



a **GAME** ABOUT  
**LANGUAGE** and  
HOW *it* **DIES**.



# DIALECT

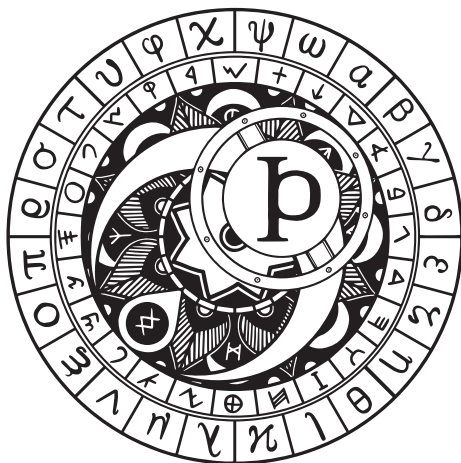


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Dedicated to Indie Games on Demand  
*For giving us a home to play*





# THORNY GAMES

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CHAPTER 1.  
**BEGINNING**

“We die. That may be  
the meaning of life.  
But we do language.  
That may be the  
measure of our lives.”

— *Toni Morrison*

*What is Dialect?*      **2**

*The Facilitator*      **4**

*Telling a Story Together*      **5**

## THIS IS A GAME ABOUT LANGUAGE.

Do you recall your first words? They were something simple or silly, no doubt. You were probably toothy and drooling and most definitely loud. Even if you don't remember, you surely said them. The act of saying something—anything—may seem so humble and small, and yet it's quite extraordinary. By speaking and developing language, you were exercising something big, something fundamental to being human.

This seed is in each of us, a profound spark that separates us as a species and drives a line between humans, animals, and robots (for now, at least). From your first words, you were anchoring your connection to the world and your place in it. Language is the logic of your internal clockwork; it's how your brain organizes information and how you convey yourself to others. It is your innately endowed technology and because it's so utterly human, the markers for your culture and identity are embedded within it.

## THIS IS A GAME ABOUT LANGUAGE.

Language tells a story. Woven into the way we speak, we reveal what we care about, where we come from, and who we are. It changes as we change. More than ever, we now stand at a critical juncture. Far beyond the natural pace of change, the world is losing languages at an alarming rate. They are being lost to the mundane everyday pressures of money, violence, social prestige, climate change, and frayed community. As global communication connects us it also risks compromising our cultural core. Right now, almost ten percent of languages on Earth have fewer than ten speakers. In embracing what brings us together, we threaten to erase what makes us special.

What happens when a language is lost? The world takes another step towards sameness and we lose a shade of humanity. This may seem inevitable as we hurtle headlong into the singularity, but it is far from it. In order to fight this future, we must fight to understand it.

## THIS IS A GAME ABOUT LANGUAGE AND HOW IT DIES.

# WHAT IS DIALECT?

*Dialect* is a story game about an isolated community, their language, and what it means for that language to be lost. It's for three to five people and runs in three to four hours.

Let's tease that apart.

## STORY GAMES

Story games are a structured way for people to tell stories together. The rules of the game help players invent fiction and share experiences that would be hard to craft from a blank page. In *Dialect* all players have equal authority at the table and a shared stake in the narrative. By giving more of yourself, you'll get more from the game.

## THE ISOLATION

In *Dialect*, you'll define and explore an isolated community through its beginning, rise, and end. You may be pilgrims to Mars, a cyberpunk gang fighting a megacorp, or students at an English boarding school. Some Isolations will be voluntary, others not. Some will choose to barricade themselves against an unforgiving world while others lie stranded and adrift from home. On their own, one thing is certain—these people will be left to simmer in what makes them special. They will change because of it. You will decide what they become.

## LANGUAGE BUILDING

You'll tell the story of the Isolation by building their language. Over the course of the game, you will create new words off the fundamental traits of the community, the pivotal events that have defined their lives, and how they respond to a changing world. You will use the language you create to explore your character and advance the story of the Isolation. Each time a new word is made, the language grows, and the community is tightened.

*Dialect's* core spark comes from gradually building up elements of language among players, who gain fluency in their own dialect over the course of play. From age to age, the Isolation will change and you'll see those changes reflected in their language. In the end, you'll define what happens to that language and community. Players take away both the story they've told and the dialect they've built together.

## BEFORE GATHERING

Gathering people to play is the most important thing you'll do. Find people who will be excited to build on each other's ideas. The group should be genuinely curious to hear what the rest of the table is creating, rather than only focused on their own contributions. To be honest, that's probably a requirement for any game to be good.

**New to roleplaying? All the better. We'll walk you through each step.**

# THIS IS OUR STORY

While playing *Dialect*, everyone will have equal say over the world and the language you build in it. The rules guide you to establish what's true together.

