

Gaming the Story

Writing a Video Game Narrative

Fall 2022 · 18-Week Course · Northern Putnam County BOCES, NY

Course Title	Gaming the Story: Writing a Video Game Narrative
Term	Fall 2022
Location	OC21: Northern Putnam County BOCES, NY (online via Schoology + in-person sessions)
Instructor	K. Keener (she/her) — Kay or Ms. Keener
Contact	Schoology inbox or kkeener3@schools.nyc.gov or kakeener@gmail.com
Civic Seal	This course fulfills requirements for the NYS Civic Seal
Platform	Schoology

Course Description

Gaming the Story: Writing a Video Game Narrative is a 18-week course that uses the design of transformative games as a vehicle for civic engagement. Students explore how games can serve as tools for social change, studying games that aim to build empathy, shift perspective, and inspire action on real-world issues.

The course is built around a single driving project: students design their own original transformative game, developing it through a professional-style pitch deck. Each week's essential questions and case study games help students build the vocabulary and design thinking they need to make their pitch compelling and meaningful.

This course fulfills one of the requirements for the New York State Civic Seal, a designation awarded at graduation by the NYS Board of Regents to students who demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and action.

Special Thanks to Sabrina Culyaba who has designed and published as a free resource her book: *The Transformative Framework*. She was highly influential in my thinking about how to player transformation is designed and iterated.

Alignment with New York State: Portrait of a Graduate

The New York State Portrait of a Graduate, adopted by the Board of Regents in July 2025, defines six interconnected attributes—Academically Prepared, Creative Innovator, Critical Thinker, Effective Communicator, Global Citizen, and Reflective and Future Focused—that describe the skills and dispositions a graduate should demonstrate, all grounded in Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education. Because this course is organized around a single, sustained design project supported by weekly analysis, reading, discussion, and reflection, it develops all six attributes over the arc of the semester. The connections are described below.

Academically Prepared. *A graduate demonstrates a foundation in the state's learning standards and the knowledge and skills needed for college, career, civic life, and service.* The course builds and applies literacy, research, and analytical skills aligned to New York's ELA and social studies standards. Students read and interpret informational and argumentative texts—an excerpt from the *Broke* book, Molly Cobb's article on the ethics of *Detroit: Become Human*, and an interview with the writer of *Never Alone*—and conduct source research to inform their design decisions (Weeks 13–14). These skills are consolidated in the final pitch deck, a performance task that requires students to apply a semester of design concepts, and the course fulfills one requirement for the NYS Civic Seal.

Creative Innovator. *A graduate uses imagination, curiosity, and flexible thinking to solve problems and develop new ideas and products, adapting as circumstances change.* The central task of the course is the design of an original transformative game, developed incrementally from higher-order purpose through audience, character, and core mechanics. Students generate and test new ideas rather than reproduce existing ones, and the later weeks build in structured revision: after drafting pitch slides (Weeks 11–15), students present their work and then revise it in response to feedback (Week 17), practicing the iterative design process directly.

Critical Thinker. *A graduate analyzes information, evaluates evidence, and identifies patterns and connections across sources to address complex problems.* Each week students analyze a case-study game as a designed system, examining how its purpose, barriers, and mechanics work together to produce change in the player. Beginning with games about misinformation and media bias in Week 1, students practice evaluating how information is constructed and how it can mislead. Over the semester they compare multiple games to identify the shared design principles that make a transformative game effective, transferring those patterns to their own work.

Effective Communicator. *A graduate expresses ideas clearly through speaking, writing, and media for a range of purposes and audiences, and listens to other perspectives.* The pitch deck is a professional, multimedia argument addressed to a defined audience—a grant committee—and requires students to tailor their message to that audience and purpose. Students present their pitch orally and respond to feedback in Week 17, write weekly reflections that develop their thinking in prose, and participate in ongoing discussion of each game, which requires listening to and engaging with the interpretations of others.

