STAYING WITH (AND PLAYING IN) THE TROUBLE:
A PILOT STUDY WITH THE NEW YORK NEO-FUTURISTS

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"Play, play every day, play and play and play away,
and then play the play you played to-day,
the play you play every day, play it and play it.
Play it and remember it and ask to play it.
Play it, and play it and play away."[1]

Gertrude Stein

I.   <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

Play and playfulness feel like relatively simple concepts. Nearly everyone has *played* a game, *played* a role at a costume party, or created universes while *playing* pretend. Given the timing of when most of this play occurs in a person's life, there is a tendency to associate play and playfulness with childhood or childishness. As a result, actions and discussions of play and playfulness have typically existed in the space of the trivial, distraction, and silly. This is problematic. Play and playfulness are tricky, sophisticated, and nuanced concepts, which lack simple and easily graspable definitions. As Johan Huizinga says in his seminal work on play, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*: "[P]lay is a function of the living, but is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically, or aesthetically."[2] Yet, this lack of definability and the natural shiftiness of what play is and means is it's invitation to embrace uncertainty, to let go of control, and to see what emerges.

To this end, we are beginning to see shifts occur in common perceptions on what play and playful can, does, and might mean. There seems to be two evolving conversations: (1) *Play as a means to an end*; and (2) *Play as a means <u>and</u> an end.*

A. PLAY AS A MEANS TO AN END

On one hand, play and games are increasingly being integrated into the vocabulary and tactics of researchers, designers, and executives. Some have attributed play with the power to

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[1] Stein, Gertrude, and Ulla E. Dydo. *A Stein Reader*. Evanston Ill: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1996. (147). Print.

[2] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1955. (7) Print.

catalyze more radical innovation.[3] Others, emphasize the utility of play and games as avenues for productivity[4] and learning.[5] Games have even made their way into government as methods for civic engagement.[6] This phenomenon is fascinating; however, I am left to ask whether these are the only ways play and playfulness might exist outside the zone of the child.

To put this more bluntly, I interpret these preceding examples as implicit articulations encouraging the pure utility of play; Play only as a means to a desired end.

Want your employees to be more 'innovative;'
Program some play into the week.[7]

Interested in upping productivity around the office;
Introduce a game to keep folks focused.[8]

Want your kids to be smarter and learn faster;
Optimize a bit of unstructured playtime throughout their busy day.[9]

The evidence certainly points to these benefits and in a society oriented around efficiency and productivity, there has been a rush to see the potentials of play through those lenses.

This is not entirely concerning. In fact, at times, play is and should be relied upon as the best way to deliver information or mobilize action.[10] Yet, this 'play as a means to an end' framing, similar to that of play and playfulness as childish, significantly limits our collective capacity to recognize an innate meaningfulness of play.

B. PLAY AS A MEANS AND AN END

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[3] Cook, Jake. "IDEO: Big Innovation Lives Right on the Edge of Ridiculous Ideas." *99U By Behance*, Behance, 11 Sept. 2011, 99u.adobe.com/articles/7080/ideo-big-innovation-lives-right-on-the-edge-of-ridiculous-ideas. ["The design gurus at IDEO explain how play drives innovation and learning."]

[4] "Bunchball Nitro Platform Enterprise Gamification Software." *Bunchball*, 16 March, 2018. www.bunchball.com/products/nitro-platform.

[5] Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy, and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff . "Transforming Cities into Learning Landscapes (SSIR)." *Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change*, Stanford Social Innovation Review, 26 Sept. 2016, ssir.org/articles/entry/transforming_cities_into_learning_landscapes.

[6] "You're Mayor for a Day." *People's Budget | New Orleans, LA*. neworleans.peoplesbudget.com/?showLogin=true.

[7] Schwab, Katharine. "Ideo breaks its silence on design thinking's critics." Fast Company. 29 October, 2019. https://www.fastcompany.com/90257718/ideo-breaks-its-silence-on-design-thinkings-critics. "Playfulness and joy don't need a reason other than that they create the conditions . . . to allow people to be more creative."

[8] "Bunchball Nitro Platform Enterprise Gamification Software." *Bunchball*, 16 Mar. 2018, www.bunchball.com/products/nitro-platform.

[9] Rock, Amanda. "Unstructured Play for Children." Very Well Family. 5 November, 2018. https://www.verywellfamily.com/unstructured-play-2764971

[10] Here, I am referring to some of these civic engagement previously discussed, in which civic and political involvement has gone up as a result of introduction of games and game theory.

