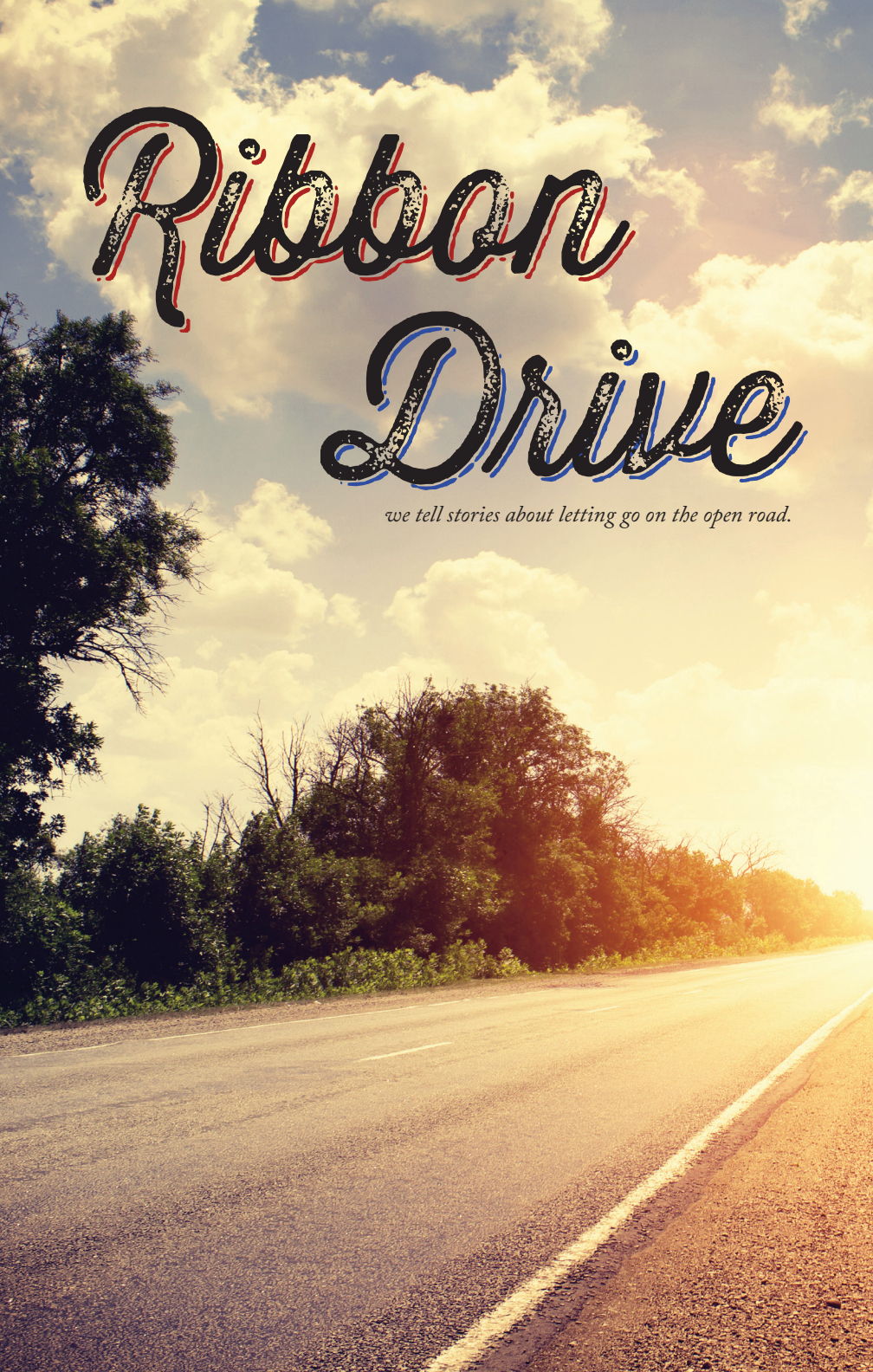


Ribbon Drive

we tell stories about letting go on the open road.



Dedications

Daniel Wood,

If doubt is to be our vehicle, let us hope the gas tank's full.

Jackson Tegu,

Some truckers say you win when you lose some.

Credit Where Due

Writing and layout by Joe Mcdaldno.

Endless support from Jackson Tegu,
Daniel Wood, and Ben Lehman.

Text in Gill Sans.