Global Citizen. *A graduate acts responsibly across local, global, and digital communities and applies civic knowledge to contribute to a diverse, democratic society.* The course content engages sustained civic and global issues, including asylum and refugee experience (*The Waiting Game*, *Bury Me My Love*), immigration and moral compromise (*Papers Please*), poverty and systemic barriers (*Broke*), climate policy (*The Climate Game*), and Indigenous storytelling (*Never Alone*), the last of which supports the framework's emphasis on culturally responsive education. Games on misinformation and media bias develop digital citizenship. The final assessment is explicitly civic and local: students design a game intended to improve an aspect of their own community, framed as a project funded by their local government.

Reflective and Future Focused. *A graduate reflects to identify strengths and areas for growth, sets goals, maintains supportive relationships, and makes responsible decisions that support well-being.* Reflection is a recurring structural element of the course. Students complete a reflection each week connecting the week's games and readings to their own evolving design, and the course concludes with a final reflection letter (Week 18) and a course survey (Week 19). The closing essential question—how designing a transformative game changes the way the designer thinks—asks students to examine their own growth as thinkers and makers over the semester.

[Evaluative Rubric to Determine Evolution of Competencies](#)

Course Essential Questions

- What makes a game a successful transformative game?
- Why is it important that your game transform players?
- What is the ecosystem in which your game must create change?
- How should players be different after playing your game?
- Why aren't your players already transformed?
- What understandings are essential for your players to be transformed?
- What narrative structures help a transformative game tell a story?
- What core mechanics increase player agency and transformation?
- How does reliable research strengthen the design of a transformative game?
- How does designing a transformative game change the way the designer thinks?

Final Assessment: Pitching Your Transformative Game

Your Role: You are a game designer for a company that has just received a grant from your local government to design a game that will improve some aspect of your community.

Your Task: Design a transformative game and pitch it in a professional slide deck. Your pitch must demonstrate deep thinking across all the course's design frameworks.

Your slide deck will include:

- Higher-Order Purpose — What is the deeper mission of your game?
- Audience — Who is your intended player?
- Context — What is the environment your audience lives in?
- Barriers — Why hasn't your audience already changed?
- Player Transformation Statement — How will players be different after playing?
- Domain Concepts & Experts — What research and expert voices inform your design?
- Character — Who is the playable character and what is their journey?
- Core Mechanics — What actions will players take and how do they support transformation?

Weekly Reflections

Each week includes a reflection assignment. Reflections are how you develop your own design thinking. They are personal, honest, and process-focused — there are no wrong answers. Reflections should connect the week's games and readings to your own evolving game concept.

Games & Media Used in the Course

Games

- Harmony Square — Week 1 (web-based; misinformation & civic manipulation)

- We Become What We Behold — Week 1 (web-based; media and bias)
- The Waiting Game — Week 2 (web-based; asylum seeker empathy)
- Broke: The Game — Week 3 (mobile, free; poverty & systemic barriers)
- Detroit: Become Human — Week 4 (playthrough viewing; AI ethics & decision-making)
- Papers Please — Week 5 (mobile download; immigration & moral compromise)
- Killing Me Softly — Week 6 (web-based; barriers to change)
- Bury Me My Love — Week 7 (playthrough/documentary; refugee experience)
- Jellyvale: A Matchtale — Week 9 (mobile; designed by guest speaker Brandon Suzuki)
- Fish Simulation Game — Week 10 (web-based; environmental decision-making)
- The Climate Game — Week 10 (web-based; climate policy)
- Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) — Week 11 & 14–15 (mobile; Indigenous storytelling)
- Florence — Week 12 (mobile; relationships & character journey)

Optional / Supplemental

- Coming Out Simulator (web-based)
- The Evolution of Trust (web-based)
- FoldIt — Protein Folding Citizen Science Game
- Re-Mission — Game for cancer patients
- VirTra — Law enforcement training simulation

Reading & Media

- Broke: The Game — Book excerpt (first 15 pages), Dana Gold
- "The Question of Ethics in Detroit: Become Human" — Molly Cobb, Vector (2019)
- Interview: Never Alone writer Ishmael Hope — neveralonegame.com
- Documentary: Bury Me My Love — A Split/Screen Documentary (segments, YouTube)
- Final Assessment Task Sheet
- Example pitch slidedeck: Never Alone model (provided by instructor)
- Hero's Journey Chart — Game (downloadable worksheet)
- Core Mechanics Reflection worksheet

Platform, Logistics & Communication

This course runs primarily through Schoology. Most games are web-based or free mobile downloads. Game store gift cards will be provided by the instructor for any paid mobile downloads (e.g., Papers Please, Jellyvale).

