

INTO THE SUNSET

A GAME ABOUT ROMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Into The Sunset is a roleplaying game designed to emulate the family-oriented romantic comedies of the silver screen. It's intended for small groups of no more than six players, and while it's written for experienced roleplayers there's no reason complete novices couldn't play it as long as someone more experienced is around for a little handholding. It has no campaign value at all; as written, a game of *Into The Sunset* will last only a single session. Two at the most.

Oh, and there's no game master, dungeon master, or director. Likewise, there are no combat rules, skill rules, or experience points. There is character creation, at least, but the main thrust of the game is unrepentantly narrativist. *Into The Sunset* is designed for collaborative storytelling, rather than simulating an environment or providing a tactical challenge.

You will need six six-sided dice, and maybe some paper and pencils. Defining a character is simple enough so that you'll be able to keep the character in your head, but it couldn't hurt to have some scratch paper to take notes.

The genesis of the game was a pleasant afternoon spent watching *Bend It Like Beckham*, a clever little British romantic comedy in which a Sikh teenager from London achieves her desire to play soccer despite her family's opposition. Along the way, there are heartbreaks and marriages and family arguments. As the plot wore on to the inevitable cheerful conclusion I noticed something very interesting: everyone had a happy ending.

In fact, that's one of the most important elements of the family romantic comedy. In the end, the obstreperous parents come around and realize that their child will be happiest on his own path, whether or not it's what they'd imagined for him. Everyone either gets the romantic happiness they deserve or finds something more engaging to do with their lives. There aren't any lasting conflicts, and chances are there aren't even any characters that remain villains throughout the entire piece.

Writing a roleplaying game that embodied that paradigm struck me as an interesting way to spend the rest of the weekend, and in the end I came up with a core mechanic that seemed to satisfy my purpose in a fairly meaningful way. Thus, this game. I hope each reader enjoys reading it (and, who knows, even playing it) as much as I enjoyed writing it.

SESSION CREATION

This chapter is titled Session Creation, rather than Character Creation, because the setting for the story is generated at the beginning of the game just like the characters. You can start the process with no idea whether the story will take place in London or New York or Bombay, and there's no need to know how big the family is or where it comes from before you begin. The story and setting are defined by the interactions between the characters, and the characters aren't pregenerated. In fact, you can (and should) think of this process as the first phase of the game.

The basic concept is simple. First, choose a player order. It doesn't matter how you do this; clockwise around a table is fine, as is alphabetical order, as is reverse alphabetical order. Then, each player takes a turn selecting a Role and defining a character. The earlier you select, the more central your character is to the story. The later you select, the more power you have over plot shifts, and the more chances you have to trigger plot shifts. In terms of the movie, the protagonist is probably the Role selected first, while the parents are probably selected among the last Roles. We'll go into more detail about how this works later on.

Finally, you need to keep the two unbreakable laws of session creation in mind: there must be a family, and there must be romance. You can't have a family romantic comedy without both of those. It's possible to tweak *Into The Sunset* to support a broader range of romantic comedies — and there's nothing wrong with that — but it dilutes the tight focus of the game and in the end is a task best left to the readers who want to take it on.

Establishing Setting

There are two strategies for establishing the setting for the game. First, and easiest, the group can agree on the setting before generating characters. Don't go too deep if you choose this method; a pre-selected setting should be a sentence or two at the most. If you find yourselves deciding whom the specific characters will be, or what the conflicts will be, you've gone too far.

“Our game is going to center around a Greek family living in Austin, Texas” is great. “Our game is going to be about a Greek family with three daughters living in Austin, Texas. One of the daughters wants to be an astronaut, and one of them wants to be President, but their parents want them all to be ballerinas. The cute cowboy from Houston badly wants to date the astronaut daughter but he'd miss her when she goes into space” is way too much detail.

Second, and certainly more challenging, you can wing it. With this method, the setting is defined during character creation. The first player to select gets the most influence over the setting, and more details are filled in as more people choose Roles. For example, the first player selects the Younger Sibling Role, adding that she's sick to death of life in Texas and wants to move back to Greece because her parents haven't taught her what it means to be Greek. A later player lays claim to the Understanding Parent Role, asserting that the family moved to Austin because the parents wanted to be real Americans. By the end of character generation, you've got the outlines of a setting, which can be filled in as necessary during play.

