FELLOWS PROGRAM

How to Apply

The application window is expected to open on December 7, 2026, and close on January 10, 2027. During that period, a link on our website will take you to the application system, where you can provide your profile information and portfolio link, submit the required materials, and request a Faculty Letter of Recommendation. You can pause and resume the process throughout the application window.

Request your faculty letter of recommendation early. You can begin working on your application immediately, but you cannot formally submit it until we receive the letter of recommendation.

Application Process

01

Faculty Letter of Recommendation

- From a faculty member who knows you and your work well
- You request it through the NOVA grant portal using their university email address; they submit it directly to NOVA

02

Game Concept

- 8–10 pages, 1,000–2,000 words of text
- A new game idea, created entirely by you. Existing projects and capstone projects are not eligible
- GenAI use is allowed but not encouraged, and must be strictly declared

03

Execution Plan

- 1–2 pages on how you'll turn your vision into a playable prototype with the $100,000 NOVA Fellows grant
- How you plan to structure development over the roughly 6–12 months NOVA funding can support
- The project must be your primary (if not exclusive) focus

04

Personal Statement (Video)

- A short video, roughly two minutes long
- A chance for us to get to know you beyond your Game Concept and Execution Plan

05

Portfolio

- A link to an online portfolio of the work that best represents your skills, experience, and creative potential
- It must open without requesting permission or creating an account

Application Evaluation

NOVA staff and Grant Committee will review applications after the application window closes, with grant decisions expected by the end of March 2027. Grant recipients must finalize milestones, staffing, and budget, and sign a grant agreement before receiving funding and other support from the Foundation. Check back for details of our Grant Agreement (available soon).

Faculty Letter Guidelines

Applicants must provide one letter of recommendation from a faculty member at their university who is familiar with their game development work and abilities.

Request your faculty letter of recommendation early. You can begin working on your application immediately, but you cannot formally submit it until we receive the letter of recommendation.

We encourage applicants to contact their faculty member well before the application window opens to confirm their willingness to provide a recommendation. Feel free to share this page with the faculty member preparing your Letter of Recommendation before the application window opens so they have time to prepare a thoughtful recommendation. Note that university programs or individual faculty members may limit the number of recommendations they write.

When the application window opens, you must request the recommendation through the NOVA application portal using the faculty member's university email address. The faculty member will submit the letter directly to NOVA. You can request the recommendation as soon as you begin your application; you don't need to complete your application first.

The letter must include:

- An explanation of how the faculty member knows the applicant
- Confirmation that the applicant has graduated, or is expected to graduate, between September 1, 2025, and August 31, 2027
- A statement that the faculty member recommends the applicant for a NOVA Fellows Grant
- Contact information, including an email address and phone number, so that NOVA may follow up if necessary

Beyond these required points, we strongly encourage faculty members to share their perspective on the applicant's:

- Strengths as an emerging game creator
- Ability to develop, articulate, and maintain a strong creative vision
- Capacity to lead a project, working independently or with collaborators, from an initial concept through a playable prototype

Specific examples of the applicant's work, accomplishments, or potential are especially valuable.

The faculty member must submit the letter in PDF format directly through the NOVA application portal no later than January 10, 2027.

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.

Execution Plan Guidelines

The Execution Plan is a "living document" that will change as you begin development and learn more about the implementation challenges of your chosen design. Here we are asking for your best understanding as to how development will proceed.

The Execution Plan is your opportunity to share with the Foundation how you intend to turn your Game Concept into a playable prototype with the $100,000 NOVA Fellows grant. We are particularly interested in how you plan to structure development over the roughly 6–12 months that NOVA funding can support.

The Execution Plan is intended to be a short document, just one or two pages; it gives your best estimates for project start and end dates, your personal role and commitment to the project, other staffing needs, and milestone targets.

If you are selected as a Fellow, NOVA will check with you to make sure that nothing has changed regarding your ability to commit to the project (e.g. you haven't accepted employment somewhere) and assign a Producer. You'll work with that Producer to establish realistic budgeting for the $100,000 grant, validate your staffing assumptions, and establish a milestone payment schedule. Once that's agreed upon, you'll sign the grant agreement and begin work.