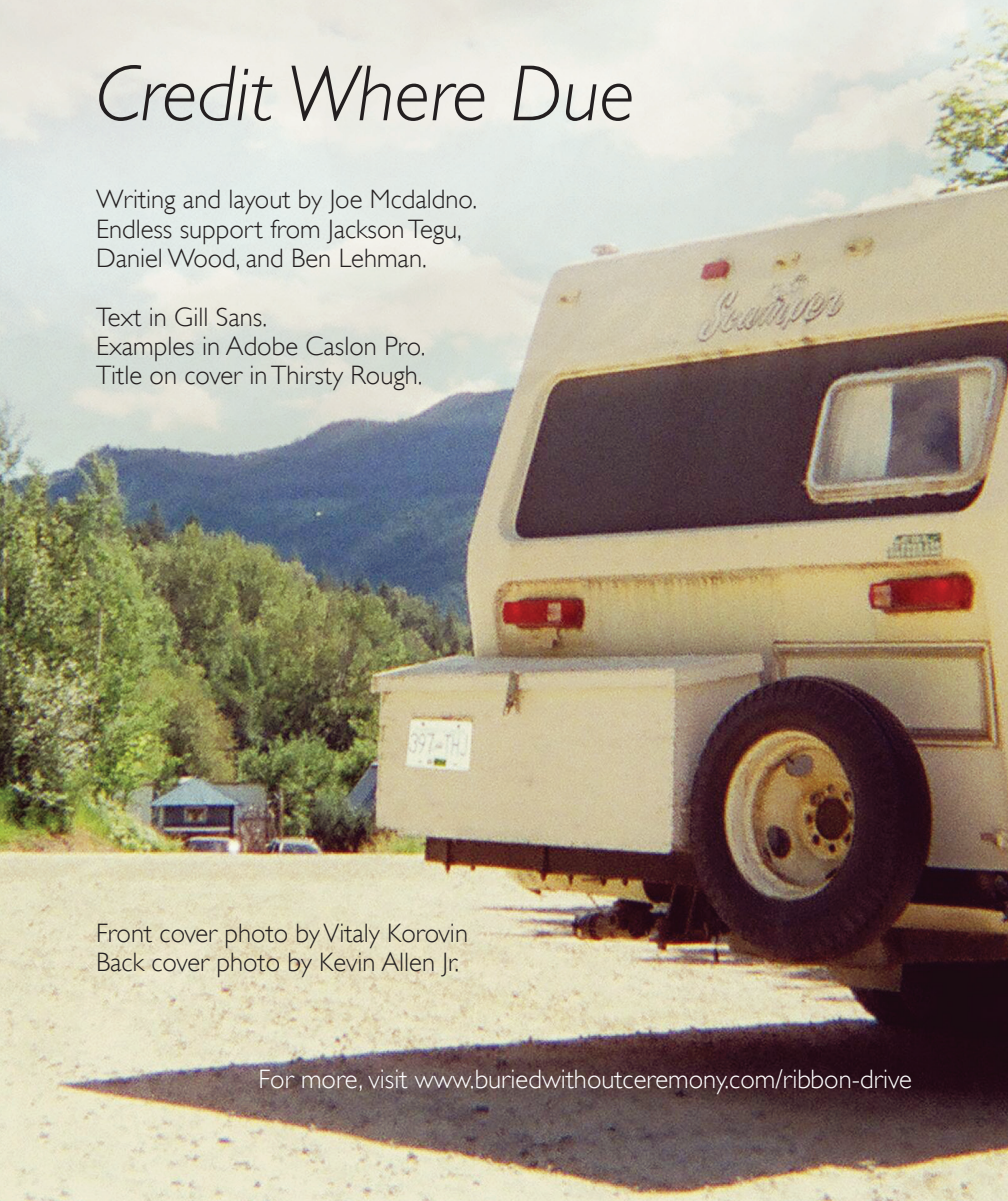
Examples in Adobe Caslon Pro.

Title on cover in Thirsty Rough.

Front cover photo by Vitaly Korovin

Back cover photo by Kevin Allen Jr.

For more, visit www.buriedwithoutceremony.com/ribbon-drive



I'm going somewhere, and I want you to join me. It's a place that always seems just past our reach. A mixture of myth and reality. This place, it smells familiar, and yet it beats the heart like first times do. It's wedged between a mix tape, a throw-away comment and a shifter. It's going to take a lot of open road to get to.

But open road's all we've ever really got, anyway.

What This Is

Ribbon Drive is a story game. It involves creating and pretending and collaborating. We play the game by telling a story together, about a road trip and the people touched by it. We do this in the comfort of a living room, over the course of 3-5 hours. All we need to play is this book, some pens & scraps of paper, several music playlists or mixes, and something to play them on.

At the start of the game, we each create a character - one of the people going on this road trip. During the game, we bring these characters to life by pretending to be them and making decisions about their actions. These characters are our individual responsibilities, but we also have a shared responsibility: to describe the rest of the world that exists around them. We'll all contribute to narrating the obstacles and scenery that our characters encounter.

In Ribbon Drive, we create stories about letting go on the open road. We draw inspiration from road movies like *Wristcutters*, *Everything Is Illuminated*, *Broken Flowers*, or *Thelma & Louise*. Our ultimate goal is to create a thought-provoking, meaningful experience. We let the music guide us. We let the road throw us curves. We rethink our attachment to the future.

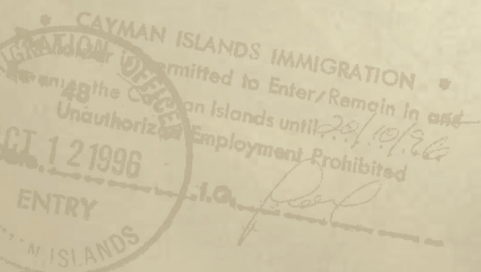
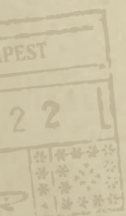
The rest of this book will show us how.

Making Mixes

Some work must be done before playing Ribbon Drive. Luckily, it's the fun sort of work, the joyful obsessive type. Each person who will be playing needs to create a playlist or mix (agree beforehand on what formats will work for your group: CD, cassette, or digital device). There are a few guidelines for creating mixes: they must be 30-70 minutes long, have a running theme, and have an interesting, descriptive title. We all bring our mixes to the game, along with print-outs for the lyrics of the first two tracks.

The game works best if we don't discuss the mix themes beforehand, and just see what gets brought to the table. It's interesting and challenging when there are lots of similar themes, except for a single curve-ball. Once, I played in a game where there was a punk mix, two dramatic indie-rock mixes, one really eclectic rock mix, and then... a soft rock/pop mix populated exclusively by cheery songs about marriage. It worked out really well in the end, taking the story down an interesting detour we wouldn't have ever seen otherwise.

*You, me, and a mutual friend agree to play a game of Ribbon Drive on Friday. We all go home and make mixes beforehand. Yours is called **Anxiously We Go**, and is about the thin line between hope and doubt. You included some Mountain Goats, a Modest Mouse song, and lots of weird bands that I've never heard before. My mix is called **Heard Through Thin Walls**, and is about jealousy, messy relationships, and small communities. It includes some Tegan & Sara as well as The Cranberries. Our friend made a mix called **Die Happy**, full of emo and pop-punk songs about bad breakups. It's got some My Chemical Romance and Misfits. We all brought the lyrics to our first two tracks. My second track doesn't have any lyrics, which is okay - I just brought the lyrics for track one. We're now ready to play.*



The First Two Songs

Once we're all gathered with our mixes in hand, we can begin playing. We randomly determine the order that our mixes will play in. We get the first mix ready to play. The first stage of play is a series of visioning exercises where we determine the nature of the road trip, who is on the trip, and what these people are like. These visioning exercises are guided by the music.

