutant Telepath** – Born with a mild mutant power of telepathy or foresight (thanks to that crashed UFO years ago). *Gameplay*: Rarely, they can sense danger ahead (preventing ambushes or revealing a hidden enemy on the map). However, their mind is fragile – if exposed to high stress or supernatural horrors, they suffer extra morale loss (overwhelmed by others' thoughts or paranormal feedback).
- **Alien Abductee** – Has a backstory of being abducted by aliens as a child (whether true or just their belief). They have a strange scar and occasional flashbacks. *Gameplay*: +Bonus when dealing with alien technology or beings (they feel eerily familiar with it), but occasionally will "lose time" (black

out) or behave oddly during certain moon phases, etc. Other party members might be creeped out, affecting relationships.

- **Haunted** – Followed by a personal ghost or an imaginary friend that might *not* be so imaginary. *Gameplay*: At night, the ghost may occasionally scare off lesser threats (e.g. wild animals won't approach the haunted person's watch post), offering protection. But it also unnerves companions (nearby allies get a small mood penalty, "Uneasy about James's ghostly pal"). Possibly triggers unique events (a mini-exorcism or the ghost acting up if the haunted character is upset).
- **Gold Fever** – An obsessive glint in their eye for treasure. *Gameplay*: This character gets a morale **boost** when finding gold or valuables and might randomly suggest detours to known gold panning sites. However, if the group is low on supplies and there's an opportunity for gold vs. basic needs, they'll argue in favor of chasing gold. They could even hide a gold nugget find from the party (triggering a potential later conflict if discovered).
- **Preacher of the Weird** – A fervent believer in some fringe religion or cult lore (could be a reformed member of the wilderness cult). Carries a heavy book of bizarre scriptures. *Gameplay*: They can boost party morale with sermons (especially effective if supernatural things have happened, as they "explain" it as divine tests, etc.). They also might try to convert NPCs you meet (which can go well or very badly!). In encounters with occult or demonic phenomena, the Preacher has a chance to **banish** or weaken the threat through prayer... or if they fail, their faith is shaken massively.
- **Mechanically Inclined** – (Not weird, but useful) This is your tinkerer/engineer type. *Gameplay*: Bonus to fixing the wagon, jury-rigging weapons or gadgets. In the alt-history context, maybe they tinker with alien tech or design a steam-powered coffee maker at camp. They might get upset if they don't have time to maintain equipment (a quirk could be a mood loss if the wagon is in poor repair because it offends their sensibilities).
- **Luckless (Jinxed)** – Misfortune seems to follow this person. *Gameplay*: Slightly higher chance for them to be the one bitten by a snake or to drop supplies, purely by trait-driven probability. On the bright side, if something really awful is going to happen, it tends to happen to the jinx (possibly sparing others) – e.g. if an artifact curses someone at random, it's likely them. They often survive these incidents though, almost comically, so it becomes a running gag that "Betsy fell down a ravine... and survived, again!" Their personal story is a slapstick sequence of mishaps.
- **Hero Complex** – Always needs to be the "hero" of the day. *Gameplay*: Will volunteer for every dangerous task (scouting a hostile area, testing strange devices). This can be beneficial – they'll do things others might refuse – but also they may act recklessly to save face. If someone's in trouble, they might rush out of cover to help, even when it's unwise. If they ever *fail* to save someone, their mood plummets (identity crisis).
- **Secret Identity** – This trait is hidden from the player initially (the game can have hidden traits!). Perhaps the character is *actually* a notorious outlaw in disguise, or an undercover Pinkerton agent, or even a shapeshifter replaced by a doppelgänger at some point. *Gameplay*-wise, clues might drop until eventually a scripted reveal event occurs ("John Doe's true nature is revealed when bounty hunters recognize him as the infamous Black Bart!"). After reveal, the trait gives some bonus (Outlaw: good at shooting, bad at reputation with lawmen; Shapeshifter: can take on someone else's appearance for a stealth bonus, etc.) but also new dangers (everyone's wary of them or old enemies come calling). Hidden traits add a neat uncertainty to characters – just because you made them doesn't mean you know *everything* about them!

