**Company Name: LLESS Inc.**

**Project Name: Fate of Civilizations**

**Founder & President: Joseph Ballou, NYC ‘07**

Other influential TFA alumni:

Investors: Nirmala Chilamkurti, NYC ’07, Jonathan Ng, NYC ‘08

Advisor: Ethan Newlin, NYC ‘07

**Narrative 1: Innovation**

Today, millions of high school students nationwide receive deficient education in history. The age of NCLB has left behind history’s meaningful lessons on civics, economics,culture, critical communication, research and reasoning, and low-income communities are hit especially hard. Innovative, effective tools can make an enormous difference to marginalized world history teachers who aim to change lives but face an inadequate selection of teaching resources. With this proposal, we seek to fill that void.

Earlier this year I formed a company to work on solving problems that I observed during four years of teaching high school world history in the Bronx. One of the most pressing needs was for good resources to teach world history, and one strategy that I used in the classroom seemed to hold particular promise. Over the summer of 2011, *Fate of Civilizations* was born.

*Fate of Civilizations* is a project to develop innovative tools for world history teachers, especially games. Games can engage students with multiple learning modalities, produce thorough achievement data, teach detailed information and big ideas, and excite students with the process of learning. *Fate of Civilizations* is built on three lessons I have learned throughout my life:

1. Using themes and narratives are essential in teaching world history.
2. Motivation, engagement and smart systems for tracking mastery of learning objectives are critical components to effective teaching. Games can drive all three.
3. If we don’t understand history, we risk repeating it. Investing in new, effective tools for teaching kids history is a worthwhile and urgent endeavor.

Over time, *Fate of Civilizations* will encompass a suite of products designed for high school world history classes. This suite could include board games, electronic games, teaching guides, and a web platform for communication, networking, and/or information gathering. In the near term, *Fate of Civilizations* will feature a single, powerful product, a board game we call *Glory.*

*Glory* is the *only* world history board game designed for use in the high school classroom! *Glory* is a four-player game. Each player controls one player piece, a deck of question cards, an answer sheet, and one lane on the board. Each card has a point value, and the goal is to earn as many “glory points” as possible. Each lane of the board represents a region, and within each lane the spaces represent different historical ideas: conflict, markets, migrations, religion, settlement, geography, and borders. Each space has its own instructions, usually to draw a card and answer a question. Every instruction reinforces a big historical understanding, particular inter-regional contact and exploration.

Players of *Glory* attempt to travel the board by rolling a die, acquiring “glory points” as they answer questions. Each civilization has 50 original multiple choice and short answer questions aligned to AP and New York state standards. The game ends when time expires, and whoever earned the most points from collecting correctly answered question cards and traversing the most territory wins.

*Glory* is based on a game I developed with Jon Ng, NYC ’08, while we were teaching together at Bronx Prep Charter School. When we first used, we observed unusually high participation in class, content mastery on the material the game reviewed, and positive reviews from the students. Since that early experiment we have worked to reimagine and redesign the game to produce a prototype that we are now testing in New York schools. After reviewing the feedback and results from these tests, recalibrating the game as necessary, and hiring a professional artist to do the final board design, we aim for public release of the game in time for end of year test review.

*Glory* offers several advantages for under-resourced schools. The first is that, since it uses no electricity, it does not require all the students to have computer access. Even as schools upgrade their technology, it can be impossible to get a whole class on computers, or properly engaged. *Glory* avoids those challenges, and insteadoffers endless configurations and modifications for heterogeneous classes. Finally, the interactive game play and supplementary resources use multiple learning modalities, supporting achievement for students with high needs.

The full release of *Glory* will include supplementary lesson plans, profile sheets for students to track progress over multiple games, and a teacher guide with over 20 variations for different game play and advanced player modes. We will sell the game as a single set, as well as discounted class sets. Finally, we will provide free downloadable resources on our website.