We play the first song, and listen to it in silence. Whoever brought this mix should put out the song's lyrics - people can choose to read along as the song plays, or just close their eyes and take it in. Once the song is over, we pause the mix and decide what our road trip is going to be like, inspired directly from that first song. Some things that we might decide at this point: where we're going, why, what brought us together, and our expectations for the trip. This discussion can take anywhere from 30 seconds to 10 minutes, depending on the song and how the group dissects it.

I've found the listening silently part to be really difficult. It's an intensely personal and intimate thing, to just be silent with others, listening and contemplating. We're not accustomed to it, or at least I wasn't, until I played this game over and over again. There are a few helpful strategies for bridging this possible discomfort. Keep in mind that different interpretations are good, and that there is no right answer. Further, it's good if different people have different depths of interpretation - if you are analyzing all of the intense subtext of a song, and I'm just focusing on literal words, that's good and fine! We'll both be contributing unique things to the conversation afterwards. No matter how we approach these songs, we're doing it right.

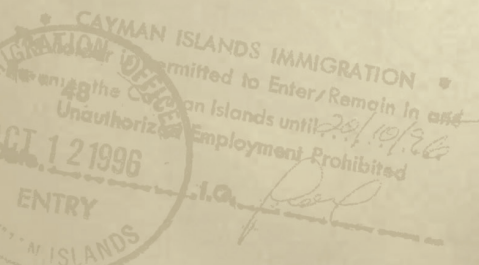
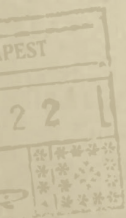
We randomly select your mix to play first. We listen to the first song, which happens to be Modest Mouse's Spitting Venom. We listen in silence. I choose to read the lyrics as the song plays, but you just close your eyes and visualize. Our friend alternates between the two. When the song is over, we press pause. There's about a minute where we just look at the lyrics and try to sort it all out. Then I suggest that we take the "damned gave us a road-map" line and treat it literally. This becomes the seed of our idea: that one of us is terminally ill ("spitting venom"), and a shady figure who might or might not be the devil appeared, offering us a map to the destination where we would find the cure. Having no better solutions, our characters take the mysterious map and head east with it.

After deciding upon our road trip premise, we each settle upon a vague character idea. At this point, we want to establish very few things about the character - a detail about who they are and how they relate to the other characters on the trip. Once we've established those details for each character, we hit play and listen to the second song.

We establish that the character with the terminal illness is a guy, and I say that I want to play the girlfriend of this dying guy. You think about it, and respond, "I want to be the dying guy himself, if that's okay." Our friend asks what he's dying from, and you respond, "I'd prefer to avoid defining what his illness is, if that's okay. If it comes up later that's cool, but for the moment I'd like to maintain an air of mystery to it." Our friend nods in agreement, and then settles upon playing the guy's childhood best friend. He gives the character a name: Ricky. That's all we know about our characters at this point, and it's all we really have a right to know. We hit play, and listen to the second song in silence.

It's the second song that fleshes out our characters, and provides us with those quirky little details that bring them to life. We each need to create a character sheet, on which we'll record information about our characters. We can use index cards or small pieces of paper for this. Each character has:

a Name, 3 Traits, and 2 Futures.



Our Futures are important for three big reasons: first of all, they dictate the things our characters care about achieving, which shapes the direction of play; second of all, there's a rule that states that we aren't allowed to talk about the future unless it's directly related to one of our named Futures (this means that if no one takes the Future "I hope we reach Delaware in one piece", then we aren't allowed to talk about whether or not we think we'll reach Delaware - we just have to wait till we get there); finally, the way in which we resolve our futures shapes the game and determines who the protagonist is. At some point in our story, a character will abandon both of their Futures, and doing so will reveal them to be our protagonist. This is explained further in the *Resolving Our Futures* section.

At least one of the things we write down on our character sheet - Name, Traits and Futures - needs to be taken directly from the lyrics of that second song. Minor paraphrasing is fine. Taking the line out of context and making it mean something radically different is fine - even encouraged! I tend to base one of my Futures on something in the song, and take 1 or 2 of my Traits directly out of the song lyrics.

The name we choose is important, because we're all going to be addressing one another by these names over the course of the game.

Traits are details about our character that we hope will come to light over the course of the trip, and that might help us overcome obstacles that we encounter. They can be single words (like virtuous or alcoholic), short phrases (like loves classical music or graphic designer), or whole sentences (like I own a house in the Bahamas or I used to be famous). The traits we choose are important because they give us a starting point for playing our characters, and because we rely on them to overcome obstacles that come up over the course of our trip.

As for the Futures, they're things that might happen in the character's future, and likely that the character wants to happen. They are full sentence statements, like "I'm going to find the cure for what ails me" or "We're going to reach Miami before this car breaks down." They should be worded as definitive statements, not questions. It's advised that you make one of your Futures a very long-term thing, and the other more immediate and related to the trip at hand. The second song on the mix is "Step Off The Map & Float" by a band named Library Voices. We listen in silence, and afterwards discuss the lyrics a bit and write our characters.

*My character is named **Amie**.*

Traits: My existence is a pinprick.
 A high-paying job.
 Quick wit.*

*Futures: I'm going to be more confident in groups.
 I'm going to have kids soon.*

*Your character is named **Anthony**.*

*Traits: Terminal illness.
 Stubborn as a mule.
 Excellent cook.*

Futures: I'm going to cross this paper continent.
 I'll die of old age.*

*Our friend's character, as previously mentioned, is **Carlos**.*

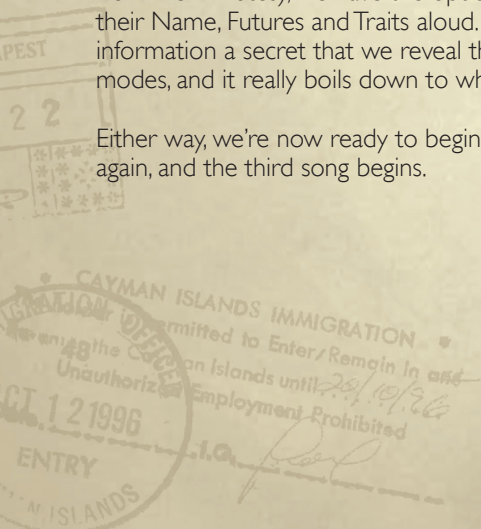
Traits: I've got places to be but nowhere that I need to go.
 Loyal.
 Often drunk.*

*Futures: I'm going to fall in love.
 I'm going to go back to grad school.*

You'll notice that each of those characters in that example has an asterix by one of their Traits or Futures. That's because those lines were taken directly from the lyrics of the song. In the case of Amie, the line was originally "Your existence is a pinprick," and I changed it around a bit to make it fit my character. In the case of Carlos, his first Trait is taken word-for-word from the song.

