



Barrington Stoke

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION GUIDE



CHRIS BRADFORD

Gamer

- PART 1** Synopsis and Themes
- PART 2** Ideas for Exploring the Text
- PART 3** About Chris Bradford
- PART 4** Ideas for Extension Work

PART I SYNOPSIS AND THEMES

Chris Bradford's **Gamer** is a breathtaking short novel accessible to mixed ability groups. This guide has been compiled to provide ideas for exploring the text via structured discussion, close reading focused on elements of the author's style, and drama, storyboarding and other techniques to help tease out meaning.

'VIRTUAL KOMBAT. SO REAL IT HURTS.'

Scott's a survivor – one of the many orphans living rough after the killer virus of 2030. Life on the street is tough as the orphans battle for a share of any meagre rations available with thousands of kids kicked out by parents who believed that they were responsible for the spread of the virus.

Since the virus, most people are afraid to leave their homes and so have retreated into virtual reality and in particular Virtual Kombat, an incredibly realistic fighting game. The man behind the game is Vince Power, whose system of orphanages is like a shining beacon of hope to Scott. Any street kid good enough to beat all comers in an open battle can make it into Power's game-testing programme, which means food, warmth and a place to sleep. When Scott qualifies, it's like a dream come true.

But Scott soon discovers that Virtual Kombat is closer to a nightmare. Kids aren't just testing the game – they're powering it. When they die within the game, there's a very real chance they'll die in the real world too. Scott's new friend Kat-Ana has just disappeared into VK and Scott knows he has no choice but to follow her, come what may...

Gamer is shorter and more accessible than recent blockbuster YA novels set in dystopian futures. It blends elements reminiscent of the *Hunger Games* novels with echoes of the *Matrix* film trilogy to present a persuasive vision of a society gone wrong, and the struggles of one decent individual to protect himself and those he loves despite heavy odds against him.

PART 2 IDEAS FOR EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. BEFORE READING **GAMER**, LOOK AT THE FRONT JACKET WITH YOUR GROUP

Use post-it notes to record questions the students would like to have answered in reading the novel, e.g. 'who are the characters', 'when is it set', 'where is it set', 'why does the girl have a sword' etc.

Together, predict what the book might be about. Why do the students think this? What genre (*type of story*) do they think it may be – e.g. romance, adventure, detective thriller, science fiction? Why?

Now read the blurb on the back of the book. Does it answer any questions? Does it raise any new ones?

2. A 'PUNCHY' OPENING – THUNDERBOLT VS. DESTROY

Ask volunteers to 'slow-mo' mime the action of the opening fight scene. The rest of the group can help 'direct' the action.

What does the group think of the opening scene? Do they like the fact the book opens, as it were, with a bang? Does it make them want to read on?

3. THE AUTHOR'S CRAFT – NARRATOR AND TENSE

The narrator of a book is the person who tells the story.

The two most common types of narrator are:

- First-person narrators. These are usually the main character within the story. They tell the story from their own point-of-view and they can only 'see' inside their own heads. They use the words 'I' and 'me' to refer to themselves, e.g. 'It all started when I got up on Sunday morning.'
- Third-person narrators. It can be harder to say 'who' these narrators are! They tell the story from a different point of view to the point of view of the characters and they can 'see' inside the heads of many characters. They call the characters 'he', 'she,' and so on, e.g. 'It all started when Catherine and John got up on Sunday morning.'

Read the first page of *Gamer*.

Does **Gamer** have a first-person narrator, or a third-person narrator? How do you know?

Discuss why you think the author chose to have a first-person narrator:

- is it easier or harder to see things from Scott's point of view?
- does the action seem more or less important or exciting when it is seen through the eyes of a person who is involved?

Stories are very often written in the past tense (*I saw, he said, she thought*) but sometimes authors use the present tense instead (*I see, he says, she thinks*). When the present tense is used to tell a story in this way, we call it the historical present tense or the narrative present tense.

Look at the first sentence of Gamer.

Is it in:

- the past tense?
- the historical present tense?