The Producer is a key part of the process. Game development is unpredictable; the Producer will work with you as design goals change and implementation challenges present themselves. The Producer will also review progress at the end of each milestone. Your Game Concept document describes the game that you've committed to make, but you can pivot to something a bit different as long as the Producer agrees with the change. Changes to staffing and milestones will also need the Producer's approval. NOVA's intent is to provide a good level of flexibility while still ensuring that the funding results in at least a vertical slice of the game.

With that as background, here's what you'll need to include in the Execution Plan:

Availability and Commitment

This is a brief statement describing your availability to drive the development of the game. Depending on your personal circumstances, you may need to explain:

- whether you can start immediately, or need to wait until after graduation, a post-graduation break, or another commitment
- whether you can work continuously on the project, or will need to take scheduled time off due to other commitments

NOVA's support isn't contingent on starting the project immediately, but we would like to keep the cohort of Fellows roughly together. For that reason, we'd prefer that projects start no later than September; we will consider later starts as circumstances warrant. You will need to commit to making the project your primary (if not exclusive) focus, as we at NOVA want to give this opportunity to those who can make the most of it.

Here are some sample statements:

> *I've already graduated, so if named as a Fellow I can start the project immediately. The project will be my primary focus.*

> *I will graduate in May, but have committed to a three-month internship immediately thereafter. I can make the project my exclusive focus from August.*

Staffing and Game Development Roles

While the Fellow is free to be a solo creator (à la Lucas Pope), most projects will involve additional people or resources. These may be full-time or part-time collaborators, individual contractors, or outside companies providing specialized services such as sound design.

In this section, briefly describe your own role, the additional people or resources you plan to use, and when they will join the project. Here are some sample statements:

> *This project will be created by me and another full-time collaborator I've already identified*
>
> - *My skill set is programming and audio*
> - *My collaborator will take on the artwork and design, starting at project kickoff*

> *I will drive the overall vision and artwork. I will bring on two additional full-time team members:*
>
> - *A programmer, who will join at the start of the project*
> - *A level designer, who will start in the third month of the project*
>
> *Audio will be created by a contractor, also starting in the third month of the project*

> *I will be the sole creator of the project, including programming, design, artwork and audio*

Other Expenses

In addition to compensation for the people working to develop the project, there may be other expenses. In this section, briefly list any significant additional expenses you expect to incur in developing your playable prototype, e.g. hardware, workspace rental, content licensing. At the $100,000 funding level, many software and middleware licenses are free or inexpensive, so only list exceptional costs.

Here are some sample notes on expenses:

> *Expenses will be minimal, as the team already has laptops suitable for development. Asset licensing may be a moderate expense, perhaps $5,000.*

> *Each team member will need a desktop PC with dual monitors. The team will share a small rented office.*

Project Milestones

In this section, provide the project's start and end dates, along with timing and deliverables for each milestone.

Milestones should be spaced out roughly every two months. If you won't be starting the project immediately on being named a Fellow (e.g. you have not graduated yet or you have ongoing other commitments), you can have a "Project Kickoff" milestone and use some of your NOVA Fellows grant funding to purchase computers and software. Acquiring those in advance will allow you to make a faster start when you do begin work on the project for real.

For each development milestone, you will need to describe:

- The gameplay mechanics, artwork and other features expected to be complete at that time. A few sentences should suffice. The final milestone must deliver what you committed to create with NOVA funding in your Game Concept document.
- Any planned staffing additions at that milestone, e.g. your staffing plan might call for a level designer to join at MS2.

Here's a sample set of project milestones, though it is missing the project specifics in the deliverables.

> *Development Start Date: 7/1/2027*
>
> *Development End Date: 2/29/2028*

Milestone	Start Date	End Date	Deliverables
Project Kickoff	4/1/2027	6/30/2027	Procure equipment (and arrange workspace, if needed)
MS1	7/1/2027	8/31/2027	Describe MS1 targets
MS2	9/1/2027	10/31/2027	Describe MS2 targets and any planned staffing additions
MS3	11/1/2027	12/31/2027	Describe MS3 targets and any planned staffing additions
MS4	1/1/2028	2/29/2028	Final staffing; deliverable matching the Game Concept document

NOVA Luminary Grants

As you approach completion of the work funded by the NOVA Fellows grant, you may apply for a NOVA Luminary grant of $500,000. The key aspects of your application are your playable prototype and an updated Game Concept document that reflects how the game has evolved during development.