After we've all finished visioning and writing our characters (this could take from 2-5 minutes), we have the option to share them quickly - simply reading their Name, Futures and Traits aloud. Or, we can choose to keep our written information a secret that we reveal through play. I've had fun playing in both modes, and it really boils down to what our group preference is.

Either way, we're now ready to begin the road trip proper. One of us hits play again, and the third song begins.



Alternate Routes:

Initial Tracks

Some people find that always having the first two songs guiding the trip and character creation leads to lopsided mixes. People who've played the game before might feel pressured to put specific songs up front, even if those songs would fit better at a later point in the mix. If the technology being used allows for it, here's an alternate method for determining which songs get used for inspiration in these visioning exercises. Determine which mix will be played first, and put that mix on shuffle. The first song that comes up on shuffle is used to inspire what the road trip is about, and the second song that comes up is used to inspire the individual characters.

Another option is to allow the mix designer to pick specific tracks to play for the group during the visioning exercises. When it's time to hit play and start framing scenes, start at the beginning of the mix. This method will ensure that the songs that inspire the starting situation are revisited during play.



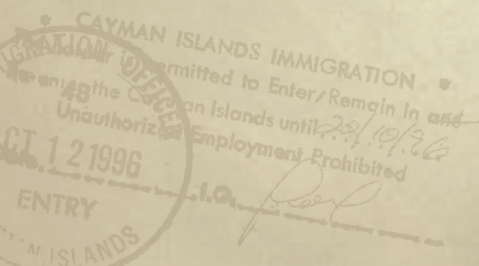
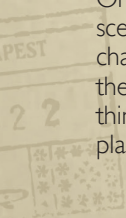
Getting on the Road

The third song has started. We're actually on the road trip now (though, in reality, we're likely sitting around in a living room, with comfortable chairs and nice little snacks). The way we begin telling the story and narrating our trip is that one of us frames a scene. Scene framing simply means that you narrate where we are, when it is, and what's happening. For a quick example, you might say, "Alright, we're all standing outside the car, and there's smoke billowing from under the hood. My character screams at you, saying, 'Carlos, I thought you said this thing was reliable!'" Quick, simple, creating just enough of an image so that we're on the same creative page, sharing the same imagined space.

So, what do we base our scene framing upon? A mixture of two things: the song that's playing, and our own narrative sensibilities. Listen to the song for a moment, and imagine what scenes might open with that song playing. Allow it to inform the opening tone, perhaps even taking a snippet of the lyrics and working that into how you frame the scene. And as for our own narrative sensibilities, what does that mean? Well, if I feel like it'd be great to have one scene be a direct follow-up of a previous scene, then that's good. Later, if you think that it'd be an interesting juxtaposition to go from a very intense, dramatic in-car scene to a quite-unrelated anecdotal scene that takes place in a diner, then that's good. We don't need to hold rigorously to any single pace or tone, and we can let our narrative sensibilities guide our choices.

When the third song starts playing at the beginning of the game, we are all silent, thinking about how to frame a scene around it, one that will nicely kick start the story of our trip. Whoever speaks first has claimed the first scene frame as their own. After that, we'll frame scenes in a round robin style, going clockwise around the table.

Once the scene has been framed, anyone can join into the roleplaying of the scene. If your character was framed into the scene, then you can jump into character and introduce dialogue. Regardless of whether your character is there or not (and whether you're talking in character or not), you can describe things that are in the scene. If it isn't mentioned, assume that the scene takes place with everyone present and in the car.



The third song on your mix is Neon Bible, by The Arcade Fire. It's a song full of foreboding, but it's quiet and restrained. We're all silent, thinking about how to frame the first scene. I get a good idea, and say, "Alright, we're all in the car and have just left town. I'm holding the devil's map in my left hand and the Rand McNally map in my right, comparing the two. I look up at you, Anthony, with a concerned look on my face. 'Unless I'm reading this wrong, the place we're going is located in the middle of a national park.'"

Since I didn't say otherwise, it's assumed that Carlos is also present. I've framed the scene in such a way that we know both Anthony and Amie are present. You respond by saying, in Anthony's voice, "What? That doesn't make any sense." My response is that: "I nod, and then shove the maps under your nose, forgetting momentarily that you're driving."

Our friend joins in by saying, "The rain is pouring down on our windshield, and fog is starting to spread. Carlos is asleep on the back seat."

Note that in the example, I narrated my character's actions in the first person, whereas our friend narrated in the third person ("Carlos is asleep on the back seat"). You didn't narrate your character's actions at all; you simply spoke in character. All three are appropriate. There's no need for us to be concerned with these little details of how each of us immerses in the story. We can alternate between speaking in first and third person depending on what feels natural in a given moment.

Once a scene has been framed, it is carried upon our narration and our actions. That means that we'll be talking in character, narrating what is going on in the scene around us, and narrating what our characters do. Scenes will have lots of dialogue, as we are traveling together and sharing life experiences and using this road trip to address what's been on our minds. When it's appropriate, we should introduce our Futures into the conversation, talking about the prospects of them coming true, or maybe our concerns about them. We all have the option to introduce new elements into the scene. Although the scene framer determines the initial situation, any one of us is free to introduce a twist, like perhaps narrating that we pass a herd of elk, or enter a city, or that darkness falls.

Aside from our named Futures, we cannot discuss the future. The reason for this rule is that Ribbon Drive is a game about letting go, and experiencing life in the moment. To fixate on the future, in general, is to remove power from the here and now. This is very important because over the course of the game, characters will resolve some of their Futures.