Roles

This is a basic and probably not exhaustive list of Roles. You can add more Roles if you find you need them, but it's better to write them down and circulate them before a session begins rather than coming up with them on the fly. Since Roles don't serve any real mechanical purpose, it's easy to ad lib them, but that detracts from the somewhat formalized nature of the family romantic comedy.

When making up more Roles, keep in mind that a Role defines a character's relationship to the family and provides an adjective describing the character. "Uncle" is not a role. "Bachelor Uncle," which has a load of associations attached to the word "bachelor," is.

Childhood Friend with Secret: this is the friend who's been around since grade school: she's gone through thick and thin with one of the family children, and probably had quarrels, but in the end they've been there for each other. Chances are most people think the Childhood Friend will wind up marrying her friend if the genders are appropriate, but usually neither the Childhood Friend or the protagonist have realized this. There's always a secret that the Childhood Friend hasn't shared. Maybe she's in love with her friend, maybe she's in love with one of the other siblings, maybe she's gay, or maybe she doesn't really share her friend's dreams.

Confused Grandparent: the Confused Grandparent is almost always a bit part, but it's also a staple of the genre. The Confused Grandparent is the comedy role, who misunderstands everything but has a bit of sage advice to put things right in the crucial moment. Most of the time, she's inclined to meddle for better or worse.

Elder Sibling: the Elder Sibling can be the dutiful child, or the rebel who fled home and only recently returned. It's possible to have multiple Elder Siblings in a single game, too; some families are big. A player can select the Elder Sibling role even if no other children have been defined, but they'll need to spend a Driver point up front to establish a younger sibling.

New Pal: the New Pal is the agent of change, introducing one or more of the family children to new vistas and possibilities. The New Pal is not a love interest, although he may be in love with a member of the family. Rather, he's the guy who introduced the protagonist to sports, or dancing, or rock and roll, or gourmet ice cream. The chances are very good that the New Pal and his new friend will have a nasty but temporary falling out during the game.

Only Child: the Only Child is smothered by his parent's love, or secure in the knowledge that his parents want only the best for him. He's a bit of a loner and it's hard getting to know him, but it's worth the effort once you get there. He generally has a pessimistic view of her own abilities, no matter how obviously skilled he is.

Outsider Love Interest: you've gotta have an Outsider Love Interest. (Well, you don't have to have someone playing her, but one ought to show up somewhere along the line.) The Outsider Love Interest is the girl your parents don't want you to bring home. Maybe she's rich, and they think she's just having some summer fun. Maybe she's poor, and they don't think she's worthy of you. Either way, she's trouble. The Outsider Love Interest could be the central role, as well: consider the movies in which the upper-class guy falls for the beautiful wild child from the wrong side of the tracks and learns to appreciate her family's strange customs.

Traditionalist Parent: the Traditionalist Parent will have none of this newfangled nonsense. He's a stern father who wants to make sure his child grows up within his religion, or he's a self-made man who expects his son to follow in his footsteps and run the family business. His motives are always good, though. The role is not that of a villain.

Understanding Parent: the Understanding Parent is the counterpart to the Traditionalist Parent, although the existence of one doesn't imply the other. The Understanding Parent doesn't necessarily let her child run wild, but she does support her child in her strange and unusual desires. The Understanding Parent, like the Traditionalist Parent, may be single, widowed, divorced, or still happily married.

Younger Sibling: the Younger Sibling and the Elder Sibling are mirrors of one another. If the Elder Sibling is dutiful, the Younger Sibling is a rebel; if the Elder Sibling wears a black jacket and smokes like a chimney, the Younger Sibling is dedicated to his schoolwork. As with the Elder Sibling, there can be more than one Younger Sibling role.

Drivers

After you've chosen your character's Role, you choose your character's Driver. The Driver is the driving motivation of the character. A Driver is expressed as a single sentence describing a conscious goal of the character. It can't be a subconscious goal; it's got to be something that the character actively wants.

