Game Concept Guidelines

Think like a creative director introducing your vision to a team. Show your creative voice, a clear direction and evidence that you can bring your idea to life. Focus on what your game can express, rather than market trends or proof of commercial value.

The recommended length of the Game Concept document is 8–10 pages (including the cover page) with 1,000–2,000 words of text. We will only accept one game concept from each applicant, so please give us your best shot!

The Game Concept document must be your own creation; you may not collaborate with others in preparing it. If creating artwork is part of your skillset, please use your own artwork in the document – we'd love to see it. Reference images and mood boards may be used to communicate visual direction in place of original illustrations. GenAI use in artwork for this document is acceptable as well but must be fully disclosed. We will ask you to distinguish between temporary use of GenAI for the purposes of this document (e.g., prior to bringing an artist onto the project) versus an intent to use GenAI in the development of the game.

Games that we support must have artistic, literary, or societal merit; please see our Exemplars for examples of games that we feel meet that requirement. The game must also be "new," in the sense that it is not something currently in development as part of your game studies or other work. To put that differently, we are looking for your "next" game, not the capstone project you might currently be working on.

The Game Concept document may be in either English or the primary language used in your university's game studies program. If you are not using English, please be sure that the text portions of the Game Concept are in a form that can be submitted for machine translation (for example, do not embed non-English text in an image).

We are primarily supporting PC games, but we will accept submissions for other platforms such as iOS if there is a compelling rationale – for example, the game requires a touchscreen interface like *and Roger*.

We are not looking for a commercial pitch or proof of market value. Whether you target a large or a small audience is up to you; what we primarily want to see is what your unique perspective can bring to games as a medium.

Game Concept Requirements

The Game Concept document should present a clear, high-level vision for your game and the creative direction that will guide its development. The type of content in the document will depend heavily on the game in question, but we require a certain structure to make review of the concepts easier for the NOVA team.

- Cover Page: This should set the mood, give the working game title and include your name.

- Overview: After reading this section, the reviewer should understand *what the game is about*, *what its core appeal is*, and *how it advances games as an artistic medium*.
- GenAI Declaration: This is where you explain your use of GenAI in two different contexts: its use in creating the Game Concept document and your intended use in developing the game.
- Details: This should be the bulk of the document, and its contents will depend heavily on the particular game concept being described. See below for thoughts on what sort of content *might* be useful here. The only mandated content is to indicate what portion of the game you intend to implement using the NOVA Fellows grant.
- "Design in Action": This is where you show *a slice of the defining aspect of your game* in depth, demonstrating your personal craft and creative thinking in action.

Here is more detail on each section.

Cover Page

This should have the game title and your name. It's perfectly fine to have a provisional or working title; you can couple that with a catchphrase or tagline if you like.

It should also set the mood, as this is likely to be the reviewer's first glimpse at something you've created; a logo, name treatment or cover art can all contribute to that first impression. Ideally, it expresses the essence of what you'd like to create and showcases your individual voice.

Overview Section

After reading this section, the reviewer should understand what the game is about, what its core appeal might be, and how it advances games as an artistic medium. Some questions you should consider:

- What the game is about. It's nice to give a tagline (a quick sentence or phrase to describe the game) if you have one. An elevator pitch (a sentence or two highlighting what's interesting about the game) may also be useful. Please feel free to reference other games when explaining your game. You can mention a genre here if you like, but it's possible that a concept that explores games as an artistic medium won't have one!
- How the game is played. Describe the gameplay in more detail. Who is the player character, or is there even one? What is the viewpoint – first person, third person, side-scrolling, something else? What are the key actions or interactions? Is there combat, puzzle solving, exploration, discovery?
- How it will look. Show a bit about the visual style of the game. Depending on your skillset, this could include your own illustrations (rough concept art is fine at this stage), or it could be reference images or mood boards. Bringing in an artist to define the look is not acceptable; the Game Concept must be entirely your own creation. GenAI use in artwork for this document is acceptable but must be strictly declared in the GenAI Declaration section (see below).

If you feel the audience is relevant to your game concept, please include it! Audience is not a primary consideration for NOVA (we are not a commercial fund), but we understand it may be an important

touchstone for you.

GenAI Declaration

There are two contexts within which you must declare your use of GenAI.