Alternatively, there is a growing collection of organizers, activists, artists, and academics who are attempting to explore the importance of play and playfulness as *meaningful inefficiencies*[11]; as valuable pursuits in and of themselves. These are folks engaging in acts of play and playful behavior not just to achieve a certain outcome, but also because the act of play is important, valuable, and meaningful in its own right. It is in these spaces we are beginning to see truly unique and sophisticated approaches emerge for how to navigate and address complex topics and challenges.[12] These collectives are beginning to uncover truly profound ways of "staying with [and playing in] the trouble" -- the framing Donna Haraway uses to describe the capacity to function symbiotically with our complexity, rather than control it.[13]

My research points squarely in the direction of this perspective on play and playfulness. I aim to explore the relationship between the play element of certain cultures and the abilities which emerge to navigate and address complex and ambiguous challenges. With this intent in mind, the findings of this paper are the initial insights from a pilot study, conducted over the past month with collaborators /participants from the New York City based theatre company, the New York Neo-Futurists (NYNF). In this paper, I aim to articulate how the playful context, rituals, and attitudes, which compose the play element of the NYNF culture, enable them to navigate and address seemingly complex and, at times ambiguous topics, including: identity, politics, race and racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and the patriarchy. Or, put more simply, I aim to articulate how the New York Neo-Futurists stay with (and play in) the trouble.

Disclaimer:
This is an exploration of the play element in the New York Neo-Futurist culture. The NYNF are not solely a play-based organization. It is therefore, a limited perspective on the company as a whole. As individuals and as a company, they are more than their play element. They are intelligent, emotionally complex, and creative people. Nevertheless, play is a continuous characteristic of the company, its culture, and its rituals. Furthermore, this play element is seemingly a critical component of their capacity to engage and create in the impactful way they do. It is for this reason I have selected to focus exclusively on the play element of the NYNF.

II.   **PROBLEM DOMAIN**

This research is an effort to push back against framings of play and playfulness as either purely childish or utilitarian. Furthermore, I am interested in this research serving as a counterexample against tendencies to take on overly simplistic solutionist approaches to complex topics, like systemic racism, poverty, climate change, or toxic masculinity. Solutionist approaches to these kinds of challenges have generally demonstrated wilful misunderstanding and /or oversimplification of the true messiness and complexity of the issues. Lastly, I aim for this research

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[11] Gordon, Eric, and Paul Mihailidis. *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice.* , 2016. Print. 242 (Referencing: Meaningful Inefficiencies, by Eric Gordon and Stephen Walter).

[12] City of Boston, Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics. "Playful Boston." Boston.gov/Play, City of Boston, 21 May 2018, www.boston.gov/departments/new-urban-mechanics/playful-boston.

[13] Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. 2016. Print.

to serve as an example of the generative potential of genuinely embracing and rooting oneself, or collective-selves, in uncertainty and ambiguity.

III.   <u>BACKGROUND CONTEXT</u>

A. 'BEING-IN-THE-WORLD' AND 'STAYING WITH THE TROUBLE'

The socio-environmental circumstances[14] we are situated within are complex, tricky, and non-absolute. They are interconnected, interdependent, and entangled. They knot bundles of the living and unliving, tragedy and joy, troubles and opportunities. An image, like that proposed by Donna Haraway,[15] of our complex and connected reality as something like *compost* resonates; A messy togetherness, in which challenges and approaches blossom like wild flowers.

As this complex mess continues to evolve, efforts have been made to decipher and affect it. For a time, all known challenges could be *understood* and *solved* with an economist's sense of rationality. Law had its time as well, with it's eye for detail and enforceability. Business has and continues to take a front seat with the theory that problems are profit opportunities, which entrepreneurs *will find* and *solve for*. More recently, particularly within the engineering, computation, and design communities, systems analysis has become optimal -- a way to *comprehend* and *solve* the vast, quantifiable, mix of connections between all things.

There is, however, a major risk related to the approaches listed above (economic, legal, business, and systems: An underlying assumption of capacity to control.