Along with the Driver, you get a certain number of Driver Points. The last person to pick a Role gets 6 Driver Points, the second to last person gets 5 Driver Points, and so on. (Nope, you can't have more than six players.) Driver Points are used for triggering plot shifts and establishing extra characters; we'll talk about them at length in the next chapter.

Drivers may involve another character, whether that character has been chosen or not. "Wants his eldest daughter to find happiness" would be a perfectly good Driver for an Understanding Parent. However, bear in mind that if nobody buys into your Driver and chooses a character to fit it by the end of session creation, you'll have to pay a Driver Point to establish that character as an extra.

Drivers can be pretty specific. "Wants to be a successful magazine editor" is a good Driver; "Wants to be the successful editor of *Vanity Fair*" is even better.

Drivers and Roles can (and should) relate to the Drivers of other characters. If someone picks "Wants to marry a handsome cowboy," it's perfectly legitimate to define your cowboy character as an Outsider Love Interest with a Driver of "Wants to sweep a beautiful girl off her feet." Don't worry about lack of conflict; we'll get to that bit soon.

Finally, there's one important twist that helps establish the fabric of the story. By the end of the session, everyone's Driver must be fulfilled. That means that you can't pick a Driver that directly conflicts with any Driver that's already been selected. The first person to pick a Role gets a lot of flexibility in her Driver, and the last person to pick will have to work around the Drivers already established.

Roadblocks

After everyone's chosen a role, each player chooses a Roadblock for his character. This occurs in reverse order of Role selection; the last player to choose a Role is the first player to choose a Roadblock. A Roadblock is a perceived conflict between two Drivers. Often, it establishes a character goal which seems very important at the beginning of the game, but which turns out to be less significant by the end. Like Drivers, Roadblocks are expressed as single sentences. A Roadblock first expresses a goal that conflicts with another character's Driver, and then explains why the character thinks the goal is important. In the long run, this reasoning will prove to be mistaken.

The quintessential Roadblock belongs to the Traditionalist Parent and conflicts with the Youngest (or Eldest) Sibling. For the sake of the hypothetical, let's say The Youngest Sibling's Driver is "Wants to dance at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater." The Traditionalist Parent's hypothetical Driver is "Wants her youngest child to marry a good man with a good heart." The Traditionalist Parent's Roadblock could be, then, "Doesn't want her child to dance, because a good man will think modern dance is low class."

Roadblocks don't have to mirror one another. In the above example, the Youngest Child's Roadblock could be "Doesn't want to get married, because she'd never get to dance again." However, it'd be just as valid to choose "Doesn't want her best friend to move to San Francisco, because then we'll never see each other again." Further, the latter leads to a richer network of conflict.

PLAYING THE GAME

Into The Sunset is played in chunks of roleplay called scenes. A scene represents a piece of story that would take about five to ten minutes to play out in a movie. They're shorter than your average roleplaying game scene; while a scene will probably take a little longer to play out in the game than it would take to show on the screen, you want to keep them to about ten or fifteen minutes at the most.

Scenes can be started by mutual agreement among players or by generating Plot Twists, which are explained a little further on in this section. First, however, let's talk about the goal of the game.

The Goal

Into The Sunset is designed to be played in a single sitting, and if all goes well the story will be complete at the end of the session. If it wasn't a heretical concept, one might even say that there's a way to win the game and a way to lose the game — not individually, but as a group. If that makes you uncomfortable, though, you certainly don't have to think of it that way.

However, the goal of the game is for all the characters to achieve their Drivers and remove their Roadblocks while remaining true to their characters. Since Drivers can't contradict each other and since Roadblocks must be resolvable, the goal is always possible. The fun is figuring out how to untangle the web of interactions.

If that's a little too abstract, think about the movies from which inspiration for the game was drawn. The fun part of the movies is watching a bunch of emotional characters making assumptions about each other, which get in the way of everyone's happiness. At the end of the movie, everyone winds up happy. Without the conflicts, there wouldn't be any challenge to overcome.