The first is the creation of the Game Concept document. For example, you may choose to use GenAI to generate images showing aspects of the game or its characters, in which case you must declare that here and label each image as created by AI. Or you may use GenAI (such as an LLM) to create or refine the text in your document; this must also be declared.

We strongly prefer that the content in the proposal is created by you in its entirety. Our goal is to evaluate the unique voice and viewpoint you bring to game creation, which can easily be masked by uninspired use of AI tools. Having said that, if these tools unlock a greater degree of expression on your part, allowing you to communicate your vision more effectively than you otherwise could, please go ahead and use them.

> **Any AI-generated images must individually be marked as such in the Game Concept. Failure to follow this policy will result in rejection of the application.**

The second is the creation of the game itself. It's one thing to use GenAI to substitute for an artist teammate during the creation of the Game Concept; it's another to choose GenAI over a human collaborator during actual game development. We will accept applications of the latter sort, and may even select Fellows who choose that route, but we would appreciate insight into those choices and the rationale behind them.

For actual game development, this declaration covers the use of GenAI to create content such as artwork, text, music and voice. Routine use of AI tools for coding and other development tasks is outside this declaration.

Here are a few sample declarations. They can be brief:

> *GenAI was not used in the creation of this document, and will not be used to create content for the actual game.*

> *GenAI was used in the creation of some of the game images in this document; they are individually marked as such. It was not used in any other way. If selected as a Fellow, I will not be using GenAI to create content (e.g. artwork, text, voice) for the actual game.*

> *GenAI was used in the creation of some of the game images in this document; they are individually marked as such. The text in this document was largely created by me; GenAI was only used in a final editing pass. If selected as a Fellow, I will be using GenAI-generated artwork, text and voice in order to accelerate the development of the game.*

Details

The bulk of the 8–10 page document will relate to the specific design that you are proposing. Since we are asking for uniquely creative ideas that advance the medium of games, there is no set format for this section; the only mandated content is to indicate what portion of the game you intend to implement using the NOVA Fellows grant funding.

Different games will need very different kinds of explanation, so the subjects below are suggestions, not requirements. Please structure your Game Concept document in whatever way best communicates your vision for the game, using visuals, diagrams, references or mockups where they communicate your ideas more effectively than dense text.

1. What Kind of Game Is This, and What Makes It Distinctive?

There are several useful forms of shorthand for communicating where your game sits creatively. Use them where they add clarity rather than trying to fit your concept into a predefined box.

Exemplar Categories. “Exemplars” is our term for the games on this site that we find inspirational. These are placed in six categories:

- Games as **Visual Art**
- Games as **Narrative Art**
- Games that **Transform the Language of Play**
- Games that **Explore Identity & Empathy**
- Games that **Illuminate Culture & Community**
- Games that **Inspire Curiosity & Wonder**

It may add quite a bit of clarity if you can say what category or categories you find central to your game concept. Is it perhaps a game that **explores identity and empathy**, with a **strong and unique visual style**? To be clear, games rarely fit into just one category (the Exemplars usually don’t), and some games may not fit into any of them. If it helps to reference specific Exemplars – or other game titles you find relevant – please do so.

Genres. Genres are also an excellent shorthand for communicating game direction, to the extent that your game could be described as fitting into one. When approaching games as an artistic medium, many concepts of course do not have a nameable genre – for example, *Papers, Please* or *Flower*.

Points of Differentiation. If the game uses a well-known genre or familiar structure, it may be meaningful to identify a few aspects that uniquely separate it from other games in that genre. Conversely, if the game is as unusual in its fundamental conception as *Outer Wilds* or *Cocoon*, listing differentiation points may make little sense.

2. What Defines the Experience?

It may be useful to describe the principles or goals that drive the project. There are many approaches to this, and different games may use different types of principles.

- Design Pillars. These are the core aspects of the game that define its identity and help guide decisions about specific game content.
- Experience Goals. These describe the emotional and psychological state that the player should experience while playing.
- Creative Values. These describe the artistic boundaries of the project, or give a mindset to be used when making decisions about its design direction.
- Impact Goals. These describe the real-world impact that you would like the game to achieve.
- Audience. Your intended audience may also be an important principle guiding the game. NOVA does not evaluate the "addressable audience" or commercial potential of a game; we are not a commercial fund or publisher. However, *even if a game is given away for free*, audience may be a valuable touchstone. Who is that audience and what do you want to offer them? How do you want to engage, challenge or affect them?