**Narrative 2: Leadership Skills**

I have taught all aspects of high school world history, grades 9-12, in both public and charter schools. Therefore the needs of our target market have been my own. Having experienced the successes we seek for our clients, and suffered the failures we seek our clients to avoid, I can testify that *Fate of Civilizations* will address real needs.

Within schools, I have continuously demonstrated leadership in my instructional practice and curriculum design. At New Explorers High School, from 2007-2009, I served as a pioneering member of the school’s data inquiry team and as the school’s expert on New York’s Aris data system. I led professional development on literacy in non-ELA classes, creating interim assessments, data trackers, and differentiated lesson plans. I taught colleagues to use technology to share ideas and resources, and I modeled teaching that incorporated findings from new research. With few effective trackers available to measure student content mastery, during my TFA placement I created new versions of mastery trackers and shared them with others. While history trackers were continuously evolving, by my second year reliable tools showed the growth in writing for my *special needs students* exceeded 1.5 years on average.

When I moved to Bronx Prep Charter School, my leadership opportunities changed. The classroom was the chief laboratory for creating solutions. Tasked with teaching all world history levels (both the first and second years of the course), I redesigned the curriculum to include interim assessments, standards-focused backwards planning, strategic skill development, greater rigor and more cooperative and discovery learning. After my first year at Bronx Prep, the average Regents test scores in Global history (80% of the test-takers were my students) went up more than 20% over the previous year’s average. Not only that, a third of my first year students opted to take the Regents with only one year of instruction. All of them passed the exam with a score above a 70, and the average score was an 81. By May 2010, I had also launched a website for my students: ballouhistory.com, and incorporated technology and public speaking instruction into my global 2 classes.

The highlight of my two years at Bronx Prep was leading the school’s first trip to Europe. Previously, there had only been one trip abroad in the school’s history—a small trip to Ghana in 2006. My ambitions were for a large group, two-thirds of them students, and to create a replicable framework. I started by reaching out to the whole community to garner interest. After several meetings and countless emails, I formed a team of five educators committed to launch this project. I drafted a proposal to the school leadership detailing a plan for sustained international travel, integrated with service learning. In December 2009, I partnered with EF Tours, and in March of 2010 we started enrolling students and faculty.

When the institutional and financial support promised by the school did not come through as originally promised, I had to scale back plans for the service learning program. Nevertheless, I fought for the trip to Spain. We held multiple fundraisers in the fall of 2010, and ultimately we were able to reduce the cost of the trip by an average of $700 per traveler. In February of 2011 I led twenty-two students and eight adults on an eleven-day Iberian tour. The experience enriched the lives of my students and colleagues and demonstrated the power of travel.

As my second year at Bronx Prep wore on, I continued to innovate in the classroom, especially with games. Jon Ng and I worked together to create half a dozen games to teach and review content. I introduced a new unit to teach World War I, involving an online simulation game called *Diplomacy.* While these classroom experiences were rewarding, I grew frustrated with the school environment and its leadership. With a growing awareness of the resource shortage for world history teachers, my developments in the classroom showed increasing promise for macro-level change. By the late spring, my vision for action had crystallized, and I charted the launch of *Fate of Civilizations.*

My leadership as an entrepreneur will draw heavily on skills I developed in teaching, but there is a longer narrative that explains what brings me here, and how I will perform moving forward. To create teaching tools for world history, I will draw on my experience of international travel, currently including 28 countries on five continents. In the cases of Spain (where I studied), Venezuela (where I researched), Peru (where I volunteered), Kenya (where I traveled) and Pakistan (where I taught), I have even had exposure to education systems abroad.

In developing products and building an organization with LLESS, my leadership abilities honed while in college will come to use. During college I founded APPEAL, a social events planning organization, raising $15,000 and coordinating and marketing weekly events that hosted hundreds of people. As president of the college Democrats during the spring of 2004, I laid the groundwork for a strong student group that actively participated in several national campaigns. As an intern with the Philadelphia Empowerment Zone and Director of Serendipity Day camp, I had powerful hands-on experiences working with low-income communities. As a student leader in my academic department, I worked as a TA my senior year and earned honors in my major.