Instead, what if the need to control were relinquished and an openness to the generative potential of the unknown were to be embraced. Haraway, in *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene,* proposes a theory, which has tones similar to Martin Heidegger's Being-In-the-World, of an effort to 'stay with the trouble.' It is a provocation to engage deeply with our collective humanness and the tangle of skills, memories, and approaches we each bring, to meets our challenges where they are, with similar knottedness and interdependency. It is a proposal to be-in, be-with the world. By being so, it is proposed, we might enable a genuine capacity to navigate and affect change on complex and ambiguous topics, issues, and challenges.

B. GAMES, PLAY, AND PLAYFULNESS

It is my belief that play and playfulness are ways to be-in-the-world. They are ways to stay with the trouble. That said, before proceeding, it is important to provide slightly more grounding for what the concepts of play and playfulness might mean in this context.

Games, play, and playfulness are all loosely understood concepts. As described previously, they can only be loosely defined at best. Games, as Greg Costikyan describes, are "merely the term we apply to a particular kind of play:" play that has been imbued with sets of rules and expectations.

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[14] *INCLUDING*, impending ecological destruction, seismic socioeconomic inequity, deeply imbedded hierarchical power structures, and ambitions toward survival and collective flourishment.

[15] Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. Print. (p1-31).

[16] Building on the work of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*,[17] Miguel Sicart, in *Play Matters*, describes the experience of play as "to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human."[18] Sicarte goes further to define playfulness as:

> "A way of engaging with particular contexts and objects that is similar to play but respects the purposes and goals of that object or context[19]... Playfulness is a physical, psychological, and emotional attitude toward things people, and situations. It is a way of engaging with the world derived from our capacity to play but lacking some of the characteristics of play"[20]

The distinction here between play and playfulness is that "play is an *activity*, while playfulness is an *attitude*."[21]

Explicit correlation between play, playfulness, and collective capacity to stay with the trouble does not, necessarily, exist. That said, held in parallel, a relationship certainly seems to evolve. And, as my research with the NYNF developed, so to did the recognizable strength of the connection between the company's play element and their collective capacity to stay with (and play in) the trouble. Therefore, the remainder of this research will focus on articulating the more notable linkages between the play element of the NYNF culture and their capacity to navigate and affect change on complex and ambiguous topics, issues, and challenges.

C. THE NEW YORK NEO-FUTURISTS

The New York Neo-Futurists are a "collective of wildly productive writers / directors / performers who create:

1) Theater that is fusion of sport, poetry, and living-newspaper;
2) Non-illusory, interactive performance that conveys [their] experiences and ideas as directly and honestly as possible; and
3) [Creative works and workshops] which embrace those unreached or unmoved by conventional theater-inspiring them to thought, feeling, and action."[22]

The central tenets of their work is that every aspect of a Neo-Futurist performance must be real:

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[16] Costikyan, Greg. *Uncertainty in Games*. 2015. Print. 7.

[17] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. 1955. Print. 13. Huizinga attributes play with a number of defining characteristics: "A free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner."

[18] Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. 2014. Print. 1.

[19] REFERENCING Lieberman, J N. *Playfulness: Its Relationship to Imagination and Creativity*. New York: Academic Press, 1977. Print.

[20] Sicart, Miguel. *Play Matters*. 2014. Print. 21.

[21] *Id.* 22

[22] Mission. The New York Neo-Futurists. http://www.nyneofuturists.org/about/#mission

"*Neo-Futurists do not play characters; they are called by their real names, relate true stories, and express honest feelings.*

Neo-Futurists do not pretend to perform any action; all tasks are real. Failure is an option.

Neo-Futurists do not transport the audience or themselves to any other setting; the only 'time' and 'place' in a Neo-Futurist plays is 'here' and 'now.' There is no fourth wall in a Neo-Futurist performance. The audience is acknowledged, sometimes addressed, sometimes even involved."[23]

Each week, the NYNF produce *The Infinite Wrench*. This show occurs twice weekly, every week of the year, except for the last two. It is an attempt at an ever-changing, 30, two-minute plays in 60 minutes. Each week, depending on two rolls of a six-sided die, one roll occurring each show-night, a certain number of plays are cut from the show's list, *i.e.*, the *Menu*, and replaced the following week. Members of the ensemble who are performing that week (there are about 20 active NYNF, but only 5-7 of them perform each week) are responsible for writing the new plays, including dialog or monologue, stage set up, and direction cues. These plays are truly unique, nuanced, and complicated.[24] They challenge, connect, and resonate with audience members. Moreover, as one participant in my study commented:

