

Varun Saxena

Game Designer, Writer, Artist and Educator

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Professional Profile

I am a game designer, writer, and educator based in Greensboro, NC. Before this, I studied and worked in Brooklyn, NY, while originally hailing from Mumbai, India. I want to use my background in games, animation and filmmaking to depict new-age storytelling that explores the cross-section of culture, diversity and human intimacy which are a few of the topics I am most interested in.

Career Summary

08/2024 – Present **University of North Carolina Greensboro, Greensboro, NC**
[Post-MEA Fellow](#) (Visiting Assistant Professor)

Outline

- I am currently working as a full-time professor and researcher at UNCG's College of Visual and Performing Arts, teaching art classes in the Animation department, and performing curriculum development research.
- My research on curriculum development aims to assist the university in creating their first ever game design classes, and planning out the path for their Game Design and Interactive Media Major program, which is planned to launch by Fall 2026.
- A part of this research involves teaching an experimental course- 'Intro to Interactive Media', wherein I teach game design and development using Unreal Engine 5 and Unreal Engine for Fortnite. Besides this class, I am also teaching an 'Introduction to 3D Modeling' in Maya, and 'Global Analysis of Animation', a class where students watch animation films from across the world, analyze them, and eventually create their own short stop-motion animation films.

03/2024 – 04/2024 **Games For A Rainy Day by TXTbooks, Brooklyn, NY**
Game Designer and Writer

Outline

- I designed and wrote a two-player game for the book- "Games For A Rainy Day", which is published by TXTbooks, an independent printing studio based in Brooklyn, NY.
- The book premiered at New York Art Book Fair (NYABF) 2024, where it got successfully sold out.

- More information and the option to purchase is available [here](#).

02/2024 - 07/2024 **NDA Project, Remote**
Narrative Consultant

Outline

- I worked as a part-time narrative consultant on an in-development game project, details of which are bound by an NDA.

01/2024 **Global Game Jam 2024, Brooklyn, NY**
Judge at NYU Game Center Site

Outline

- I was invited to be a judge at the NYU Game Center site of Global Game Jam 2024, where I played and evaluated a diverse range of games.
- Using my expertise as a professional game designer and artist, I aided in the selection of game jam award winners in six different categories.

11/2022 - 02/2024 **Venom CoLab, New York, NY**
Lead Game Writer and Interaction Designer
(In-development game project- Killer Snails, LLC)

Outline

- VenomCoLab is an inquiry-based, collaborative science experience for middle school students. In this experience, students play as scientists, and collaboratively work to study venomous organism like marine snails, snakes, sea anemones, or scorpions to find peptides or proteins from venom, to use as potential treatment for health problems including pain, cancer, blood clotting, or autoimmune diseases.
- Like WaterWays, this project also contains augmented reality segments, and personalized online science journals, along with a new co-operative multiplayer feature, where students interact and solve exercises and activities together, in teams of four players.
- The project is currently on track to complete development, and ship publicly by Fall of 2024.

12/2023 **Dustborn, Oslo, Norway**
Narrative Sensitivity Consultant- Red Thread Games

Outline

- [Dustborn](#) is an upcoming story-driven, action-adventure game being developed by Red Thread Games, and being published by Quantic Dream.
- I worked as a narrative sensitivity consultant on this project to ensure it stays true to its vision of supporting, and validating its diverse cast of characters.
- Using my experiences and background, I worked with their narrative designers to provide detailed feedback and inputs on representations of POC characters, representations of LGBTQ+ characters, character arcs, worldbuilding, and how the gameplay supports the branching narrative.

08/2023

Play NYC 2023, New York, NY
Volunteer and Show Floor Runner- Play NYC 2023

Outline

- I volunteered at Play NYC 2023, New York City's premier gaming convention and expo, produced in partnership with NYC Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment and Rockstar Games.
- As a volunteer, my duties included- setting up the showfloor with other volunteers, and ensuring all booths had the correct number of tables and chairs.
- As a showfloor runner, my duties included- checking in with show presenters and making sure that they're having no trouble running their booth, bringing them water or snacks if needed, and tending to their booth when they needed a break.

