Empty Roads (by Tamás Kisbali/Evil Scientist)

2015 *A collective road-tripping RPG*

"Two characters in search of a country song
Just make believe, but so in love
Two characters been listenin' all night long
For voices from Nashville above"
- The Magnetic Fields -

In search of a concept

This game was created for the Loreshapers design contest. While brainstorming the theme – *"Meeting Strangers"* – one of my first associations was that staple line from Westerns: "we don't like strangers here". Dusty backroads and sleepy towns appeared next, inhabited by a cast of off‑beat, weird, introverted characters: "strangers". When I run a game, I always pay great attention to my NPCs (adding little quirks for each one), and I find that players really like interacting with them, because

strangers are interesting.

Why not turn that into a role‑playing game? I like (player & non‑player) character‑driven stories. So for my game I desperately needed a context that allows me to include as many strangers as possible. We have to keep on truckin', because constant movement is a chance to get in touch with all the weirdos. Therefore

the protagonist of "Empty Roads"
embarks on a journey.

But... To where, exactly? She may have a goal (*Las Vegas. To get away from the cops. The place where I was*

born. To find a job), but on the long run, this is merely a decoy. The protagonist hits the road because staying where she was is no longer possible. Enter the cliché: a road trip as a quest of self-exploration. Thus the real goal of the journey is to find a goal. The strangers reflect on the protagonist's own state. All is well and magnificently existential, but role-playing games are supposed to be for a group of players. That's why in "Empty Roads"

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*the protagonist character
is shared by the gaming group.*

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She or he roams the landscape created on-the-go by all members of the *collective*, interacting with strangers, searching for, well,

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something.

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This is the basic premise. Stay tuned!

Putting the concept to work - preparation

"Empty Roads" is a collaborative storytelling game. You **need** a group of like-minded players (4-5 is optimal). One person of the group becomes the MODERATOR. The moderator keeps the game going by reminding the fellow players that it's time for the protagonist to move on (see later). You also **need** a bunch of papers and pencils for jotting down notes. No dice or other accessories are necessary. Then you **need to agree upon** a **basic setting**: time and place of the story. You can keep this brief. Then, there are two kinds of people in "Empty Roads":

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the protagonist and the strangers.

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The world is perceived through the eyes of the protagonist-with-capital-P. The story is the story of the protagonist searching for that ambivalent something. So no wonder

Step ONE Creating the protagonist,

is a crucial part of the game. The players get together and envision their collective character. "Empty Roads" relies on a certain, somewhat archetypical figure. The following ambiguous bullet points provide an outline for your protagonist:

1. The protagonist is an outsider in her place of origin.
2. The protagonist embarks on the journey because she has no other option left.
3. The protagonist burns the bridges, throws away the key, leaves everything behind, except
   a. the burden,
   b. painful memories,
   c. a photo of a loved one.
   Don't be afraid of drama.
4. The protagonist is ALONE.
   a. *optional*: the protagonist may be allowed a non-human companion.

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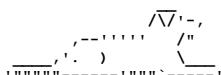
This is written with irony and in a tongue-in-cheek manner, but it's meant to be kind of serious. The protagonist is a tragic hero, alienated, lonely, lost and estranged. Have respect. Now onto

(the kind of optional)

Step TWO The Strangers,

that is, the characters the protagonists interacts with throughout the journey. Most of an "Empty Roads" session consists of improvisation, but it always helps if you come up with a few "stock strangers" beforehand. You can find a brief list of stock strangers in the appendix. Let's cut the chase. Behold:

Step THREE Playing your first act

❶ The players all work together to tell the story of the protagonist. The story consists of encounters with various strangers. The encounters are united into acts. Following road movie logic,

an act is all the encounters that happen in a single location,

e.g. "the protagonist arrives into a small town, a tight community with a dark secret" → this is the **basic frame** of the act, a short description of the location. It is created collectively. Listening to your fellow players' ideas is important. It's the key to this whole game.