These are just a sampling – the goal is to have dozens of possible traits, serious and silly, that interact in unpredictable ways. The emergent humor often comes from trait interactions (imagine the **Luckless Jinx** and the **Pyromaniac** being the same person – disaster!). We'll balance to avoid any trait making someone unplayable; even weird traits should have upsides or fun RP value.

Sample Dynamic Events & Encounters: Here are some concrete event ideas (and how they might branch or chain) tailored to *Old Trail's* setting:

- **Crashed UFO Encounter:** *Trigger:* Traveling through a remote prairie, you see smoke and a metallic object half-buried in the ground.

Options: Investigate the crash vs. Avoid it.

Outcomes: If you **investigate**, you find an alien survivor (injured Grey alien) and their broken ship. You get choices – **help the alien** (it gives you a strange gadget and limps away into hiding; later, Men in Black-type agents might stop you, having tracked unusual radiation to your party), or **loot the ship** while the alien is unconscious (you steal a plasma pistol but the alien dies, and you might have recurring nightmares or an “Alien Curse” trait inflicted). If you **avoid**, nothing immediate happens, but another faction could salvage it: perhaps days later you encounter a bandit group armed with a powerful alien weapon – the very consequence of letting the wrong hands get the tech. This chain ties into future combat or social events depending on that early choice.

- **The Ghost Town Duel:** *Trigger:* You arrive at dusk in a derelict frontier town (tumbleweeds, silent streets).

As you set up camp, ghostly figures materialize – two spectral cowboys pacing off for a duel (reenacting an old feud nightly).

Options: **Intervene in the ghost duel** (e.g. try to talk to them or settle their dispute), **Observe quietly**, or **Flee the town** (the safest but you miss potential loot).

Outcomes: If you intervene and have, say, a character with spiritual or diplomatic skills, you might learn each ghost's grievance and help them reconcile (one ghost holsters his gun, they shake hands and vanish in peace). This lifts the curse on the town, and a hidden cache of supplies in the saloon becomes visible in daylight for you to take. If you intervene without understanding, you might anger them – the ghosts unite to attack the “meddler,” causing a paranormal fight (perhaps only certain weapons or the Preacher's prayers can harm them). If you simply **observe**, the ghosts duel ignoring you – maybe one wins, the loser ghost dissipates. The remaining ghost sheriff thanks you for not interfering and points to a gravestone with his buried revolver (a spectral six-shooter relic) that you can claim. If you **flee**, you avoid danger but one of your party is unnerved (temporary morale penalty for being spooked). This event adds a surreal twist to a classic ghost town trope, and how you handle it can equip you with a unique item or story advantage later (a ghost gun might be especially effective against other supernatural enemies).

- **Traveling Medicine Show (Encounter Chain):** *Trigger:* On the trail, you meet Professor Abernathy's Traveling Miracle Show – a wagon full of oddities and a barker selling tonic. They offer to trade and put on a show.

Event sequence: Initially a lighthearted encounter: the show might boost party morale (free entertainment) and you can trade for “miracle tonic.” But the tonic could be dubious – later, if someone drinks it when injured, one of two things happen (50/50 or trait-influenced): it truly heals miraculously **or** it causes psychedelic side effects (character gains a short-term hallucinating condition, maybe they start seeing “future visions” that may or may not be accurate). Additionally, one of the “oddities” in the show – say a caged creature labeled *Fiji Mermaid* – escapes during the night after the encounter. In a follow-up event, that creature (maybe a small imp or chimera) starts shadowing your camp. If you befriended the Professor, he'll come back looking for it, and you can return it for a reward. If not, it might cause mischief (stealing food, etc.) until you deal with it. This

chain is mostly comedic, showcasing the weirdness of frontier snake-oil shows and letting players either benefit from or be tricked by charlatans.

