In any conversation, we need someone to talk with. Without a player, a game is just a set of instructions, whether executed by a computer or human beings who learn what cards to draw on their turn. An unplayed game is like a piece of sheet music: you can see its potential and imagine what it might be like brought to life. You can grasp from notation or rules that it’s complex and maybe glimpse its nature. Instructions need someone to carry them out to leap from untapped potential into a living, changing experience. To deepen our practice of playing games, we have to think about our own role in shaping what happens—and understand how our role as game designers intersects and tangles with the choices of players.
Players

My first real player was my little sister. I was around 12 years old when I discovered a digital game that let you design and play your own levels: the Macintosh version of *Lode Runner* (1984). It boasted a straightforward but deep system of climbing up ladders and racing across platforms, collecting bags of gold, running from nebuloously defined enemies, and digging holes for them to fall into (see Figure 5.1).

![Lode Runner level](image)

**Figure 5.1** A typical level in *Lode Runner*, with the player at the bottom, three enemies, and six bags of gold to collect.

I found the real magic of *Lode Runner* to be in the level-editing mode, which put the dozen or so objects of *Lode Runner* at my disposal. All of a sudden I was experimenting, creating scenes where the hero would be overwhelmed instantly by a horde of implacable enemies, or clamber and fall into a treasure chamber with hundreds of coins. I could create new scenarios that were completely unlike anything that came with the game; I could tell simple stories that played out in a series of twisty, challenging corridors.

When the player has collected every bag of gold in a level of *Lode Runner*, a new object often appears: a ladder that reaches to the top of the screen, allowing exit to the next level. In my own levels, I came up with new ways of using this suddenly appearing ladder. The space of the level would suddenly rearrange, and it would become clear that completing it required getting back across the dangerous level, being chased by enemies, to reach a previously invisible path. Suddenly I was creating plots with turning points!

Even though I could play those levels myself to see how they unfolded, there was something missing: a player, someone else who could experience the dangers and surprises I was crafting. I wanted to express something to someone, through this game. I wanted to see how another player would respond and if what I'd done would be clear. So I started using my 10-year-old sister as a guinea pig.
My sister knew how to play *Lode Runner*, and I’d make her sit in my well-warmed chair once I had finished creating a level. I’d tell her, “Go on, see if you can beat it!” She could beat my easier levels without much trouble, and although she had a big smile when she did, I felt disappointed somehow. I could tell that she was smiling in part because she’d beaten me somehow—as if I’d asked her a riddle and she’d managed to outwit me and find the solution with no help.

Before long I started creating fiendishly difficult levels for her to play: they required precise timing and exact knowledge of how to manipulate the movements of each enemy in order to win. These scenarios had lots of hidden trapdoors that looked like ordinary sections of floor but dropped the player right through them into certain death. I orchestrated the behavior of the enemies so that they’d start chasing the player at exactly the moment I wanted.

My sister would insist that these levels were impossible, and I’d smugly show her that they weren’t... well, as long as you had exactly the right skill, the correct strategy, if you knew the right path through the scene. As the designer, I possessed all the above, of course. I was thinking more like a player competing with a sibling, though, rather than crafting something for her. I wanted to beat her and see her admit defeat. That’s a natural impulse that I’ve seen play out many times since in games and levels made by kids for each other to play. But creating a system that’s practically impossible for anyone but the creator is just a tiny, tantalizing fraction of what we can do when we create games and ask others to play.

I was trying to create a harrowing experience for my sister, something with narrow escapes, unanticipated secrets, and perfect moments where a choice to run left or right made for an instant life-or-death difference. All the pieces were there, but with these fiendishly difficult levels, I hadn’t succeeded in engaging my sister, in showing her the magic I was trying to conjure. Eventually, when faced with a level full of tricks that were impossible to understand ahead of time, she rolled her eyes and refused to play.

**Creating Conversation**

So far, this book has talked extensively about the elements of vocabulary: verbs and objects, the pieces of context that aid in understanding those elements, and the ways those elements combine into scenes that develop verbs and create pacing. In the second part of the book, we’ll look at some broader questions: why might you want to pace the development of a particular verb? What kind of story is conveyed when contextual elements, objects, and verbs work together... or against each other? What might you try to say with all that vocabulary? And how might you invite players to say something in response? Do you want to invite players to put their own stamp on your game, or are you trying to convey something that’s best understood if a player primarily absorbs and listens to what your game has to say?
We use the vocabulary of written and spoken language to communicate with other people. The vocabulary of games allows us to express ourselves in tremendously powerful ways, saying things with systems in ways that words can’t. It lets us create different kinds of dialogue with each other. We’re lucky to live in a time when expressive systems—another way of thinking about games—are being explored by creators and players in all sorts of new ways, to converse about and reflect on our every idea.