06/2023

WaterWays: An immersive science experience, New York, NY
Game Writer and Interaction Designer
Successfully shipped game project- Killer Snails, LLC

Outline

- Successfully shipped and released [WaterWays](#), an immersive science experience game for elementary school students (grade 3 to 5), that is spread across a digital website and a dedicated AR application.
- This project won a silver award in the "K-12 education" category at the International Serious Play Awards 2023.
- In WaterWays, students work in augmented reality and personalized online science journals to gather data, answer questions, construct models and develop and test hypotheses. They study organisms like mako sharks and learn more about human impacts on water, and water's impact on humans. While developing knowledge of the connections between ecology and human health, students will also apply that understanding to come up with solutions to problems like plastic pollution, urban heat island effect, and loss of marine biodiversity.
- WaterWays was developed in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society, Hudson River Park, and the Mount Sinai Transdisciplinary Center on Early Environmental Exposures. The augmented reality (AR) experience is funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH) and aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).
- This is my first shipped game with Killer Snails. I am currently working with them on their next game project- Venom CoLab, an immersive science game for middle school students (grade 6 to 8) where students learn about venomous animals.

03/2023

Unreleased Games Arcade by Gaming Pathways, New York, NY
Presenter and Award winner- Waiting For Evening

Outline

- Showcased and presented my game- Waiting For Evening at the first ever "Unreleased Games Arcade 2023" event by Gaming Pathways, a first-of-its-kind program dedicated to growing public education in the field of games.

- The game was played and very well received by the attendees, which consisted of more than 100 high school students from Upper Manhattan, Harlem, and Bronx.
- I won an award for the “Best Story”, out of 28 other indie games that were presented. The attendees voted for the games that got awarded via a secret ballot.
- [Unreleased Games Arcade 2023](#)
- [Game Summaries & Event Photos](#)

10/2022

SUBMERGE Marine Science Festival, New York, NY

Presenter and Booth Assistant- Killer Snails, LLC

Outline

- Showcased and presented WaterWays, the newest immersive experience being developed by my company, at their booth in the SUBMERGE Marine Science Festival.
- Advertised product to school teachers and students of grade 3 through 9, from public schools across NYC.
- Networked with other science based organizations and nonprofits to establish or increase future collaboration opportunities.

07/2022

NSTA National Conference, Chicago, IL

Presenter and Booth Assistant- Killer Snails, LLC

Outline

- Presented and advertised both digital, and physical game experiences developed by my company, at their booth in the national conference of the National Science Teaching Association (NSTA).
- Interacted with science educators and school representatives from across the country to strengthen client relations.
- Networked with other educational technology (EdTech) businesses to establish or increase business opportunities.

05/2022 – 11/2022

IndieCade Festival 2022, Remote (online)

Jury Member

Outline

- As an IndieCade jury member, I played and evaluated a diverse range of submitted games for the 2022 festival.
- I contributed insights and expertise to the selection process, helping with the selection of finalists.

02/2022 – present

Killer Snails, LLC

Game Writer and Interaction Designer

Outline

I am working as a Game Writer and Interaction Designer with Killer Snails- a Brooklyn-based educational games studio, on their immersive AR experience projects. WaterWays successfully released in June 2023. I am currently working on Venom Colab, a new immersive AR experience project, in a similar capacity.

Key Responsibilities

- Work with designers to author stories for the targeted age group.
- Write instructional, descriptive, and didactic text.
- Create UI flow maps using Figma and Adobe Photoshop. These maps are used to communicate interactions that will happen on the website to developers, keeping in mind the designers and writer's vision.
- Maintain a wide range of creative documentation using Google Workspace and Microsoft Office.
- Track and manage tasks via Trello to ensure every deadline is met and then present work at weekly team meetings.
- Participate in internal playtesting and incorporate team feedback to edit, review, and update my writing as necessary.
- Having a CITI certification in Social Behavioral Human Subjects Research, I also help our team with in-person playtesting our experiences with elementary school and middle school students (target audience), at private and charter schools, across tri-state areas.