Ultimately, one character will stop caring about both of their Futures (which is the criteria for being named the story's Protagonist, but more on that later), and in that moment it is essential that they be grounded entirely in the past and present.

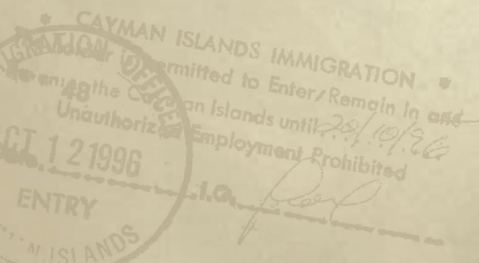
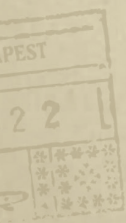
Scenes should go on until they hit a natural point of resolution. This could be when the conversations that the characters are holding all come to a halt, or when one of us says something that seems an excellent point to cut away on, or when we all feel like it's appropriate. At that perfect moment, anyone can just say "cut." If someone really wants to keep the scene rolling for a little longer, possibly because they had something they wanted to add, that's fine. Otherwise, move on to framing the next scene.

If the song changes mid-scene, it's important to allow the new song's tone to leak into our narration and guide the direction we take the scene. We shouldn't slavishly hold to this rule, but take it as a guide.

A scene might last from 3 to 20 minutes. Whatever we feel is appropriate and fun is correct.

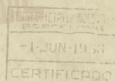
We're listening to that Arcade Fire song, playing out a solid first scene. The song ends, and a new one begins – one that's lighter, but also wistful and nostalgic. I take this as a good opportunity to change the direction that we were headed with the scene, and say, 'At this point, we drive past a playground, and it's about noon right now. 'Look at those adorable children,' I remark, pointing out the window at a group of girls on the swings. We keep driving, and suddenly I'm filled with a pang of longing. I can't wait until I have kids of my own.'

As a player, I want my character to say something along the lines of, "I really hope that Anthony finds his antidote, so that he can be there alongside me". But, the prospect of Anthony finding an antidote isn't one of my two Futures, so that isn't something I can narrate. Instead, I say to the group, "I really hope that my children get the chance to know Anthony."



Activating Traits

AIR MAIL



During each scene, we can each activate one of our Traits. To activate a Trait, narrate something (maybe an action, visual detail, or line of dialogue) that highlights one of your Traits. Say the name of your Trait aloud and put a check mark next to it. Once a Trait has been highlighted, it can be used to help overcome obstacles in future situations.

Midway through our third scene (we're now in a grocery store), I realize that I have a perfect opportunity to activate Amie's "My existence is a pinprick" Trait. "Amie glances at the other people in the line," I begin. "We pull back a little bit, and see like twelve long line ups. Zoom in on Amie again, and we see that she's got a look of quiet desperation upon her face. I'm activating 'My existence is a pinprick'." And then I put a tiny little check-mark next to that Trait.

Notice how I describe zooming in on Amie, like we're watching a movie? It's fine to do that. If you want to use language borrowed from theatre ("Anthony exits stage right"), and I want to describe things as if seen through a camera ("we cut to a close-up of Amie's face, and see..."), that's great. We can describe the fiction in terms we feel comfortable using, with whatever language comes naturally to us.

Encountering Obstacles

Sometimes, things get in the way of a perfectly good plan. Maybe we're going down the road, and find out that the bridge is closed for construction. Maybe we run out of gas. Maybe the hitchhiker we picked up is having a huge emotional breakdown and threatening suicide. Maybe someone steals our car.

In Ribbon Drive there are specific rules for these situations, called Obstacles.

If everyone else speaks before you do in a scene (whether narrating something in the scene or speaking as their character), then you have the right to introduce an Obstacle into the scene. You don't have to introduce the Obstacle immediately. You can join in, describing and narrating, and then at some later point in the scene introduce your Obstacle. Finally, you aren't by any means required to introduce an Obstacle - this is an option, not a responsibility.

Sometimes, several people will be silent through the start of a scene, perhaps because they all want the right to introduce an Obstacle. I've developed a way to silently ask "are you being silent because you want to introduce an obstacle?" I hold my hand up in the shape of an O, and raise an eyebrow quizzically. And then if they indeed have an idea for an obstacle, just like I do, they might reply with their own hand in the shape of an O. Or, if they just hadn't thought to speak yet, they might jump in and narrate some stuff into the scene, neatly giving me the Obstacle rights for the scene.

An Obstacle is something that gets in the way of the trip, something external to the characters. It needs to be something that we can't ignore, something that we need to either deal with or go well out of our way to avoid dealing with.

Example Obstacles include: being pursued by cops, hitting a deer, being cornered by a couple bikers intent on mugging you, or finding out that the bridge has collapsed during a recent storm.

While obstacles should generally be external to the characters, there is some flexibility in that rule. Once, I played a game where one of the players was a veteran from the Vietnam war. He had a bad cough, and spent most of his time drinking and smoking. My friend Gilbert was playing this character, and he narrated that his character started coughing up blood, and that it got really bad, and that all of a sudden he broke into seizure. Gilbert paused for a moment, and said, "Alright. That's the obstacle in this scene. I'm coughing up blood and starting to seizure." Although it wasn't exactly external to the characters, it was something outside of their control that they were being forced to respond to. In that way, it was a suitable Obstacle.

When an Obstacle is introduced, there are two options:

resolve it, or take a Detour.

Resolving Obstacles

To resolve an Obstacle, one of us must have a Trait already activated which would help overcome the obstacle. It might be a Trait which is directly helpful. Alternately, it can be a Trait that, if revoked or flipped on its head in a moment of character growth and transition, would become helpful. Whoever has such a Trait activated can decide to cross it off their character sheet and narrate how the Obstacle is overcome with the help of the Trait. Now, the Obstacle has been overcome and we can continue to play as normal (now might be a good time to end the scene, if it fits our narrative sensibilities). If you introduce an Obstacle, you can't also be the one to resolve it.