Currently, I also exercise leadership and entrepreneurship even beyond LLESS. Right now I am volunteering as a mentor teacher in the World History and Geography community on TFAnet. This September, as an organizer within the American Dream movement, I received 677 votes of support and won a scholarship to attend the summit in DC. Finally, I am spearheading a marketing sub-committee for a 2012 conference on the Arab Spring.

My values, skills, and experience drive me to support other world history teachers. Having experienced teaching world history without effective curriculum or tools, I know how dire and urgent the need is. I know that without fixing this problem, it will be so much harder to fix other problems; and I know that I am one of the few people with a constellation of qualities that will enable the undertaking of this project.

**Narrative 3: Transformative Impact & Sustainability**

If *Fate of Civilizations* were wildly successful tomorrow, it would provide world history teachers effective tools to address a myriad of needs. *Glory* in the classroom would motivate and engage all students simultaneously. With *Glory,* teachers would have multiple ways to track student performance *while* it is happening, the game adjusting itself to the learning needs of the participants. With *Glory,* history would grow in importance within high schools, as kids’ enthusiasm and achievement rise. Visible in history classrooms, these innovative techniques for differentiation, tracking, and engagement would model new ways of teaching for other subjects.

The best way to work towards achieving such success in the next one to five years will require multiple steps. First, we will need to build a following of as many world history teachers as possible. This will be no small task, but with sophisticated, strategic and robust execution of electronic and traditional marketing and relationship management, we will push for *Fate of Civilizations* awareness to go viral. Second, we must focus on developing and taking to market a full suite of effective, high quality products, including board games, electronic games, curriculum guides, and perhaps, an online social network. Third, we must build a team of top talent with the ability to manage the growing complexity of finances, human resources, data, customer service, logistics, law, product and service offerings, and innovation that our national strategy will require.

There are two related challenges that pose the greatest obstacles to explosive success of *Fate of Civilizations*. The first is breaking into a market that, while underserved, may be skeptical of adopting new practices or purchasing products without the Pearson or McGraw-Hill label. The second obstacle is to maintain and grow our market share, and this will depend on if we consistently deliver the highest quality products, service and results. If we can capture a foothold in the market, and we consistently deliver, **we can rapidly grow to fill the void of resources experienced by our history teachers and their students.**

**Narrative 4: Idea Development Stage**

Currently *Fate of Civilizations* has undergone months of intense work in order to prepare for a 2012 product launch. We have built a basic corporate and operational infrastructure, having incorporated, launched two splash sites, drafted a business plan, hired an accountant, and formed critical partnerships. We have created the first prototype of *Glory* and are testing the game throughout the fall, working out any issues, moving through beta testing, and preparing to publicly release the game. We have formed an informal advisory network composed of banking, private equity, venture capital, corporate law, marketing, sustainability, technology, instruction and curriculum experts, and we aim to form a formal advisory board and board of directors by the end of 2011. At this stage our limited savings are covering operational expenses, however, it will be hard to scale without additional funding. With that in mind, and cautious to give up equity without good cause, we are looking at incubators and start-up competitions to support our growth.

Winning the Social Innovation award would have a transformative impact on our viability to grow and carry out our mission. It would provide a larger marketing budget to reach a broader audience, and the ability to order a larger inventory, bringing down our per-unit cost, and, in turn, improving our profit margins. Rather than keeping our ambitions modest, looking to target just a few schools, we would have the resources to get our tools into needy classrooms across the country.

The award would also allow us to pay a staff, and to bring on a full time technology specialist—a critical investment given our ambition to leverage high and low tech strategies both in our business operations and in our product development. Support from this award would facilitate proper compliance and good corporate management, rather than forced compromise on due diligence or hiring the best contractors.

This seed money and other support will significantly impact our ability to follow through to spread our solutions to the neediest classrooms throughout the nation.