"*I think if there's one thing that like we do in this space, that's super healthy for audience members, [it] is... to be able to create things that they aren't defined or...[that] can be really illegible. And messy and ambiguous... the forum sets them up for an embracing of that*"[25]

If it is not apparent from the conditions and radically playful approach the NYNF take to the production of *The Infinite Wrench* each week, "there is a lot of play in the company."[26] The play element permeates the NYNF culture. Play and playfulness flow through and around all the NYNF do.[27] Furthermore, play and playfulness enable "messy," "ambiguous," and complicated experiences, presented in ways which can be embraced rather than avoided. Thus, they are exceptional partner for an exploration of how the play element of a culture allows for the emergence of capacities to navigate and affect change on complex and ambiguous topics, issues, and challenges

IV.   <u>**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**</u>

<u>BROAD INTEREST:</u>
To explore the relationship between the play element of certain cultures and the abilities which emerge to navigate and address complex and ambiguous challenges.

<u>SPECIFIC PILOT FOCUS:</u>
(1)   *How does the play element of the New York Neo-Futurists' culture affect their capacity to navigate and affect change on complex and ambiguous topics, issues, and challenges?*

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[23] Audition. The New York Neo-Futurists. http://www.nyneofuturists.org/auditions/

[24] Field Notes. April 5, 2019.

[25] AB Interview. April 28, 2019.

[26] AD Interview. April 25, 2019.

[27] REFERENCING AB Interview. April 28, 2019. (Play is like a moat throughout the Neo Futurists culture).

(2) *What other kinds of impacts does this play-element have?*

Thus, for this projects I will explore:

1) *Do the New York Neo-Futurists conceive of their work as play or playful?*
   a) *What elements of their work do they consider play and/or playful?*
   b) *How do the Neo-Futurists integrate these components into designing, performing, and facilitating shows?*
   c) *What factors determine the circumstances for integrating these playful approaches?*

2) *What impacts do the NYNF see resulting from their approach?*

V. <u>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</u>

To explore the role of play and playfulness in the NYNF capacity to navigating complexity, I used a heavily qualitative, triangulated research approach. The main determinant for which method to apply when was contextual, based most notably on my own curiosity and what felt attuned to the collective tone and energy of my participants. As a result, I relied upon: (1) a classical model of ethnography and compiling field notes; (2) multimodal (sound and video) ethnography; (3) cultural probes, including photovoice, participatory video, narrative, and digital storytelling; and (4) interviews. Cumulatively, over the three-week period in which this pilot occured, I was with the NYNF for approximately 40 hours. I was able to participate in Pitch Meetings, Rehearsals, and Shows with twelve different members of the company. This time and diversity of exposure gave room for tremendous insights and observations to emerge.

In approaching this research process, I felt it was incredibly important to engage with a participatory and design led research attitude. I would not necessarily define the methodology as purely one or the other, given limitations on time and my own capacity. Nevertheless, a conscious effort was made to ensure, throughout the pilot, participants were part of designing the process and synthesizing insights.

A. PROCESS

1. Coordination of Pilot

From the very beginning of this project, I attempted to integrate a participatory approach to the process. After connecting with members of the NYNF, we went through a process of refining the schedule, research components, and participants to ensure everyone was comfortable and excited to proceed. We pushed the start date back a week, identified critical meetings, rehearsals and shows I could join, and sculpted a set of cultural probes, which would fit within the time and energy constraints of members in the company. This process of coordination took several weeks and included multiple check-ins[28] and collective decisions made by all members of the ensemble I would

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[28] As part of this ongoing coordination process, I developed a One-pager, which drew from my initial research proposal and input from the NYNF. This one-pager was shared with the entire company for all-company business meeting to help inform a decision of whether to participate or not.

be working with. This initial process of coordination was a tremendously important cornerstone to the development of the project. It established a sense of shared trust and more relational dynamic, as well as built a foundation for a more participatory process.