10/2021

Hot Pot For One 2-year Anniversary Concert, Brooklyn, NY
Presenter- Waiting For Evening

Outline

- [Hot Pot For One 2-year Anniversary Concert — WONDERVILLE](#)
- Publicly showcased my game- Waiting For Evening at an event/concert dedicated to indie games that celebrate music and different cultures.
- The event took place at Wonderville, an arcade, bar, and event space dedicated to indie games developed by local developers and designers.

08/2021 – 05/2022

CUNY- Hostos Community College, Bronx, NY
Adjunct Assistant Professor

Outline

I taught “Intro to Digital Games”, to Associate level students. The class introduces students to concepts of game mechanics, game theory and digital game production by affording them the opportunity to read about game development, play test several different video games and finally create their own digital game using important industry standard development tools like Unity3D.

Key Responsibilities

- Gave weekly lectures in a hybrid format on various topics like- game mechanics, UI design, Multiplayer Design, Monetization, etc.
- Introduced students to game engines by teaching them Unity3D and C# scripting.
- Guided, mentored and provided feedback to students throughout the development of their first digital games and design documents.
- Enabled students to learn iterative game design practices by holding in-class playtesting sessions and enforcing them to give/receive constructive criticism to one another.
- Prepared and carried out group exercises and activities which involved students studying in-person as well as those online.

- Successfully enforced University's COVID-19 safety mandates in the classroom and completed an entire semester with zero cases of infection.

09/2020 – 12/2021

NYU Game Center, Brooklyn, NY

Thesis Research and Development- Waiting For Evening

Outline

For my MFA degree's thesis, I designed and created "Waiting For Evening", a 3D narrative-adventure video game with a unique point-&-click gameplay, an original story set in an atmospheric world, and developed along with Alina Constantin- an artist, game designer, and a fellow NYU graduate degree colleague.

Key Responsibilities

- Used Unity3D, C# and Fungus- a visual storytelling tool to create and script the entire game project.
- Worked over two academic semesters to bring my original idea from conception to prototype to finally a vertical slice demo that was shown at NYU Game Center Annual Showcase 2021: [NYU Game Center Showcase 2021](#)
- Researched on post-colonial narratives along with studying the lifestyle, architecture, environments, cinema and popular culture of Bombay (now Mumbai), India to craft an original narrative with a diverse set of characters.
- Followed a 3-week sprints based production schedule made using Trello, to complete the thesis project before deadlines.
- Showcased the latest version of the game as a part of an indie game event at Wonderville in Brooklyn, NY (October 2021).

09/2020 – 12/2020

NYC Media Lab and Consumer Reports, Brooklyn, NY

Narrative Designer and Developer- Ganesha's Terms

Outline

"Ganesha's Terms" is a symbolic allegory about data, privacy and consent through an interactive card reading. It was created and selected as a part of NYC Media Lab's – Consumer Reports Data Challenge in Fall 2020.

Key Responsibilities

- Acted as the primary narrative designer by creating narrative flow charts and visual maps to depict characters from the Hindu myth of Ganesha with their parallels to modern-day terms related to data, consent and online privacy.
- Worked with other teammates to form a three-month long schedule with sprints for completing a prototype of the project within the constraints of Consumer Reports' deadlines.
- Used Unity and C# to create an initial functional prototype for the project, which later went through multiple iterations and refactoring to reach the demo prototype stage.
- [Ganesha's Terms Demo: Consumer Reports x NYCML Data & Privacy Prototyping Challenge](#)

09/2020 – 05/2021

NYU Game Center, Brooklyn, NY
Teaching Assistant

Outline

I worked as a Teaching Assistant in Fall 2020 for Prof. Eric Zimmerman and in Spring 2021 for Prof. Jesse Fuchs in their class- “Intermediate Game Design” for BFA Students at NYU Game Center.