❷ Next, the players populate the location with **strangers** – the inhabitants of the location the protagonist will get in touch with one way or another.

Up to this point, it's all a collaborative effort. But when the frame is set and populated, ❸ the players divide the roles:

one player plays the protagonist, the others play strangers.

These are not fixed roles, change around the protagonist's impersonator in each act. Nevertheless, the **character** should remain **consistent**. The players can and should offer input on how the protagonist is depicted during the encounter. The story you create should be entertaining and meaningful, it should include

conflict and consequences.

Make sure you put all kinds of dramatic tools to use. If needed, introduce minor strangers (played by anybody who's available), forces of nature (storm breaks out), everything goes.

Step FOUR Evaluating and moving on.

When does an act **end**? There is no strict limit, but as a rule of thumb – when

the protagonist interacted with all strangers and resolved at least one major conflict.

After this, the protagonist resumes the journey. Settling down (especially straight after the first act) will probably lead to a disaster. Many more strangers await, and the protagonist's wounds are hard to heal.

But before moving on to the next location & strangers, the players should **evaluate** the finished act. When looking back and retrospectively analyzing the events and reactions, certain

*patterns and **themes** emerge.*

One or two of these key things should be noted, written down and set in stone: the players should try and make these elements

re-surface during the following acts.

If during the first act the protagonist tried to reach salvation by helping the less fortunate (despite being a bloody gangster in the past), make that a reoccurring theme, why not.

It is also an option for a special stranger to become a **companion** of the protagonist and follow him or her to the next act. This should be used rarely (maybe once or twice per story) – after all, the protagonist has a hard time dealing with human relationships. The companion is very a strong dramatic tool.

Repeat evaluation after every act, update the list of themes. Then move on to the next act, frame it and play it, as prescribed in step THREE.

Using the THEMES

These themes play an important part in "Empty Roads". If a theme has successfully re-surfaced, put a mark next to it. If it's fading (hasn't reappeared), remove a mark or remove the theme if there are no marks left. The disappearance of a theme can be treated as a dramatic change, a "step back" on the journey of the protagonist. But if a theme is strong enough, keep pushing:

it might be what the protagonist
was looking for all along.

You, the players have the power to finish (if not "win") this game. After a number of acts (4? 7? hard to tell, depends on your playing style and the story) a dominating theme can be used to give the protagonist some closure, peace, more or less sustainable existence.

In this respect, "Empty Roads" is a **story**telling game:

it has a definite
end.

Some closing remarks

❶ The game was written with a vague "1970s American road-movie" setting in mind. But that's not the only way "Empty Roads" can be played. The same dramatic story can take place anywhere. Set your journey against a backdrop of Indonesian islands, with an outcast fisherman and his raft. An intergalactic bounty hunter visiting every space port and cantina. A kindergarten teacher haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter travelling the Balkans. Anything goes, just keep your themes and characterisations consistent. Make it interesting.

❷ "Empty Roads" relies heavily on improvisation. A good group of players who have known each other for some time is an advantage. But if you want to play the game with new people or run it at a convention, you can always turn the moderator into a full-fledged game master. Pre-plan the story, the strangers, the encounters (but leave the protagonist to the players!).

❸ Have fun!

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Appendix – Stock strangers

- The wise old man will give advice, flaunt his shotgun.
- The model housewife will have a nervous breakdown.
- The once famous writer who now lives in seclusion, might have faked his/her own death.
- The obsessive kid will envy the protagonist and will want to tag along.
- The sheriff will cause problems for the protagonist.
- The "normal" guy will reveal himself to be a conspiracy theory nut.
- The waitress will stand up against her abusive husband.
- The local drunkard will tell his story.
- The local farmer will ask for help.
- The biker chick will give the protagonist a ride.

These stock strangers are just empty shells for you to add your own flavour!

Appendix – Stock locations

- The motel (with a stranger in each room).
- The once prosperous rural community.
- The trailer park.
- The lonely house at the edge of nowhere.
- The "normal", everyday sleepy town.
- The travelling hippy group.