When you cross off a Trait, it might mean that you've overcome or outgrown it. Alternately, that Trait might still be integral to who you are, but it won't be the pivotal thing which helps resolve any further Obstacles on this trip.

Taking a Detour

To take a Detour (which we are forced to do if there are no relevant, activated Traits, or if no one wants to cross such a Trait off permanently), we must narrate how the obstacle creates an impasse and how we backtrack or detour to get around it. We must at this point switch the mix. This immediately ends the scene, starts a new mix, and changes the tone of the game.

When an Obstacle is introduced, we need to play by these rules. If we want to continue forward on our journey, one of us needs to resolve the Obstacle by crossing off an already-activated Trait. If we don't do that, we need to take a Detour.

There shouldn't be an Obstacle in every scene! Most games have between one and six Obstacles.

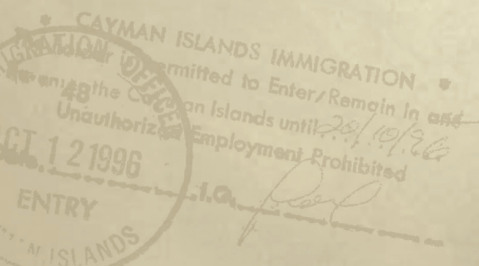
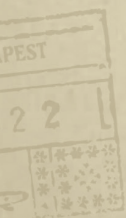
If no one can remember who the last person to join the scene was, then we can either let anyone introduce an Obstacle, or just decide that no one is allowed since no one remembers earning that right. If someone has a really good idea for an Obstacle and none of us remember who's got the Obstacle rights, I don't see any harm in letting that person fire away.

We've left the grocery store, and are now traveling along a winding country road. Our friend framed the scene, and I was the first person to join in and narrate anything after that. Since you were the last person to join the scene, you've got the option to introduce an Obstacle at any point in the scene. You hold off for the moment, describing the countryside, all of its gold and brown and crimson hues. You continue, "Anthony takes out a pack of cigarettes, pulling at the plastic. This is going to be his first smoke in months."

Amie and Anthony begin fighting about the cigarette. Our friend describes how Carlos starts fidgeting with his phone, anxious to pretend that he can't hear any of this. We play out the argument for a moment, and then you get an idea. You say, "While they're fighting, they drive right past the last gas station for a hundred miles. And twenty minutes later, the car sputters to a stop. We're in the middle of nowhere, with no cell phone signal, and we're out of gas. This is our Obstacle."

In order to resolve the situation, one of us would need to use (and cross out) an already-activated Trait. I've only got "My existence is a pinprick" activated, and our friend only has "Loyal." I suppose our friend could use Loyal to resolve the Obstacle, narrating how Carlos walks for a couple hours to get help. But no one suggests that, and neither of us cross out our activated Traits.

Since we didn't resolve the Obstacle, we need to take a Detour. We switch mixes, and our trip changes tone. The next mix ends up being Die Happy. We put it in and press play. Angry break-up music right after a big fight? This could get messy.



Switching Mixes

There are two ways that a mix might end: it might naturally reach its conclusion, or we might Detour in the face of an Obstacle. If a mix naturally ends, we bring the current scene to a good ending point (wrapping it up within two minutes, at absolute most). If a mix gets cut short by a Detour, that scene ends immediately.

We then randomly select the next mix, read the title, and put it in. We listen to that first song in silence, or at least most of the first song. If it's your turn to frame the scene, and you want to start framing two and a half minutes into the first song or something like that, you're welcome to. You may choose to wait until the start of the second song, or begin most of the way through the first.

The point of this silence at the start of a new mix is to refocus our energy, and to welcome in a change of tone. We should welcome the change, and allow ourselves to be surprised by what comes next.



Handling Conflicts

Road trips don't always go according to plan. Sometimes, they get messy and awful. What do you do when two characters get locked into a conflict? How does Ribbon Drive support the players in figuring out where the conflict leads?

Conflict among the main characters doesn't count as an Obstacle. Obstacles are external problems. There aren't any rules for deciding who wins a conflict and gets their way, like there are in many other games. Because that's not what Ribbon Drive is about, right?

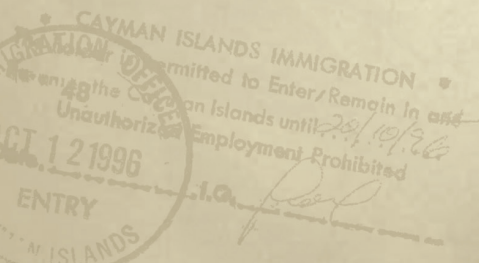
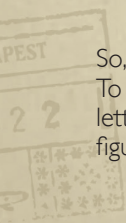
Ribbon Drive is about letting the music guide us, letting the characters show us who they are, and about figuring out the future. And we can turn to those three things for guidance on how to resolve inter-character conflict when it arises. Let's set up an example, and explore some techniques through it.

Things haven't been going well between Amie and Anthony on this trip. Carlos has tried to smooth things over, but it's only escalated the problem. Anthony has lost hope in their trip, and in the miracle cure that they're chasing after. He feels like his death is imminent and inevitable.

In the middle of an argument, Anthony goes silent. He just stares ahead vacantly, grips the wheel, and presses his foot down on the accelerator. They're on a windy mountain road. Anthony is careening around blind corners at alarming speeds and drifting between lanes. Amie and Carlos are both yelling for Anthony to slow down and snap out of it, but he's ignoring them. He's feeling helpless and this is his meltdown moment.

In an act of desperation, Amie reaches over and grabs the wheel. The characters are locked in conflict and there's a lot at stake.

So, what happens next? As players, how do we decide how this conflict ends? To answer these questions, we're going to return to what the game is about: letting the music guide us, letting the characters show us who they are, and figuring out the future.



In moments like these, remember to pay attention to the music playing. If Ladytron's *Destroy Everything You Touch* is soundtracking this scene, that gives us a strong vision of how this conflict might resolve - with Anthony totaling the car, damaging Amie's faith in him, and bringing the trip to a screeching halt. If MGMT's *Kids* is playing in the background, that gives us a different vision of the conflict - instead of being about Anthony's destruction, the scene might be about Amie's vulnerability and unwillingness to turn people away, even when they do terrible things to her ("control yourself / take only what you need from me / A family of trees, wantin' / to be haunted"). If the song is trying to give you the answer, take it.