And that's the real key to *Into The Sunset*. In most roleplaying games, conflict is generated by villains. In *Into The Sunset*, the challenge and conflict comes from misunderstandings. You have to have misunderstandings before you can have the conflict, and without the conflict you don't have a story. In other words, it's not just an exercise in masochism.

Plot Twists

You may spend a Driver Point to introduce a Plot Twist. A Plot Twist can be just about anything you like. In particular, a Plot Twist can introduce new information or new characters to the story. When the Hollywood agent shows up and tells you that you've got the talent to make it big, that's a Plot Twist. When your son's no-good friend accidentally lets it slip that your son has been playing guitar in a rock and roll band, that's a Plot Twist too.

You don't need to generate a Plot Twist to have a scene with another player or players; you can do that any time as long as everyone agrees. On the other hand, if you want a scene with your wayward Eldest Son and his player doesn't want the Eldest Son to face the music just yet, you can use a Plot Twist to force the issue as long as you're willing to spend the Driver Point.

A Plot Twist always has a goal. When you introduce a Plot Twist, you must explain what you want to get out of it, because there's a chance you won't get what you want. (That's you the

player, not you the character.) You must explain both the goal and the twist itself in three or four sentences.

For example: “Joanie’s cousin Mabel is coming into town to visit for the holidays. On the way back from the airport, she catches sight of Daisy and Reese kissing on the side of the road, and she’s eager to explain it to Joanie. I want Joanie to find out about Daisy and Reese dating.”

In this example, you’ve dictated something that happened between Daisy and Reese. Daisy’s player (assuming Daisy is a player character) has the right to veto that event, but shouldn’t do so unless it would be truly out of character. Even then, Daisy’s player should try and figure out a way to make it possible. If she’s been working towards breaking up with Reese, maybe it was sympathy smooching. Or maybe Mabel misunderstood what she saw.

By the by, who’s Joanie in the example? Joanie’s probably the character of the player who’s introducing the Plot Twist. Joanie could be someone else’s character, though; it’s very noble to spend your Driver Points to give someone else some roleplay. In practice, players will most likely say “My cousin Mabel,” and so forth; the example is a little more formal as a reminder that the goal is the player’s goal, not the character’s goal. It’s OK to deliberately torture your own character, though. Certainly Joanie isn’t going to be happy when she finds out about the illicit smooches.

Once the Plot Twist is in play, it’s time to pull out the dice. Roll a number of six-sided dice equal to your initial Driver Points. If the total of the dice is equal or higher than your initial Driver Points times three, you’ll reach your goal. If the total of the dice is lower, you won’t. Let’s say you started the game with three Driver points; you’d roll three six-siders, and if you rolled nine or higher, you’d succeed.

If you fail, the player whose Driver is obstructed by your Roadblock gets to decide what form the failure takes. Perhaps Mabel turns out to be soft-hearted and doesn’t tell on the young lovers. Or, perhaps, Daisy shows up at the last minute and manages to change the subject. The shape of the failure can’t be any more specific than the goal itself; you’ve got to leave room for the subsequent roleplay to be interesting.

Finally, roleplay out the scene. The only constraint is that you must reach your goal (if you rolled successfully) or fail (if you didn’t).

If you’re worried about succeeding, you can ask another player to help you out. If that player agrees, she can make the Plot Twist roll for you, using her Driver Points to determine the target number and the number of dice to roll. If she succeeds, not only does she get to rephrase the goal, she gets a bonus Driver Point back. No player can wind up with more Driver Points than she started with, however.

One last bit of formality: if two players want to introduce a Plot Twist at the same time, the player with the lowest number of Driver Points gets to go first. If two players have the same number of Driver Points, the one who started with less Driver Points takes precedence. Also, Plot Twist scenes always take precedence over other scenes.

Non-Player Characters

Generally speaking, anyone can jump into the role of a non-player character, which helps keep all the players involved in scenes even when their characters aren’t present. The first

person to lay claim to an NPC gets to play that NPC for the length of the scene; if two people want to play the same NPC, the player who's played that NPC less recently wins. Ties are broken in favor of the player who started with less Driver Points.