- **The Ticking Mine (Decision with Consequences):** *Trigger:* In a mountain pass, you discover an abandoned gold mine with warning signs scrawled “Do Not Enter – Ticking Terror”.

Inside, there's rich ore... and possibly something else.

Choice: Do you send someone in to mine gold quickly, or heed the warning and leave?

Outcome: If you go in, you find rich gold veins (resource reward) *but also* trigger an ancient mechanism – turns out a time traveler or mad inventor left a **time bomb** here. The party member runs out as the mine collapses. Now a timer event starts: that bomb's description was “ticking terror” for a reason – somewhere ahead on the trail, at a random time, it will detonate, causing a weird temporal anomaly. Perhaps days later, reality warps: a portion of the map reverts to the Jurassic period for a while, or your party is duplicated as phantom echoes, etc. It's a chaotic consequence for greed. If you avoid the mine, you miss out on gold but also avoid the whole shenanigan; however, maybe later another group triggers it and you see a distant explosion – the difference is it's not centered on you. This demonstrates risk-reward in event choices and adds a dash of absurdity (a temporal bomb in 1850s!).

- **Faction Conflict – The Two Forts:** *Trigger:* Mid-journey, you're caught between two frontier forts (e.g. Fort Ironwood and Fort Liberty) that have an ongoing feud (one might be Union Army remnants, the other Confederate holdouts, in an alt-history scenario – or could be two rival cults, or two towns run by competing mayors, etc.).

Both sides want your support. One offers you supplies if you deliver a message to the other, but the message might contain false info or an ultimatum.

Choice: Whom do you side with? Or try to stay neutral?

Outcome: This can branch widely. If you side with Fort A, you might later get military aid from them (they send a few soldiers to help you at a tough battle), but Fort B will consider you hostile – perhaps a posse from Fort B ambushes you later. If you side with Fort B, vice versa happens. If you try to **play both sides** (sneakily), maybe you deliver the message but secretly warn the other of the coming attack – this could lead to a unique outcome where you broker a peace (unlikely, but a clever path). Staying **neutral** is also possible: you lie to both that you're just passing through. That might avoid conflict now, but if those two forts go to war anyway, you could get literally caught in the crossfire event later (shell lands near your camp, etc.). This kind of chain brings *Crusader Kings*-style faction politics into the game and forces narrative-altering decisions (which also increases **replay** because you can try different allegiances in different runs).

Weird World Features & Points of Interest: Lastly, let's envision some persistent world elements (places, factions) that add flavor and can generate emergent stories as the party encounters them:

- **Area 51½ (Secret Site):** A hidden encampment in the Nevada desert where a clandestine government team (decades ahead of their time) studies supernatural occurrences. If the party finds it, they might get access to high-tech weapons or info on upcoming events (“There's a massive shapeshifter roaming north of here, avoid it”). However, the agents are suspicious and might detain a character for “knowing too much” if provoked. This location adds an overarching faction that ties many alien or mutant events together – they might show up after certain events, not always benevolent.