Discuss why you think Chris Bradford chose this tense:

- does the action seem more or less 'immediate' and exciting?
- do the readers feel even more like they are there, standing in Scott's shoes?
Or not?

4. A DIFFICULT SETTING – DYSTOPIAS

In **Chapter 1**, Scott describes a scary world, where there has been an awful plague and people are afraid to go out of doors. Everyone is addicted to a violent virtual reality game in which players fight to the death. Scott and many other kids are orphans as their parents have died. Other parents did not die, but they feared that their kids were the cause of the plague and so they threw them out into the street. The street kids must fight to survive, as they do not have enough to eat.

If you wish, you can introduce the word dystopia here – an imaginary world, usually in novels or films, in which life is unpleasant and difficult due to political events like war or environmental events like natural disasters. Otherwise you might prefer to refer to books 'set in very difficult worlds' or similar.

Does the group know of any other books or films or TV shows set in a very difficult world/a dystopia?

There has been a recent fashion for books and films of this type, although they are by no means new. Classic novels *1984* and *Brave New World* are dystopian, as are the silent film *Metropolis*, and sci-fi favourites *Blade Runner* and *Mad Max*. Recently the fashion has extended into novels for young adults, including:

- *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins – books (and film adaptation) set in a society that has been through a terrible war and forces young people from different districts to fight to the death in a sick reality TV show.
- *Blood Red Road* by Moira Young – a novel set in a wasteland where Saba and her family scavenge among rubbish tips for food. When Saba's brother is kidnapped, she must set out to rescue him.
- Philip Reeve and Catherine Fisher both write dystopian novel series.

Recent dystopian films include the *Matrix* trilogy, the TV series *Firefly* and its spin-off *Serenity* and the adaptation of *Never Let Me Go*.

5. THE AUTHOR'S CRAFT – SIMILES AND METAPHORS

Authors can make their writing very powerful by packing it full of images. One way they can do this is to use similes and metaphors.

A simile is a comparison between two things (often a thing in the story and an image it suggests), using the word 'like', e.g.

- The mist lay on the land like a bride's veil
- The horse raced like sheet lightning

A metaphor makes a comparison between two things but does not use the word 'like'. In this way metaphors seem to suggest that the first thing IS the second thing, e.g.

- All the world's a stage, and all the men and women players
- Just then the headmaster arrived, a black cloud ready to rain on everyone's day.

Can you find an example of a simile on **P3**? (*'Massive Street Screens are everywhere in the city. Like sick suns that never set.'*)

How could you rewrite this sentence to make the image into a metaphor instead? (*You could take out the word 'like' and run it together into one sentence.*)

Can you think of some similes for the following?

- Scott and the rest of the street children (*e.g. rubbish, sewer rats...*)
- The painful hunger Scott feels (*e.g. rats eating at his stomach, acid burning inside him...*)
- The virus of 2013? (*e.g. a tidal wave, a bomb...*)

6. A CRACKING CHARACTER

Chapter 1 of **Gamer** gives us lots of insights into Scott's thoughts. In **Chapter 2**, he starts to get involved in the action.

Draw a boy's silhouette on the board (you could draw round a student for this) and write 'Scott' inside. Now work together to mind-map what the group knows about Scott and record it inside/around the silhouette. Contributions can be anything from single words to statements. Encourage the group to think about externals and internals; to read between the lines and take into account what Chris Bradford shows us as well as what he tells us.

The following prompts may help:

- o Is Scott kind/unkind/brave/meek/scared/confident?
- o Has life on the streets made him hard, or is he quite soft and kind? Or is he somewhere in the middle? What evidence is there in his actions?
- o How does he feel in himself? Physically strong, or not?
- o How does he feel about Virtual Kombat?

When you have completed your mind-map, discuss whether Scott is a simple character, or more complicated. Does the group think that books are more or less interesting if their central characters are complicated?

Ask the group to make drawings of Scott. How would he look? Would he be strong and brawny, or small and skinny? Why? (*Remember that the picture on the front jacket of **Gamer** is of the avatar Scott uses inside the game, and may not look very like Scott in real life*).