You do not need to use these terms or address all of these areas – there is no requirement to address *any* of them. These are simply different ways to articulate what you feel is central to the experience you are intending to create.

3. How Does the Game Work?

The Overview section gives the basic idea of how the game is played. Here you can go deeper wherever the play experience itself needs more explanation – this is particularly desirable if your concept does not fit neatly within any established genre.

- Gameplay Mechanics. Describe the mechanics and interactions that are central to the experience. What does the player actually do? This would usually involve movement, combat, dialogue, puzzle solving, resource management, or some other familiar form of interaction – but with a NOVA submission it could also be something completely unexpected. For example, there may not even be a character present to be controlled.
- Core Loop. Depending on the game, describing the core gameplay loop using the traditional visual flowchart can be very helpful. At the same time, your game may or may not have a definable Core Loop at all – if it is sufficiently experiential, it may make little sense to talk in those terms.
- Game Flow or Player Journey. Rather than describing a recurring loop, this can describe the higher-level structure of the experience: how the game develops from beginning to end as, for example, the player's toolkit and understanding of the world grows. Defined broadly, this should have meaning for almost all games, even experimental ones.

4. What Is the Game's World and Artistic Identity?

World, Story and Character. Depending on the game, this might include setting (time, place), premise (protagonist motivation, central conflict), theme, key characters (names, backgrounds, motivations), narrative approach (text, voice, environmental narrative) and story or plot. Some game concepts will call for much more detail here than others.

Visual Style and Artistic Touchstones. Visual style usually merits deep exploration. You could, for example, reference other games; other media such as cinema; photos of nature, people, cities, or buildings; traditional art such as paintings, illustrations and sculptures; and other sources that communicate your intended visual direction.

If your concept focuses on games as Visual Art, the assumption is that your own artistic skills will drive the visual direction of the game. There should be a substantial section of the Game Concept showing your work in support of the project, including the breadth of visual artistry that would be found within the game. GenAI would likely not be appropriate for that material, since the purpose is to showcase your personal artistic craft.

Even if your concept is not focused on games as Visual Art, you will need to communicate a visual style, which may be done through references such as a mood board. GenAI is permissible here, but each image must be marked as such, and you must describe your usage in your GenAI Declaration.

Look and Feel. You may also want to explore the game's broader sensory identity. How do visuals, soundscape, music, UI and other elements combine to create the tone and atmosphere that you are targeting? Diegetic aspects such as in-world game interfaces may also be relevant.

5. What Are You Proposing to Make?

Structure, Scope and Size. Structure is important to clarify somewhere in the Game Concept document – is the game broken into pieces such as chapters, levels or missions, or a unified whole? Is the entire game experienced on a single playthrough, or are multiple playthroughs a part of the experience? What is the rough size and scope of the intended game?

Your targets for the *completed* game may be extensive; you must indicate here (or elsewhere in the Game Concept document) what portion of the game you intend to create using the NOVA Fellows grant funding. That could be a vertical slice, several complete chapters or levels, a substantial portion of the game, or another clearly defined development target.

"Design in Action" Section

The Details section communicates the breadth of your game design. Design in Action is where you show its depth. Choose a slice of the defining aspect of your game and show how it takes shape in one part of the experience. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your personal craft and creative thinking in action; what that looks like will depend on the nature of your game:

- Narrative. If the core of the experience is the narrative, you might provide a 1–2 page scene or dialogue excerpt showing character voice, player interaction, choice and consequence, or how narrative is delivered through play.
- Action. If action is at the heart of the experience, you might show an annotated encounter or level sequence with enemy placement, player abilities, environmental interactions, and the intended flow of the experience.

- Puzzle and Exploration. If the defining aspect is exploration or puzzle solving, you might show one complete puzzle or challenge, giving its setup, underlying rules, player interactions, solution possibilities, and how it fits into the larger experience.
- Artistry. If the game is intended to showcase games as a visual artistic medium, this is where you'd do a deep dive into the visual style and artistic ruleset for a specific part of the game, perhaps using annotated examples.

…and so on. The goal is to demonstrate that you have the overarching vision, and also the craft to translate that vision into concrete design.