- **The Clockwork Metropolis (Lost City):** Rumors speak of a frontier town that industrialized overnight thanks to a genius inventor – an alternate-history *boom town* full of clockwork robots and steam gadgets. In game, this could be a rare location the player might stumble upon or hear about via NPCs. Visiting it presents opportunities to upgrade your wagon with bizarre tech (mechanical legs? a steam engine boost), but also dangers if something goes awry (e.g. the town's master gear is failing, causing robots to malfunction and go on a rampage – and guess who might need to fix it?). This is a sandbox “set-piece” that can provide a big emergent scenario (a robot revolt or a moral choice about helping the inventor vs. freeing the oppressed townsfolk who feel the machines took their jobs).
- **Dinosaur Graveyard:** A valley where, due to temporal anomalies, giant ancient bones – or even living dinosaurs – are present. Perhaps a T-Rex skeleton occasionally animates at night under a curse. The party could explore for rare resources (valuable bones, dino eggs) but might have to deal with a live raptor attack. This location serves as a fun wildcard region on some maps (in one playthrough it might exist, in another not). Imagine the emergent story of an 1850s pioneer shootout with a velociraptor pack – that's the kind of unique experience these features allow.
- **Mystic River (Spirit Realm Crossing):** A certain river ford is known by indigenous lore to be a crossing into the spirit world. During a rare alignment of stars, crossing it might transport the party briefly into a strange mirrored world (perhaps the landscape turns eerie, they might meet the ghost of a long-dead pioneer or even their own future selves giving warning). If players aren't into heavy mysticism, they might just cross it like a normal river with no effect most times. But if the event triggers, it's a memorable supernatural detour. The *mechanics* could be: one random character gets a permanent buff or knowledge (the spirits gave them a vision) but another suffers a curse (a spirit clung to them out of the realm). This feature pulls from the idea of magical realism and indigenous myth, handled respectfully and whimsically.
- **Notorious Factions:** In addition to places, we have roaming factions that spice up encounters. Some ideas:
 - **The Wild Bunch 2.0:** An outlaw gang armed with stolen future weapons (maybe they looted a military lab). They show up with laser pistols and confuse the heck out of the party (“why do those bandits have ray-guns?!”). They're few but dangerous; maybe the player can defeat and scavenge their tech (leading to fun moral questions of using such weapons).
 - **Cult of Coyote:** A group of desert-dwelling cultists who literally worship a trickster spirit (some might even be were-coyotes). They prefer sabotage and illusions over direct fights. Encounters with them involve strange traps, like hallucination-inducing incense or mirages. If a party member has a high relationship or background with them (say the Preacher was once in this cult), you might navigate peacefully. Otherwise, expect pranks that can turn deadly.
 - **Traveling Circus Caravan:** Not hostile – a circus troupe moving west, including clowns, acrobats, maybe a strongman who is actually a friendly mutant. They can be a boon (trading stories, boosting morale, even joining forces against a common threat like those raptors) or a humorous complication (their pet bear gets loose in your camp). They embody the surreal yet lighthearted tone and can trigger mini events (e.g. one of your party wants to join the circus – do you let them go live their dream?).
 - **Native American Time Guardians:** In this alternate history, perhaps a secret society among the Native tribes who are aware of the time distortions and supernatural threats, working to contain

them. They might test the party's intentions with riddles or trials when you traverse sacred ground. If respected, they could impart wisdom or protection spells; if crossed (say you steal artifacts), they might shadow you and undo your progress (like causing that newly repaired wagon wheel to mysteriously break again). This faction can provide context that ties the weird events into a larger narrative (they might explain, for instance, "The spirit of the land is angry because of the metal bird that fell from the sky" – referring to the UFO). It adds depth and a sense that the weirdness isn't just random, it's part of a semi-coherent alternate world with its own guardians and dangers.

Each of these events, traits, and factions is designed to be **modular** – they plug into the emergent framework. It will often be the *combination* that yields humor and drama. For instance, imagine an emergent scenario: Your party's **Luckless** jinx triggers a minor mishap that delays you, causing you to make camp at that haunted ghost town instead of passing earlier in daylight. That night the **Haunted** character's personal ghost communicates with the duel ghosts, perhaps calming them, resolving the event in an unexpected way (because you had that trait in play). Meanwhile, your **Preacher** is taking notes to write a scripture about these ghostly miracles. It's a one-of-a-kind story.

Through careful design of systems and content – drawing on the **AI storytelling of RimWorld, the dynastic drama of Crusader Kings, the choice-driven saga of King of Dragon Pass, and the survival depth of UnReal World** – *Old Trail* can become a rich canvas for emergent, comedic, and surreal stories. Every wagon journey to Oregon will turn into a legend of its own: sometimes tragic, often hilarious, and always uniquely generated by the interplay of characters, choices, and chance. By focusing on procedural characters, AI behaviors, dynamic event chains, and a lively world, we ensure the player isn't just **playing** the Oregon Trail – they're **living** an ever-evolving tale on the Old Trail.

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