7. AMAZING ACTION SEQUENCES

Chapter 3 and **Chapter 5** are breathtaking action sequences. Strengthen sequencing skills by asking students, in groups, to use cards to 'boil these down' into a series of actions. You could then use these as a framework for a collaborative cartoon strip version.

These chapters also offer brilliant stimulus for drama. Use the text as a 'script' for a monologue with 'slo-mo' action, and encourage students to think about Scott's voice, breathing, posture and facial expressions as he lives through the rooftop chase or his first VK fight. These could also be recorded, and sound effects added.

8. DOUBLE-EDGED SWORDS

Read over the following section from **Chapter 7**:

*A tall, black-haired girl with the tag VIXEN puts her hand up. "What are the rules?"
Vince looks at her, his face grave. Then grins. "There aren't any."*

Do the students think that it would be good to live in a world with no rules? Are rules always bad?

Brainstorm rules that upset and annoy the students, and rules that are important and keep them safe.

On balance, would the students prefer to live in a world with no rules, or with rules?

In **Chapter 8**, Scott discovers that the new version of Virtual Kombat allows players to feel the pain of blows as well as feeling the high of winning. Vince Power says:

“It’s addictive. The gamer never wants to lose – not at any cost.”

What does the group think of the new version of Virtual Kombat, and of Vince’s opinion?

9. THE AUTHOR’S CRAFT – PACING AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

In the action-heavy chapters of **Gamer**, Chris Bradford varies his sentence structure to change the pace of the action.

Look at **Chapter 9**. Can you find sentences which:

- Are only one or two words long?
- Are like one sentence split into two?
- Are not complete – don’t have all the words you would normally expect in a sentence?

What are the effects of these short sentences?

- Seem to make the action happen faster
- Seem to make the action happen slower
- Make it seem like Scott is seeing things happen one heartbeat at a time
- Make it seem like Scott is seeing things happen smoothly

10. THE AUTHOR’S CRAFT – CLIFFHANGERS

A cliff-hanger is a chapter ending that leaves a character (often the main character) in danger. The idea is to keep the reader wanting to read on in order to find it if/how the character gets out of the situation.

Which chapters in **Gamer** end on cliff-hangers?

11. FEARSOME FIGHTERS

When Scott enters VK2 for the last time, he lands in the middle of the worst battle he has ever seen. Danger comes thick and fast from all sorts of different fighters.

Divide the chapters of the book between the students and ask each to list the different types of fighting styles and fighters that appear, e.g. kickboxer, ninja etc. Collate these lists, then divide up the different fighters and styles between the students to research in books or on the internet.

Create a presentation with information about each, on paper or using Powerpoint. Include:

- o The country/countries the fighter/fighting style comes from
- o The history of the fighter/fighting style (if known)
- o Weapons used (if any)
- o Clothes worn
- o Pictures (print-outs or hand-drawn)
- o Other relevant information, e.g. famous fighters in this style.

12. THE POWER OF MEMORIES

Inside VK2, Kate/Kat-Ana knows how important it is to remember who she is. In order to do this, she sings the nursery rhyme 'London Bridge is falling down'. This is because she has a strong memory of her dad singing it to her when she was little.

Ask students to decide on a memory they would cling to if they were in Kate/Kat-Ana's place. They could think of a place, an event, or a person, or something they once saw, heard or felt. They could think of an object that reminds them of a person, place or event that is important to them.

Ask each person to share their memory with the rest of the group.

13. THE CITADEL

As Kate/Kat-Ana and Scott search for a way out of VK2, a clue leads them to a place called The Citadel.

Does the class know what a citadel is?

If they do/did not, what information does **Chapter 17** give to help them understand what it is?

Look up 'citadel' in a dictionary or online and write down the definition.

The Citadel in **Gamer** is a little different from citadels in the real world – how? Why? (*because Gamer is a fantasy/science fiction novel and VK is not real, even within the world of the novel*).