It’s compelling to think of a game as a conversation: players make choices and use verbs within a system. In multiplayer games, these choices can communicate with other players. A single press of a button or move of a chess piece can convey aggression or uncertainty or less obvious concepts that are specific to a particular game. Players who are highly conversant in a system can read the moves of an opponent, whether human or computer controlled, and understand what’s being said even without words.

As the creator of a game, you also participate in the conversation, but in an unusual and special way. Unlike the times I peered over my sister’s shoulder and watched her play *Lode Runner*, you’re usually not there to watch your players. Instead, you’ve facilitated a conversation by deciding many aspects of how it will work beforehand. As a game creator, you craft the particular vocabulary of its conversation, deciding how verbs will develop and shaping the space of possibilities in which the conversation will happen. As creators, we try to shape a space where a good conversation with or between players could happen; we hope that players won’t throw their hands up in frustration and leave or get bored and drift away.

During a play session of a single-player game—the kind of game that’s the primary focus of this book—all the conversation is happening between the creators of the game and the player. It’s a tricky kind of conversation to have. As the creator, you have to hope that what you’re saying in the conversation—through the rules and shaping of the experience as well as the words, images, or sounds you’ve added to the mix—gets across and finds a player, somewhere out there, who responds with choices, thoughts, and maybe even interesting strategies and emotional engagement.

This challenge can feel like a gamble, like sealing a letter in a bottle and hoping someone figures out how to open that bottle and understands what you wrote. If you’re drawn to creating games—if you’ve ever felt the spark of excitement that I did when I started making *Lode Runner* levels for my sister—then maybe you have things to say which can’t simply be expressed in words, but which could find a compelling form in the systems of a game. Take the gamble! The good news is that in recent decades, many others have gone before you. We’ve tried, failed, succeeded, and tried again. Despite the fact that we’re all still learning exactly how to talk about games, finding words to use and models to think with, creators of games have found a lot of techniques and tricks to get our “letters in a bottle” read.
Iterating to Fun and Beyond

When I first started making levels in *Lode Runner*, I intuitively discovered one of the most pervasively used techniques for refining a game and fine-tuning the conversations that can emerge from it: I got someone to play it, went back and changed it, and made her play it again. Games need players, and as the participants in the conversation who might not be there when our games our played, we need to see people play and hear about their experience. Playtesting and iteration—the process of changing a game based on what you see and hear from the player during play—are the cornerstone of many creators’ process. After all, very few composers could create great works of music without ever being able to hear them; Beethoven, who lost his hearing, is the astonishing exception.

We playtest because we want to see a response to determine whether we’ve succeeded in eliciting the kinds of responses we were hoping for. Usually, the response a game creator is looking for is a smile, a look of intense concentration, the raised hands and lifted eyes that accompany a feeling of victory—all the hallmarks of someone who’s really into what’s going on and having fun. Playtesting lets us spot the barriers to reaching that place and then think about ways around those barriers. The barriers might include confusion about how to use a verb or pacing that’s too difficult for the kinds of players you’re hoping will play your game.

“Fun” is the most popular and traditional goal that game designers try to reach, however. Think about the metaphor of conversations again: talking with others, especially your circle of friends or other like-minded people, has often been described as one of the most consistently engaging and pleasurable things in life. That doesn’t mean that all conversations are fun. Some are deadly serious, even if they’re hard work to stay engaged with, and some conversations are necessary to convey important ideas. More and more, game designers are finding that fun is just the traditional role that games have played in society. We have to remember that it’s what most players expect of games still, but there’s a huge variety of other kinds of system-driven conversations that remain to be explored.

*Papers, Please* (2013) by Lucas Pope doesn’t try to present itself as a straightforwardly fun game. It tells you that you’re going to work: you play an immigration inspector, checking and stamping the documents of hundreds of would-be border-crossers. You’re employed by a harsh, totalitarian regime that tramples on rights and demands your diligent and detail-oriented assistance in exchange for a meager stipend to keep your family alive. The scenario is grim and mind-numbing, and so is the gameplay: you’re literally inspecting paperwork for discrepancy, expiration, and forgery and stamping it APPROVED or REJECTED, over and over. For each mistake you make, you’re penalized, which could make a life-or-death difference for your inspector’s family.
This may not sound fun at all, on the surface—but Papers, Please manages to thoroughly express the workings of an unjust system that you find yourself trapped in when you play. You’ve got to decide whether to prioritize helping mistreated and threatened border-crossers or preserve your own family’s health and wealth. The shape of the game—the difficulty and balance of costs and payment—always holds out the possibility that if you’re good enough at your job, you can get away with some purposeful “slip-ups” to help people. Just as surely, your power to act is limited by the fact that you’re only one cog in the machine.