The rules live in ink. A game is more than rules. We are people and play is messy. No amount of ink can lead us perfectly through that journey. In play and storytelling, a human touch is necessary to guide the experience. The Facilitator is the shepherd on that path.

## THE FACILITATOR

It's typical for the player who teaches the rules to become a de facto guide to ensure the game runs smoothly. We believe in being a little more deliberate. By explicitly designating a Facilitator, the other players recognize this player has a special role in keeping the game fun and engaging for everyone. Choose a Facilitator before starting your game.

As Facilitator, here is your charter.

**Know the Game.** You'll be the one teaching the rules and making sure players are holding to them. You should have an idea of how the game flows before starting, but you don't need to know everything by heart.

**Keep Play Tight.** Sometimes a call needs to be made. Perhaps a discussion is taking too long, or two players seem unable to resolve a creative dispute. You're there to push folks to consensus, or to make a choice. Think of ways that both parties' inputs can be part of the outcome.

**Make Space.** Be the voice for the shy or unheard. If someone is having trouble getting their ideas across, or if they seem uncomfortable interjecting on their own, be the person who asks for their input and gives them the spotlight. Help them be a part of the story and your game will be richer for it.

You'll also be the one making sure everyone feels safe together. Discuss safety with your players before the game starts; the mechanics covered in the Appendix on Page 132 are there to help.

Being a Facilitator is work, but it is good work. You'll still get to play, and you'll be helping your friends share in the best possible experience together. You are why this game is happening. Thank you.

## TELLING A STORY TOGETHER

We live for stories. They put meaning behind the ebb and flow of days. We see the world through the prism of our stories, and in big and humble ways, they form our legacy. Building a fiction together with friends is a particular kind of fun, where you mix and muddle ideas and end up in unexpected places. Your players are the lifeblood of the game and together you'll be enacting a ritual performed since time immemorial.

Get ready.

Let us share three mottoes to gently guide your play. With them, your group can dig in regardless of experience level. If this kind of game is new to your players, consider reviewing these points before starting.

**Be Obvious.** A story isn't a competition to be original, clever, or funny. Be authentic and grant yourself permission to do the obvious thing. This will make the game more fun, less stressful, and more honest. By combining what is obvious to all of us together, we will make something that is anything but.

**Listen.** When someone introduces an idea, encourage them and build on it. See where it goes. Embrace it when someone takes your idea in an unanticipated direction. Together you'll create something more intricate and wonderful than you ever could alone, but only if you listen to one another.

**Be Kind.** Being creative is being vulnerable. We're here first and foremost as people and as friends. Value the people at the table more than the game. If someone seems uncomfortable, or if you sense something is amiss, think about why that might be. Try to help.

As you build your language and world, keep these three principles in mind. Use the words others introduce and be excited when someone uses yours in a way you hadn't originally considered. Think about how you can highlight what others have made.









CHAPTER 2.  
**RULES OF PLAY**

“Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.”

— *T.S. Eliot*

<i>Before You Start</i>	<b>9</b>
<i>Creating the Isolation</i>	<b>15</b>
<i>Creating Characters</i>	<b>23</b>
<i>Turn Sequence</i>	<b>31</b>
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# BEFORE YOU START

YOUR GAME IS A CONVERSATION.  
WE'RE HERE TO GUIDE YOU THROUGH IT.

At a high level, *Dialect* is about telling the story of a group of people by building their language. They are known as the Isolation. As the game progresses, the language the players make together will bend, change, and eventually break as the story of the Isolation comes to an end.

The game takes place over a sequence of turns. In each turn, a player will play a card from their hand. With this card they will change the language in some important way for the community. This may mean defining a new piece of language, changing existing words as the Isolation evolves, or ultimately removing pieces of language as the story demands. Over the course of the game, your group will build a dialect that is particular to you and you alone.

Players will each embody a character that will be their voice in the Isolation. Each character will have a different relationship to the fundamental traits of the community. This will manifest in who they are and how they speak.

In what follows, we'll teach you how to prepare for a game of *Dialect*.

# USING THIS BOOK

Let's discuss how the rules for *Dialect* are structured. The rules are divided into sections corresponding to the different phases of play in the order that you'll need them while running a game. These sections are:

1. **Creating the Isolation** (Page 15) Communally building the world of the Isolation together starting from a playset.
2. **Creating Characters** (Page 23) Defining who you'll be within the Isolation.
3. **The Turn Sequence** (Page 31) The core flow of the game and the engine for language building.
4. **The Ages** (Page 57) Progressing the story of the Isolation.

These sections are broken down into steps to further explain how that portion of the game is played. Each step begins with a set of core rules in bullet point:

- **This is an example of a core rule.** These are what the players need to know in order to play.

After the core rules, there are notes and principles to help the Facilitator. These provide context and clarification to guide play and make the most of your game.