2. Conventional and Multimodal Ethnography

A primary means for gaining insight from the NYNF was through an ethnographic process. I attended two Play Pitch Meetings (4/16/19 and 4/23/19) and four Rehearsals+Shows (4/19-20/19) and (4/26-27/19). Each pitch meeting was approximately four hours long and each rehearsal+show was five. During each, I would sit with and engage with members of the ensemble as they conducted their meetings and rehearsals, asking periodic questions, and making short notes. Following the meetings and shows, I would then compile more comprehensive field notes.[29] These field notes were returned to on an ongoing basis to reflect on what I was hearing, seeing, feeling, and learning. This process was particularly helpful for shaping how I focused my attention during later meetings and rehearsals, as well as how I conducted my interviews.
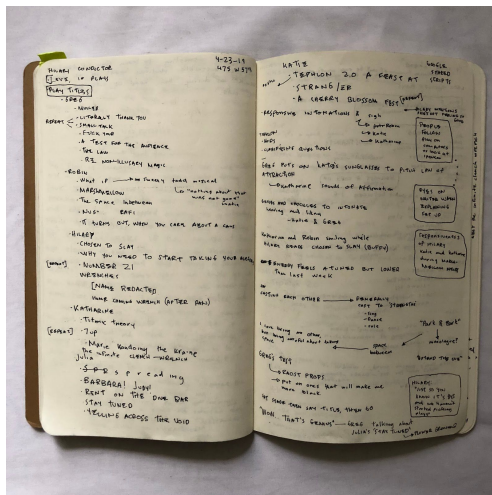

Notes from the field
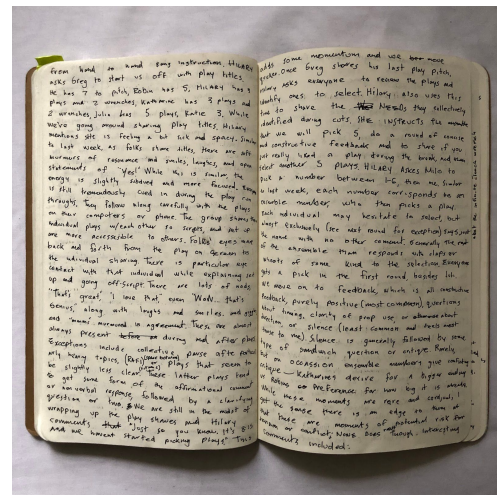
Field notes

Beyond actively engaging, notating, and compiling field notes, I also attempted to use a more multimodal ethnographic approach. To do so, I video recorded elements of rehearsals and show set ups.[30] I also audio recorded show set ups in the Kraine Theatre, where the company performs.[31] These videos and audio were helpful to review, because they did a better job conveying tone, energy and dynamic amongst ensemble members than I had been able to illustrate in my field notes. I intentionally chose not to record any of the pitch meetings. These gatherings felt more personal and private and I felt that even an ask to record could deteriorate important trust I had been developing with my participants. As such, those events were only captured in Field Notes. Over time, if this pilot were to be extended, recording those meetings may have eventually become an option, but in the short time I had, I did not feel it was an appropriate request.

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[29] Field Notes.

[30] Videos.

[31] Audio.

3. Cultural Probes
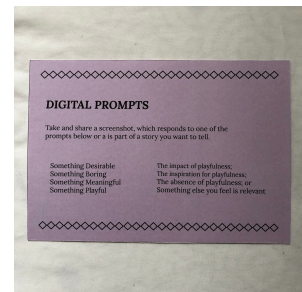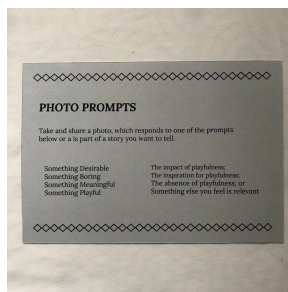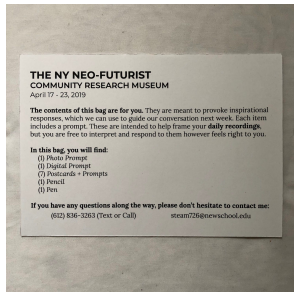
Cultural probe packages shared with participants

At the onset of the pilot, once all the elements had been coordinated, 5 specific participants self-selected to engage with cultural probes. In the interest of avoiding design jargon, I referred to these probes as *daily recordings* or *prompts*. I will use all three interchangeably in this paper. The daily recordings were designed with input from the company. Originally, I had intended for each individual to take one photo a day as well as write a short statement in relation to the image. Feedback from members of the company was that this would be prohibitive to other forms of expression and potentially overly time consuming, particularly for individuals not oriented toward taking photos or writing in that way. So, the probes were co-redesigned to enable participants

freedom to respond to one of four different medium cards: photo, writing, drawing, and digital. Each card had a set of prompts written on them to help direct attention, but participants were encouraged to go beyond or outside the prompts.