Lucas Pope playtested Papers, Please extensively to fine-tune the workings of the game’s fictional injustices. As one of the participants in the web forum where he posted early versions of the game, I took part in that process and saw the game get better at eliciting the kinds of feelings and experiences he was aiming for. Do all games benefit from playtesting, though? There’s an argument that can be made that the goal of some games is less about persuading the player to respond, feel particular things, or make certain kinds of choices, and more about expressing something that the creator wants to say—regardless of whether a particular player is willing to hear it.

When we playtest and iterate a game, we make changes that attempt to adapt the game’s form and the possible spaces that can emerge from it to the psychology and behavior of players. If we’re making a game that’s intended for young children, for example, we might change the controls so that they’re easier for players with less developed reflexes and motor skills, or we might adjust the difficulty of the game differently than we would for an experienced gamer. We move the game away from purely being about our own expression to adapt it for an audience.
That’s not necessarily a bad thing, of course, but it means changing what we’re saying or how we’re saying it through game systems to attract, retain, or persuade players into hearing and engaging.

**Your Conversation**

What happens when game creators simply put their thoughts out there in an expressive system and ask players to listen without compromising or adapting? What if a game is trying to express something real about the creator’s life? Anna’s game *dys4ia* (2012) reveals her own experiences of taking hormones through dozens of small systems; it asks players to help unfold that story, piece by piece. *dys4ia* is a game that’s less about players choosing what happens or expressing themselves and more about a kind of listening through interaction to understand a kind of life experience that most players don’t share.

Telling and listening are part of conversations, too. Sometimes it makes sense to rest our active responses and simply hear what the person who’s talking is trying to say and understand what they mean in the stories they tell—or the systems they build. Games can present us with overt choices and ask us what we think; they can also show us that in some circumstances and systems, choices are limited or don’t necessarily make a difference. For example, as a single immigration inspector in *Papers, Please*, you can’t help every single person cross the border. When you play *dys4ia*, you can’t change the course of Anna’s life or experiment with the system to see what would happen if she stopped taking hormones or reacted differently to emotionally trying circumstances. It’s part of the story of her life, and it recounts through its systems what’s already happened.

When you go into a conversation, you help shape how it’ll evolve and turn out. Conversations can be polite and formal or raucous and free-wheeling; the same is true of games. As the creator of a game, even if you’re not present when it’s played, you’ll make many choices that determine and limit what might happen in the conversation of play. Games can present us with overt choices and ask us what we think—like an interrogator demanding answers or a friend posing questions to help us understand how we feel. What would you do in a difficult situation? What kinds of choices would you make when faced with limited resources? We can also create wider spaces within games where we invite players to come up with their own strategies, reactions, and explorations into territories that we might never have anticipated as the creators of the game’s vocabulary. Or we can limit those spaces and ask players to listen—to understand that not every system is open to being changed through the agency of players, not every story can be diverted toward a happy ending, and not every difficult challenge can be mastered and conquered.

These are all different ways of communicating through games, and they raise all sorts of questions. What kind of space do you want to shape? If you have something you want to say, how do
you get that across in a way that feels honest and true to players? How do you decide when to try to adapt to players’ expectations and psychology to try to elicit feelings of fun or persuasion, and when do you stop doing that in favor of holding on to your own expressions and just ask players to listen? If you’re inviting more open contributions to the conversation from players, how do you help them become conversant enough with our vocabulary to say something interesting in reply? Can we create space for a player to tell their own stories and express themselves in the space of a game, while also conveying what we have to say?

The brightest and most passionate game designers in the world continue to struggle with these questions because it’s exciting to explore a space with so much possibility that remains untapped. Although there are no definitive answers, the next few chapters share plenty of ideas about and around these questions. Maybe you’ll come up with some of your own answers.

Twenty years after I started experimenting with *Lode Runner*, I had a job designing games and another 10-year-old sister in my family. When I went home for the holidays one year, I brought my youngest sister one of the games I’d been working on. She was delighted and played it for weeks, mastering the intricacies of its system. She talked to me about it, asked me for help, and showed me her strategy. Inside the game, around it, and beyond it, we had a conversation.