Key Responsibilities

- Helping out Professor and Students with online class management in Zoom
- Carrying out in-class exercises in 3D level design and game economy balancing sections.
- Checking in on assignments and providing feedback on students’ work.
- Managing class attendance and initiating students’ communication with the professors.

01/2020 – 05/2020

NYU Game Center, Brooklyn, NY
Game Designer- Người Lạ (Strangers) Part 1

Outline

- I designed and co-wrote a cinematic 3D visual novel game as a part of my class ‘Game Studio 2’ at NYU.
- This game gained a lot of attention online, and multiple youtubers made playthrough videos of the game, some of which are linked below:
 - [Người Lạ Part 1 Visual Novel Game Play \(There are creepsters in this game! Nguoi La\)](#)
 - [Người Lạ \(Strangers\) Part 1](#)
 - [Người Lạ \(Strangers\) Part 1 \(Full Playthrough\)](#)
 - [Warpdoor: Người Lạ \(Strangers\) Part 1 \(Christine Fourn, Emi Schaufeld, Lu Yang, Toby Do, Varun Saxena\)](#)

01/2020 – 05/2020

NYU Game Center, Brooklyn, NY
Independent Study (Student Researcher)

Outline

- During the second semester of my MFA program at NYU Game Center, I was a part of a student-led independent study where we developed a curriculum to discuss colonialism in games.
- This curriculum was meant to provide guidelines for creating a prospective 2 credit class syllabi. It was successfully approved by our study mentor- Professor Mitu Khandekar, and also other senior faculty members.
- Our final curriculum can be found here: [Colonialism In Games - Google Docs](#)

02/2020

Beers and Betas, Brooklyn Brewery, Brooklyn, NY
Game Designer- No Honor Among Thieves

Outline

- Publicly showcased and facilitated playthroughs of my social board game with an engaging concept and fast gameplay, at a relaxed bar setting along with other members of the design team.
- [Beers and Betas - NYU | Game Center](#)
- [Event post on social media](#)

01/2020 **Global Game Jam 2020, Brooklyn, NY**
Game Designer- New Trees

Outline

- Created a short walking simulator game with atmospheric visuals and a unique narrative in a team of three people, within 48 hours as a part of Global Game Jam 2020.
- The game won the award for “Best Visuals” at the NYU Game Center site: <https://gamecenter.nyu.edu/global-game-jam-2020-award-winners/>
- An article on the game was also featured on usgamer(dot)net: [The 8 Best Entries From Global Game Jam 2020: These Indies Want to Repair Our World](#)

11/2018 **Indian Games Expo 2018, Mumbai, India**
Game Designer- Case No. 488

Outline

- Designed and directed a live-action FMV murder mystery game in under 3 months.
- This prototype was specifically made to be publicly showcased at the Indian Games Expo (IGX) 2018, which is currently the biggest and most popular public games expo in India.

05/2017 – 08/2017 **Film City, Mumbai, India**
Lighting Department Assistant- Bollywood Production

Outline

I worked as an assistant for the lighting department (uncredited) of the Bollywood film production: Padmaavat (2018), produced by Bhansali Productions and Viacom 18.

Key Responsibilities

- Reported daily to the lead lighting artist, and ensured their on-set requirements are met.
- Handled professional lighting equipment, and made sure they are set in appropriate positions for the cinematographers.

Education & Qualifications

- **M.F.A. in Game Design, 2019-2021 (GPA- 3.7)**
New York University- Tisch School of the Arts

- **B.S. in Animation and Filmmaking, 2016-2019 (GPA- 3.3)**
Tata Institute of Social Sciences- Whistling Woods International