Samples of Daily Recordings

Ultimately, I received daily recordings back from each participant.[32] They had each compiled rich and unique sets of daily recordings. These were primarily used as a way of centering each interview, but they also provide tremendous insight into the attentiveness, playfulness, and creativity of each participant.

4. Interviews

As a final component of my research strategy, I conducted interviews with each of the participants who had also conducted daily recordings. Each interviews was structured according to a similar protocol, recorded, and transcribed.[33] The protocol, which is included below, was fairly flexible, as my primary interest was in creating a context which feels more conversational than formal. Certain interviews veered in different directions and I was open and appreciative of this. That said, I did structure the conversations to touch on three primary points, the Play Element of the NYNF Culture, Review of the Cultural Probes, Description of "Good Neo-Futurism"), so they all had a slightly similar trajectory. I also used the interviews as an important checkpoint to review my insights to that point with each participant to get feedback, questions, and clarification. Their

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[32] Cultural Probes.

[33] Interview Audio.

reflections in this regard were tremendously helpful to the process of synthesizing the findings, as well as ensuring a more participatory oriented qualitative analysis process.

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INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

LOCATIONS & TIMING

As much as possible, timing and locations for meetings were conducted according to preferences of the participants. That said, limitations of my own schedule meant that participants also accommodated to my needs.

THEMES & QUESTIONS

NYNF Play and Culture

Can you tell me a bit more about yourself and your role with the NYNF?
Can you tell me about the culture of the NYNF?
Can you tell me about finding the balance between "Going there" and "Keeping it Light"[34]
  - *What does it mean to find that balance and how do you see the company navigating that?*
How do you see play, playfulness, and games fitting into the NYNF culture, attitude, or approach?

Review of Cultural Probes

Can you tell me about what you chose to record each day?
What drew your attention?
What might these recordings say about you as a NYNF?

"Good Neo-Futurism?"

What do you think makes for "good neo-futurism"[35]

Review of Insights Up To Now

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General Interview Protocol

5.   **Participatory and Independent Qualitative Data Analysis**

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[34] "Going there" and "Keeping it Light" are references to a statement from one of the members of the ensemble who described the balance of the show for a certain night as "A good balance between going there [i.e., orienting toward a more personal, vulnerable, or challenging topic] and keeping it light [i.e, more fun or funny]." Field Notes. Play Pitch Meeting. April 23, 2019.

[35] "Good Neo-Futurism" was a phrase I heard multiple times from multiple participants to describe certain plays.

As has been previously discussed, qualitative data analysis occurred throughout the research pilot process. That said, a predominant amount of the more careful refining process occurred once information and data collection had concluded. This analysis was executed both independently and in participatory fashion. I started during the process by coding the field notes I was creating. Through this effort, I was able to identify repeating themes, particularly those related to the rituals and conditions practiced by the NYNF related to play and playfulness. I continued this coding until I began interviewing. Equipped with my initial insights, I tested them with certain questions in the interview protocol (see interview protocol above). Responses from participants to these questions helped clarify and consolidate my grounded theories. Additionally, I used the probes as a means for collaborative qualitative data analysis. I would have each participant walk me through their daily recordings while I asked clarifying questions. I would also frame their daily responses relative to some of my initial theories during our conversations and together we would orient the meaning appropriately. This was my effort to balance my own interpretations with their intentions. Then, I would walk each participant through the theory I was piecing together and, again, together we would clarify details and organize clusters of insights.

After conducting interviews, I returned to independent coding. I reviewed transcripts of our interviews relative to my previous coding and the cultural probes. I continued this process until I felt I had come to a point of identifying a thorough grounded theory regarding how *the NYNF rely upon play and playfulness to navigate complex topics and challenges and the impact that has.*

VI.   <u>THE PLAY ELEMENT OF THE NYNF CULTURE</u>

Play and playfulness are not the definitive terms the NYNF use to define the basis of their company. Yet, they are certainly threaded throughout everything the NYNF do. As one participant told me:

> "*I don't know if it's like play here, other* [elements of the NYNF] *here* [indicating two separate spaces with hands]. *I think it's like all of the* [elements] *and then play is… the moat through which it happens. That is that's how I feel. That's how I feel about the company.*"[36]

And, as another participate framed it:

> "*All 30 things that we do in the show, we call them plays… I think there's something to that. It's a funny… homonym of play and play.*"[37]

With this in mind, what makes the play element of the NYNF culture especially unique are the conditions which exist for certain forms of play to flourish at certain times. It is the context for play, rituals of play, and playful attitudes that are sewn into the NYNF culture that enable distinct forms of play and playfulness to be ever present, contextualized, and affecting. It is by means of these conditions that the NYNF is able to so powerfully navigate complexity and ambiguity.