In-person sessions are held at Northern Putnam County BOCES. The Week 9 guest speaker session is in person on a Friday at 10am EST; the session will be recorded for students who cannot attend.

To contact the instructor, use the Schoology inbox or email kkeener3@schools.nyc.gov. The instructor also uses kakeener@gmail.com for slide submissions.

Weekly Schedule at a Glance

Wk	Topic	Essential Question	Key Activities
1	Orientation	—	- In-person BOCES meeting - Course goals overview - Play Harmony Square & We Become What We Behold - Week 1 reflection
2	Intro to Transformative Games	<i>What makes a game a successful transformative game?</i>	- Overview: 6 types of transformative games - Play The Waiting Game - Discussion of The Waiting Game - Week 2 reflection
3	Higher-Level Purpose	<i>Why is it important that your game transform players?</i>	- Play Broke: The Game - Read first 15 pages of Broke book - Discussion of higher-level purpose - Reflection on your game's potential purpose
4	Audience & Context	<i>What is the ecosystem in which your game must create change?</i>	- Watch Detroit: Become Human playthrough (15 min) - Read article on Detroit & AI ethics - Discuss audience for Detroit - Reflection on audience
5	Player Transformation	<i>How should players be different after playing your game?</i>	- Play Papers Please - Watch all endings of Papers Please - Discussion - Reflection on Papers Please experience
6	Barriers	<i>Why aren't your players already transformed?</i>	- Video on barriers - Play Killing Me Softly - Discuss Killing Me Softly - Week 6 reflection
7	Domain Concepts & Experts	<i>What understandings are essential for your players to be transformed?</i>	- Watch playthrough of Bury Me My Love - Watch documentary on Bury Me My Love - Discussion - Week 7 reflection on domain
8	Character Journey	<i>What narrative structures help a transformative game tell a story?</i>	- Hero's Journey video presentations - Hero's Journey planning worksheet - Readings on character journey

Wk	Topic	Essential Question	Key Activities
9	Guest Speaker: Brandon Suzuki	<i>How can we learn from real-world professionals about transformative game design?</i>	• Play Jellyvale: A Matchtale • Discussion of Jellyvale • In-person meeting with Brandon Suzuki • Reflection on guest speaker
10	Core Mechanics	<i>What core mechanics increase player agency and transformation?</i>	• Play Fish Simulation Game • Play The Climate Game • Core mechanics video analysis • Week 10 reflection
11	Higher-Order Purpose in YOUR Game	<i>What makes a player transformation powerful?</i>	• Watch Never Alone making-of video • Play Never Alone • Discussion: Never Alone • Submit two pitch slides
12	Thanksgiving Brainstorm	<i>How do app games build a character's journey?</i>	• Watch Florence playthrough • Discussion of Florence • Catch-up on pitch slides
13	Audience, Context & Barriers	<i>How do you change someone's mind through gameplay?</i>	• Read Final Assessment task sheet • Review example slides • Source research • Submit new audience/context/barriers slides
14	Domain Concepts & Experts	<i>How does reliable research strengthen transformative game design?</i>	• Rewatch domain concepts video • Watch interview with Never Alone writer • Discussion • Add two domain slides to deck
15	Characters, Core Mechanics & Journey	<i>What character and core mechanics support player transformation?</i>	• Read review of Never Alone • Watch Never Alone ending • Revisit example slides • Final slides before presentation
16	Holiday Catch-Up	—	• Catch-up week • Polish final pitch slides
17	Presentation & Reiteration	<i>What mindsets support reiteration in game design?</i>	• Present game pitch slides • Discussion about presentations • Submit revised slides based on feedback
18	Revision & Reflection	<i>How does designing a transformative game change the way the designer thinks?</i>	• Watch reflection video • Discussion • Write final reflection letter
19	Course Reflection	—	• Complete course survey

FINAL ASSESSMENT · RUBRIC

Pitching Your Transformative Game

Gaming the Story — Writing a Video Game Narrative Instructor: K. Keener

The scenario: You are a game designer at a studio that has just received a grant from your local government to build a game that will change its players. Pitch your game design to the funders — and prove it can transform them.