Applications for the NOVA Luminary grants will be considered quarterly, at the start of January, April, July and October. You may want to take that schedule into account when planning the end of your project. You can apply during your final milestone using a WIP playable prototype, or afterward using your final deliverable.

If you wish, you may indicate when you intend to apply for a NOVA Luminary grant, e.g.:

> *My intent is to apply for a NOVA Luminary grant in April 2028.*

Risk Assessment

If you wish, you may include some notes on what you view as the largest risk or risks to completing your playable prototype by the end of grant funding, and how you might address them.

Here are some sample statements:

> *The largest risk would appear to be validation of game mechanic XYZ by the end of MS1. This is needed so that the world construction in MS2 and MS3 can proceed smoothly. If the mechanic isn't working as intended, we'll need to have a discussion with the Producer; possibilities might include pivoting to a new concept for the mechanic, or revising MS2 and MS3 to allow for delayed world construction.*

> *The largest risk is that the story won't be sufficiently engaging or the main character sufficiently relatable. My strategy will be to start early and iterate often, bearing in mind that iteration has production and timeline impacts.*

Personal Statement Guidelines

The Personal Statement is a short video, roughly two minutes long. It's a chance for the grant committee to get to know you beyond your Game Concept and Execution Plan. The goal is to hear your "voice" and understand something about the kind of creator you are or hope to become.

You may speak in any language. We encourage you to use whatever language allows you to express yourself most comfortably. If your video isn't in English, please include English subtitles or provide a written transcript.

There are no required topics, but here are some questions you might consider:

- What do games mean to you, and why have you chosen to make them?
- What kind of creator or creative leader do you aspire to become?
- Have there been experiences in your life that shaped your relationship with games?
- What personal experiences, interests, or perspectives do you hope to bring to the medium?

You're also welcome to talk about something outside of games if it helps us understand who you are and what matters to you.

You do need to appear on camera, but there's no need for elaborate production or a carefully rehearsed speech. A simple recording of yourself speaking naturally is fine. And there's no need to stretch the video to two minutes, a shorter video is fine too.

Please don't use the video to pitch or explain your Game Concept, that's the purpose of the Game Concept document. You're welcome to mention your project if it helps explain something about you.

Sample Statement

To give you a sense of what we're looking for, one of the NOVA founders put together a sample Personal Statement. It's informal and personal, without trying to be especially profound. That's intentional. We're not looking for an impressive speech, just an opportunity to learn something about you as a creator, player, or person. Note that this is shorter than the two-minute guideline, which is perfectly fine.

> *I've been fascinated by video games my whole life. In my earlier days of playing, I especially enjoyed the 'flow state' that it's possible to enter when playing an especially tough game, you can just lose yourself. It's intense but it's also calming in a way, you enter that state and then emerge an hour later and the world just feels different.*
>
> *Regarding making games, I've been viewing it through a rather commercial lens. That hasn't been my intent, per se, it's just that by default games cost money to make and require an addressable audience to earn back that money. I'm really looking forward to discovering the more artistic side of what I can do when commercial concerns aren't such a dominant factor. Games really can create a sense of wonder,*

> *I’m hoping to construct quiet but significant moments where the game has a chance to breathe and that sense of wonder can really come through.*
>
> *If I had an aspiration, it would be to become a creator who can inspire through story. As a player, that’s where I gravitate these days, what we call ‘gameplay’ isn’t nearly as important to me as who the characters are in the game, how they relate to each other, and the grand sweep of the narrative. But as I said, that’s an aspiration, I don’t feel I have the skills to do that today.*

Portfolio Submission Guidelines

Applicants must provide a link to an online portfolio showcasing the work that best represents their skills, experience, and creative potential.

Your portfolio may include completed projects as well as works in progress, created independently or as part of a team. Examples include games, game prototypes, artwork, design work, writing, technical work, or other projects that demonstrate your skills and strengths as a game creator.

For collaborative projects, clearly indicate your role and the work you personally contributed.

Please provide a link that NOVA can access without requesting permission or creating an account, and make sure it remains accessible throughout the application review period.