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[36] AB Interview. April 28, 2019.

[37] AD Interview. April 25, 2019.

What is especially fascinating to me, is the complexity with which these conditions intertwine. One component of the play element of the NYNF culture does not presuppose the others; They occur simultaneously and are held in tandem, rather than according to any system of hierarchy. As one participants said:

> "*Yeah. I mean, there's a lot of aspects of play that I think are things we associate with vulnerability. Especially things that came up in this conversation around ambiguity and a loss of control or power or, or certainty. Like, a lot of those things are really vulnerable things for people. But they're also essential human connective tissue.*
>
> *Yeah.*
>
> *And so,* [for the NYNF, we're constantly exploring] *like, ... how do we dream up of spaces and communities where you create a context where people can have those experiences.*
>
> > *So that then the rules, expectations, how we understand, is, like, what we need to do for each other so it comes naturally,   rather than assigned by a hierarchy,*
>
> *you know?*"[38]

I have summarized these non-hierarchical conditions of the play element of the NYNF's culture as: (1) The Context for Play; (2) The Rituals for Play; and (3) Playful Attitudes.

A. THE CONTEXT OF PLAY

The "machine" is a term I heard commonly to refer to the primary show of the NYNF, *The Infinite Wrench*. As discussed previously, this show occurs twice weekly, every week of the year except for two. It is an attempt at an ever-changing, 30, two-minute plays in 60 minutes. Each week, depending on two rolls of a six-sided die, one roll occurring each show night, a certain number of plays are cut from the show's list, *i.e.*, the *Menu*, and replaced the next week. Members of the ensemble who are performing that week (there are about 20 active NYNF, but only 5-7 of them perform each week) are responsible for writing new plays, including dialog, monologue, stage set up, and direction cues. This writing tends to occur on Sunday and Monday, though previously written plays, which have not been performed for more than two weeks, can also be brought back. Pitching, selecting and rehearsing happens on Tuesday. On Friday and Saturday, immediately before each show, they run more thorough rehearsals.

Rightfully so, the company has been called "The hardest working theater group in the city."[39] Furthermore, given the nature of this demanding process, the nickname, *Machine*, seems to make sense. There are specific mechanisms each week, which need to be functioning, in order for the the show to happen.

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[38] AB Interview. April 28, 2019.

[39] "New York Neo." *Futurists*, www.nyneofuturists.org/.

Interestingly, a *machine* is sometime used as a term to describe games: "*Games are machines that generate designed play.*"[40] I believe the NYNF's mechanisms for operating their own machine mirror and exhibit these characteristics of a game. This became especially notable to me as I sat in on Play Pitches and Rehearsals and began drawing connections with another set of conditions which are typical to games: *Actions, Rules, Goals, Objects, Playspace, Players.*[41]

Actions:
Each week, the performing ensemble of the NYNF flow through a cycle of play writing, pitching, selecting, notating, *i.e.*, providing feedback on, rehearsing, performing, keeping, and cutting. This happens every week.

Rules:
In order to move through the actions of each week, the NYNF have designed particular rules and structures for how each action occurs.

On Tuesdays, plays are pitched with everyone sitting together in a circle. One after another, one play is pitched by each person until everyone has had a chance to pitch their plays. Then, a micro game of random selection, *i.e.*, asking one intern (or me in this case) to select a certain colour, number, or cartoon character amongst a larger group, with each colour, number or character corresponding to one of the members of the ensemble. Then the randomly selected ensemble members, one at a time, select a pitched play to be added to the Menu, *i.e.*, the list of plays to be performed that week. This mechanism for play selection repeats until half of the needed plays have been selected. Then the group turns to collective feedback, moving from one member of the ensemble to the next, providing thoughts, ideas, and questions about each play pitched by that person. These notes are constructive. Once this process has been completed, the group returns to the micro games and the corresponding member selection of plays. Once all the new plays have been selected, the group collectively discuss Wrenches, *i.e.*, game-changers which may be called upon during *The Infinite Wrench*, which require the members to perform the rest of the plays according to a different set of rules.[42] A collective decision is made to decide which two or three wrenches will be added to the show each week. The group then, one by one, discuss the prop, lighting, and set up needs for each of the new plays of that week. Once this has been accomplished, they move to rehearsing plays.