Designer / Team: _____ **Date:** _____

How to read this rubric: Each row is scored 1–4. **Level 3 (Proficient) is the mastery target** — the shaded column. Level 4 goes beyond it.

CRITERION	1 Emerging	2 Developing	3 Proficient mastery target	4 Exemplary	SCORE
High-Level Purpose <i>The grant mandate — your big “why”</i>	Purpose is missing, unclear, or unrelated to the grant’s goal.	Purpose is present but vague or too broad (e.g., “make people better”). Loose tie to the grant.	Clear high-level purpose that fits the grant’s goal. The “why” is stated and mostly guides the design.	Purpose is sharp and compelling and directly answers the grant’s problem. A memorable one-line “why” drives every design choice.	____/4
Player Transformation <i>How players change: head, heart, hands</i>	No clear change, or a change a game could not realistically cause.	A change is named but is general or unrealistic; the “after” is hard to picture.	Names a clear player change in at least one area — knowledge (head), attitude/feeling (heart), or skill/behavior (hands).	Names specific, believable changes in what players know, feel, or do. The change is concrete and sits at the center of the design.	____/4
Audience & Context <i>Who plays — and their real-world setting</i>	Audience is missing or defined as “everyone.”	Names a broad audience (e.g., “teens”) with little or no context.	Identifies the target players and at least one context factor: where, when, or how they will actually play.	Rich picture of who plays and their context (access, culture, setting). Considers stakeholders beyond players — e.g., teachers, parents, the funders.	____/4
Barriers <i>What stands in the way — and your response</i>	Barriers are not addressed.	Barriers are mentioned but generic, or no design response is given.	Names at least one believable barrier and one way the design responds to it.	Identifies real barriers (knowledge, access, attitude, social) and shows clearly how the design works around them.	____/4

Domain Concepts + Narrative <i>Real content carried by story, character, choice</i>	No clear content, or no narrative.	Content OR story is present but weakly linked — a story with no real content, or facts with no story.	Identifies the key content the game teaches and connects it to a clear story or set of player choices.	Content is woven into story, characters, and choices so learning feels natural, not tacked on. Narrative is engaging and purposeful.	____ /4
Evidence & Expertise <i>Expert resources + prior works</i>	No sources or example games are used.	Sources or examples are mentioned but thin, vague, or not clearly relevant.	Includes at least one credible expert source and one prior game or study relevant to the design.	Cites credible experts and references prior games or research, using them to justify design choices.	____ /4
Assessment Plan <i>How you'll know the game worked</i>	No plan for knowing whether the game worked.	Only a vague idea of success (e.g., “people will like it”) with no real measure.	Describes at least one reasonable way to tell if the game met its purpose.	Clear, realistic plan for measuring whether players actually changed — what to look for and how to check.	____ /4
Pitch Craft <i>Slide design & delivery to the funders</i>	Slides are unclear or incomplete; the pitch does not communicate the design.	Slides are cluttered or hard to follow; the pitch shares some ideas but loses the audience.	Slides are organized and readable; the pitch communicates the design and makes a case for funding.	Slides are clear, organized, and visually strong; the pitch persuades the funder and stays audience-appropriate. Delivery is confident and clear.	____ /4
TOTAL					____ / 32

Built on Sabrina Culyba’s Transformational Framework. The first seven rows map to the Framework’s eight components (Domain Concepts and Prior Works are paired with Narrative and Expert Resources); the final row scores the pitch itself. Point weights are equal by default — adjust any row’s weight to fit your emphasis.

This syllabus is subject to change. Updates will be communicated via Schoology.