You may also spend a Driver Point to take ownership of a NPC. You can take ownership of an NPC that another player introduced, as long as that player hasn't taken ownership of her, but the player who introduced the NPC always has the right of first refusal. In other words, if another player says she wants to take ownership of an NPC you introduced, you may immediately spend a Driver Point to take ownership of the NPC yourself. You're the only person who can play an NPC you own.

If you picked a Driver that refers to a specific character, and no player has chosen that character by the end of session creation, you must spend a Driver Point when play begins in order to take ownership of the new NPC. Another player may take pity on you and take ownership of the NPC herself, if you're lucky. You do have the right of first refusal, however, just as with NPCs introduced during play.

You may not veto Plot Twists that dictate something that happened to an NPC you own. Even ownership has its limits.

DESIGNER NOTES

What Was He Thinking?

The key concept for *Into The Sunset*, as I mentioned way back at the beginning, was the idea of stories with tons of conflict but happy endings for all (or almost all). I've never been entirely happy with the GM-less roleplaying systems I've read in the past; this is not a failing of the systems, but rather a matter of personal preference on my part. When I realized that I could write a game in which all the major characters got what they wanted, I realized I could do without a GM. The rest was merely formalizing the rules such that they'd support the kind of storytelling I was aiming for.

I include dice because — and this is another personal belief, and I know it doesn't have to apply to all games — my style of roleplaying depends heavily on the theory that roleplaying is the intersection of two ancient traditions. As a million roleplaying games have pointed out, roleplaying comes from the stories we tell around fires. However, I believe that roleplaying is equally influenced by the act of prophecy.

When you roll a handful of dice, you're about to make a prophecy about the future of your character. When you score a hit by rolling an 18 on a d20, you can interpret that as reading the dice and making a prediction about what your character is going to do. Part of the power of roleplaying is the fact that these prophecies always come true.

Enough theory; more on how the game came together.

The big struggle was figuring out how Driver Points should work exactly. I came up with Drivers, Driver Points, and Roadblocks pretty early on. However, I flip-flopped a dozen or so times on the details. I knew that each session would have one or two protagonists, and that the other players would be supporting characters. I knew I wanted the supporting characters to have a lot of influence on the flow of the plot. I was pretty sure that this meant supporting characters needed more Driver Points. But should the first Roles chosen be the supporting characters? Should supporting characters have a better chance to dictate the outcome of Plot Twists? I went through a lot of permutations.

In the end, I decided that the first player to choose a Role should get the plum position. I realized that if I set things up such that the protagonist roles got picked last, there'd be the temptation to just skip the protagonist altogether if the constraints created by the previous Drivers were something the last player didn't want to deal with.

I balanced the additional power this gives the earlier Roles by making it a little harder for the earlier Roles to control their Plot Twists. Since rolling more dice flattens out the bell curve, players with high Drivers can be more confident that they'll be in control. Most Plot Twists will resolve as per the desires of the initiator no matter what, but the higher your Driver the more likely you'll get your way.

If you squint hard, you might notice that players with supporting Roles are a lot like traditional GMs. This is intentional; while at first glance *Into The Sunset* looks like a game with no GM, it's really a game where the players occupy various positions on the arc between GM and player.

Influences

In no particular order, I'd like to recognize the following influences on this game:

The Forge, located at <http://www.indie-rpgs.org/>. Is the Forge the last word in game design? Nah, as anyone there would tell you — but it's a rare example of a roleplaying design forum which has thrived over the years, and there's always an interesting discussion going on over there.

Hogshead Publishing. James Wallis' New Style game line was a swift kick in the pants for roleplaying games. In particular, *Pantheon* and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* blazed a clear trail for story-oriented roleplaying systems.

octaNe, from Memento Mori Theatricks. Cool game, from which I drew the confidence to demand explicitly defined Roles.

Bend It Like Beckham. As mentioned in the Introduction, this is the flick that kicked off the design of *Into The Sunset*. It's not a great movie but it's awfully enjoyable, and what more can one ask for?

John Hughes. Hey, he pretty much defined the family romantic comedy for the 80s. *Some Kind Of Wonderful* is a perfect *Into The Sunset* episode.

John Cusack. The other John. *Say Anything*. *One Crazy Summer*. But not *The Grifters*. (Ew.)