Look at the Traits on the character sheets. If someone has a Trait waiting to be activated, and this situation is the perfect context in which to showcase it, then bring it in and let it shape the events to follow. Is this the moment where Anthony's "Stubborn as a Mule" Trait gets activated, as he refuses to put a halt to his dangerous behavior until his temper has resided? If so, you can add that check mark to your character sheet, and narrate how these antics continue until the car falls into white-knuckled silence. If the Traits are giving you the perfect chance to showcase your character, take it.

And finally, look at the Futures. Amie has "I'm going to be more confident in groups." This is a perfect moment to explore that Future. Does she take decisive action, thus confirming that Future? Or does she instead fall into stunned silence, letting go of that tentative conviction she had about who she was becoming? Anthony has the Future "I'll die of old age." This situation is almost too perfect a venue for exploring it. This is it: the moment where Anthony's hope and doubt are playing tug-of-war with both his mind and the physical safety of the entire car. Does he get a grip on his emotions, and remember that faith is a powerful and important thing in its own right? Or does he give up on his belief that he'll outlive the month, and descend further into his fatalistic cynicism?

The resolution of the situation isn't the most important thing. The most important thing is how these characters, and the context of the trip, is reflected in the situation. "Does Anthony cause a crash?" is less important than "Does Anthony want to crash?" and less important than "Is Amie in control of her own life" and less important than the Joy Division song playing in the background. Use the situation as a launching point for exploring what the characters want, how they view the world and who they think they are. Allow the resolution of the situation to spill, secondarily, from that.

Those are the tools. Use them in conjunction with your own narrative sensibilities.

Resolving our Futures

During play, it is everyone's job to bring their Futures into conversations. This will allow us to steer the hopes and the expectations of the road trippers, as well as add meaning to the eventual resolution of these Futures.

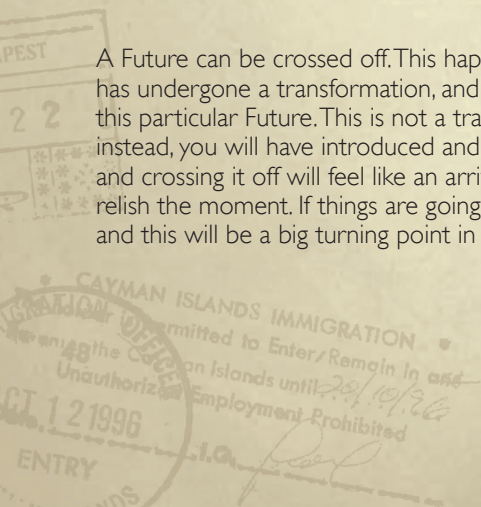
Resolving Futures is one of the most important parts of play. Not all of the Futures will be resolved, but the ones that do will be significant. There are two ways that a Future can be resolved: it can come true, or it can be crossed out.

A Future can come true over the course of play! If a Future comes true, circle it on the character sheet. We should allow a scene in which a Future comes true to focus on that as a pivotal event. If one of us has a Future (or both) come true, that's really exciting, but it also means that character isn't the Protagonist.

One of Carlos' two Futures is "I'm going to fall in love." Our friend has brought that Future into several scenes so far, having Carlos talk often about his romantic frustrations. We're just over two hours into the game, and the current scene features a minor character: a young mechanic with curly black hair. Since Anthony isn't in this scene, you're playing the young mechanic. He's talking with Carlos, and the two develop a connection. Carlos says, bashfully, "Since we're waiting on some parts arriving, maybe the two of us could go get some coffee?" The mechanic smiles, revealing dimples, and says, "Sure, I'd love that. There's a cafe around the corner."

Our friend smiles, triumphantly, and circles "I'm going to fall in love." It's a signal to the group that Carlos has fallen instantly for this guy, and that it's going somewhere. His Future has come true (which, incidentally, means that he will not be the Protagonist of this story).

A Future can be crossed off. This happens when you feel that your character has undergone a transformation, and no longer care about the outcome of this particular Future. This is not a transformation that occurs out of the blue; instead, you will have introduced and explored your Future in several scenes, and crossing it off will feel like an arrival of sorts. When this change occurs, relish the moment. If things are going correctly, you'll have our rapt attention and this will be a big turning point in the story.



To make the crossing out of a Future feel believable and significant, make sure to demonstrate the change rather than just declaring it. Introduce the Future into a variety of scenes to establish context. Demonstrate how this belief or hope guides the character's actions in little ways. And then, when the transformation occurs, demonstrate how their actions and mannerisms change to reflect. If any of us don't understand or get the transformation, we may call it into question. If this happens, it's your job to help us bridge that gap with further explanation and demonstration.

It's nearing the end of the game. Carlos has succeeded at "I'm going to fall in love" (thus circling it), and stopped caring about "I'm going to go back to grad school". I've crossed out "I'm going to be more confident in groups". You've been bringing up Anthony's "I'm going to die of old age" Future frequently.

Our characters are in the car, and you narrate that, "Anthony sees a cemetery to his right, and instinctively slows down and cranes his neck to see it better. There's a tinge of sadness in his gaze, and he zones out of the conversation at hand." It's obvious to everyone playing that Anthony is contemplating his own mortality, and that you're reference his death-related Future. I'm trying to figure out how Amie could extend more support to Anthony in this moment, but don't come up with anything. This is a sad moment in a sad scene.

"It's... you know guys, I don't really care if this is a wild-geese chase at this point. Who cares about the antidote? If this is all I've got left, this trip... well, that's enough." I'm moved by your narration, and the sincerity you lend to Anthony's voice. The rest of the group is silent as we wait to see where you take this scene. "As the graveyard recedes into the rear-view mirror, Anthony returns to his original speed. There's a different look on his face now. It's stronger and calmer than before." You cross off Anthony's "I'm going to die of old age" Future. We decide that's a good place to cut the scene.