14. A TRAGIC ENDING – AND AN OPEN ONE

Discuss the closing chapters of **Gamer** as a group.

- Who is most responsible for Kat-Ana/Kate's death – Vince Power, or Shark? Or are both equally responsible?
- Is Shark a victim of VK, or does he like VK because it gives him an excuse to behave in a cruel and violent way?
- Does Vince Power really think he is helping society by keeping VK going, even though kids are dying? What other reasons might Vince have for wanting to keep VK going?
- Why has Chris Bradford chosen the surname 'Power' for Vince?
- Is Scott right to run away from Vince Power, even though he risks his life?
- How do students feel about **Chapter 22**. Do they like the fact that the story seems almost open for a sequel? Would they have preferred to have all the ends tied up instead? Which is more true to life – a messy ending, or a neat, tied-up ending?

PART 3 ABOUT CHRIS BRADFORD



Chris Bradford is a man of many talents! As well as being a best-selling author, he has a black belt in Zen Kyu Shin Taijutsu and he is also trained in judo, karate, kickboxing and samurai swordsmanship. He has put this experience to good use in his *Young Samurai* series of books, and in his titles for Barrington Stoke, **Gamer** and **Ninja: First Mission**. He has been won the Northern Ireland Book Award and been on the short-list for the Red House Book Award.

Before he was an author, Chris played music for a living and worked for a publishing company. Now he divides his time between writing and touring schools and festivals with shows about his books. In his shows he dresses up in martial arts costumes and shows off some very impressive moves with a sword!

Chris has now finished the *Young Samurai* series and is writing a new series about a bodyguard. In order to find out everything he needed to know for the new series, he trained as a real-life bodyguard. That's dedication!

You can read more about Chris Bradford on his website,

WWW.CHRISBRADFORD.CO.UK

PART 4 IDEAS FOR EXTENSION WORK

1. DESIGN A POSTER FOR VIRTUAL KOMBAT

Ask students to bring in video game boxes or look at examples online for inspiration.

2. PLOT A TRAILER FOR GAMER

Imagine **Gamer** was going to be made into a film. What would the trailer be like?

There is a good lesson plan for trailer writing here: <http://www.skillsworkshop.org/sites/skillsworkshop.org/files/resources/e3l2filmtrailerlessonplan.pdf>

3. WRITE A BOOK REVIEW

- Try to answer all of these questions to help you create your review of **Gamer**:
- What is **Gamer** about?
- What did you think was good about **Gamer**?
- Was there anything you didn't like about **Gamer**?
- Did **Gamer** teach you anything new or make you think about anything differently?
- Would you like to read more books by the same author?
- How many stars would you give **Gamer** out of ten? What might have made you change your mark?

Write your review out neatly in your best writing and display it on the wall or keep it in a folder with other reviews.

4. WRITE A SEQUEL

What happens next?

The ending of **Gamer** is very open. Kate/Kat-Ana is dead, but Scott has got out of the game and escaped. Now Scott is on the run, and has vowed that Vince Power must be stopped – but first he will have to make people believe his story...

Ask students to plan and write sequels to **Gamer**.

5. DESIGN A VIDEO GAME

In groups, ask students to come up with a concept for a new video game. They must plan out the 'world' of the game, the levels and the tasks players will have to complete in order to progress through the levels.

The software company **Immersive Education** sells a piece of software called **Mission Maker** that allows students to create their own video games, using a range of knowledge and problem-solving skills.

6. FURTHER READING



Chris Wooding's *Pale* is set in a dystopian near-future in which the 'Lazarus Serum' can bring individuals with a compatible blood type back from the dead. Officially called the 'Resurrected', those who have taken the serum face widespread discrimination and are known by the derogatory term 'Pales', since a side effect of the serum is that they are leached of all colour.

The 'Pales' cannot own property as they are still legally dead, and there is more than a suggestion that those who cannot benefit from the serum have perhaps manipulated the situation to their own advantage. *Pale* follows the story of Jed, a young man initially repulsed by the 'Resurrected', who joins their number after a fatal car crash...