There's a moment in play that the entire game is building toward. It's the moment when one of us crosses off their second Future. It's the moment when we suddenly have a character who is freed of all of their concerns about the days to come, and is entirely grounded in the here and now. They've let go on the open road. When a character crosses off both of their Futures, they are declared the Protagonist.

When a character is declared the Protagonist, we are given a new, retroactive interpretation of what this trip has been about. In almost every game I've played, when someone becomes the Protagonist, it becomes crystal clear that they were the protagonist all along. Looking back, the hints and signs underscored every scene. And if that doesn't happen, if it comes as a quirky surprise, that's cool too. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, I was really surprised by the fact that Alex emerged as the clear protagonist at the end of the story, but he absolutely did and it was awesome.

Arriving

When one of our character's becomes the Protagonist, that's it. We've hit the climax of our game, and it's our job to bring it to a quick but meaningful close. The scene in which a Protagonist emerges might be our final scene. Alternately, we might have one or two brief follow-up scenes to tie up loose ends. Either way, play comes to a close in a way that feels natural but doesn't linger.

We don't need to reach our destination. We may. We might see the Welcome To Aberdeen sign, proudly inviting us to "Come As You Are," and leave that as our final moment. We might have arrived at our destination halfway through the game. These are all valid.

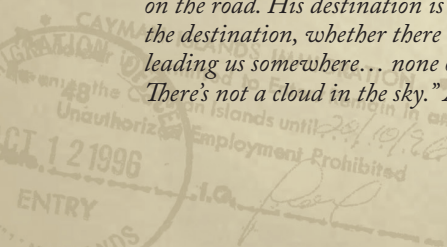
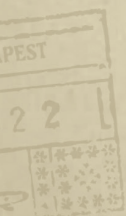
Once the game has finished, take a few minutes and just sit there, as a group. Discuss the best moments, praise work well done, or just let it all sink in. Hopefully it's felt like a meaningful experience.

If you've got your mixes on CD or cassette, consider swapping mixes with another player before heading home.

The car has broken down again. Our characters are all standing around on the side of the road, frustrated. Carlos and Amie are yelling at one another about who's fault it is. You interrupt with, "You both realize that Anthony isn't there anymore." You've snagged our attention and curiosity, and continue, "He's wandered down the hill, to a patch of grass underneath a weeping willow tree. He's bunching his coat up like a pillow, and laying down in the shade." I get the distinct impression that this is building toward an important moment, possibly even our climactic moment.

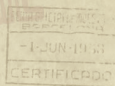
Anthony calls out, "You guys, it doesn't matter. Just... take a break. Let it sit. We'll get to where we're going, or we won't. It doesn't matter." You savor the moment, and slowly cross off that second Future ("I'm going to cross this paper continent"). I narrate that Amie pauses with a quizzical expression on her face, before walking down the little hill and laying down on the grass next to Anthony. Our friend narrates Carlos pulling out his phone, ringing up the young mechanic he's fallen in love with.

You continue, "Anthony tilts his head up, watching the willow branches swaying in the breeze. He doesn't feel any anxiousness about getting back on the road. His destination is out of mind entirely. Whether we make it to the destination, whether there ever was a cure, whether the map was really leading us somewhere... none of that matters anymore. It's a sunny day. There's not a cloud in the sky." And that's where our story ends.



Inspirations

AIR MAIL



The movie which first inspired me to write this game was *Wristcutters: A Love Story* (2006). *Wristcutters* is a story about three travelers in a special afterlife reserved for successful suicides, coming together to help one of their number find his ex-girlfriend. Offbeat, fluctuating between hilarious and somber, possessed of an ambling indie darling charm.

The movie which grabbed my heart and became my driving inspiration while working on the project was *Everything Is Illuminated* (2005), a heart-felt and moving story about what happens when you catch up to the past. The shifts in tone are brilliant.

Other movies that had a significant impact on Ribbon Drive, listed by importance: *y tu Mama Tambien* (2001), in which two coming-of-age Brazilian boys join a seductive older woman on a trip that reshapes their understanding of sexuality and passion; *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), a comedy in which an estranged, odd-bunch family piles into a VW van to get their youngest to a beauty pageant; *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things* (2004), a haunting drama in which a drug-abusing mother takes to the road with her seven year-old son; *Thelma & Louise* (1991), in which two best friends find themselves on the run after killing a man; *High Fidelity* (2000), in which John Cusack gets very particular about the construction of mix tapes; *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), an existential classic in which two men set to drag racing across America, and probably never finish; *The Doom Generation* (1995), in which two messed-up teens pick up a hitchhiker and try to drive through the surreal vomit that is the American wasteland; *Wild At Heart* (1990), in which Lula and Sailor, two young lovers, attempt to outrun the hit-men sent after Sailor; and, *Go* (1999), in which a messy drug deal disrupts several lives and a road trip.

Since completing the game, I've also noticed the affinity that Ribbon Drive has to a few other road trip movies: *Broken Flowers* (2005), in which a man goes off in search of the son he might or might not have; *Transamerica* (2005), in which a transsexual woman juggles her desire to meet her son with fear of rejection; *Mouth to Mouth* (2005), in which a disenfranchised teen girl gets swept up with a volatile revolutionary movement; and, *The Go-Getter* (2007), in which a teenage boy goes off in search of his long-lost brother.

Sharing Our Mixes

Want to share your Ribbon Drive mixes and listen to some that others have created? Create an account at 8tracks, and search for the *ribbon drive* tag (8tracks.com/explore/ribbon_drive).

I'm going somewhere, and I want you to join me. It's a place that always seems just past our reach. A mixture of myth and reality. This place, it smells familiar, and yet it beats the heart like first times do. It's wedged between a mix tape, a throw-away comment and a shifter. It's going to take a lot of open road to get to.

But open road's all we've ever really got, anyway.

Ribbon Drive is a story game about road trips, mix tapes, and self-discovery. It draws inspiration from movies like Wristcutters, Little Miss Sunshine, and Everything is Illuminated. Our goal is to create a meaningful experience. We let the music guide us. We let the road throw us curves. We rethink our attachment to the future.

Created by Joe McDaldno
For 3-5 players, 2-4 hours

Buried Without Ceremony