On Fridays and Saturdays, before rehearsal, the group runs through the menu and decide which plays to run (fully rehearse), run with just lines, or walk through. They then run through each of the selected plays. Once rehearsal is complete, the ensemble head to the Kraine Theatre and set up, which occurs in a similarly orderly and efficient way. At around

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[40] Sharp, John, and Colleen Macklin. *Iterate: Ten Lessons in Design and Failure.* 2019. Print.

[41] Sharp, John, and Colleen Macklin. *Iterate: Ten Lessons in Design and Failure.* 2019. Print.

[42] Examples of Wrenches include: "REDACTED" -- Having to chew spicy, raw, onions slices if you say the name of one of the other ensemble members; "The Infinite Clench" -- Ensemble members can opt in to performing the remainder of the show with a vibrator inserted; and "Resurrection" -- One member of the ensemble must sit aside and not participate until three plays have passed (this was the wrench during Easter weekend).

10:30 each night, *The Infinite Wrench* begins with a similar introduction, which prepares the audience for what is to come and how to play along.[43]

This flow, order, or structure, whatever it might be understood as, functions nearly identically week to week, marking a fairly strict set of "rules and expectations"[44] for how the machine is to function.

Goals:
There seem to be several goals for this "game." The primary goal is to attempt to develop, select, prepare, and perform, the 'ever-changing 30 plays in 60 minutes.' Other goals, however, are important contributing factors to the characteristics of the rules and actions that take place. These include, forwarding an egalitarian ideology, sharing responsibility, and reducing risk of personal alienation or attack.

Objects:
The objects of this "game" are the plays (pitched, selected, performed, and kept), the Wrenches, and the literal objects used as props.

Playspace:
The "playspace" for the NYNF shifts. They conduct Play Pitches in Midtown and Rehearse and Perform in the Lower East Side. That said, pulling from the Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, I would suggest the playspace of the NYNF is any space in which the ensemble come together to Pitch, Rehearse or Perform; When they do so, they create "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart."[45]

Players
The players are all the members of the Ensemble, including the NYNF interns who support the production of the show each week and the technical collaborators who facilitate the sound and lighting design and production. Particular attention should be paid, however, to the role of the bi-weekly conductor. This is a responsibility, shared by each member of the company, in which one person, who is part of the performing ensemble, facilitates meetings, rehearsals, set up, and MCs the show. This is a challenging responsibility. As such, it is shared and shifts to a new person every two weeks. This has a fascinating impact of the way the NYNF structure flows because each person brings different energy, focus, and attention to the role. This contributes to the ever-shifting and dynamic nature of this "game"

Structure / Game elements of Neo-Futurist meeting, rehearsal, and show structures, as identified and defined through ethnographic research and interviews

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[43] *The Infinite Wrench* is an incredibly participatory show. Each of the week's 30 plays are numbered and hang on sheets of paper over the stage. Audience members decide which plays will be performed in which order based on the code word "Curtain," which marks the end of one play and cues the audience to choose the next.

[44] SEE Costikyan, Greg. *Uncertainty in Games.* 2015. Print. 7. (Games, as Greg Costikyan describes, are "merely the term we apply to a particular kind of play:" play that has been imbued with sets of rules and expectations.)

[45] Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture.* 1955. (10). Print.

Interestingly, multiple members of the ensemble commented on the nature of "the Meta-Game that is New Futurism."[46] One participant described this game as:

> "*So the meta game is probably the. Yeah, just like the little strategies we all have for how we, how we pick plays, how we choose which plays to bring in to.. Yeah, which to bring in, which plays, what order we pitch them in, and how to keep or cut plays, how to talk about things you might like. It's all these little, like, mini strategies we all have, but don't necessarily talk about. Because when I was first starting, I definitely talked to a couple of the Neos that were like, were talking about how they would sometimes pick... Sometimes, the play that someone brings in, that everyone thinks is a shoe in, doesn't get in. And the reason is, because everyone is trying to pick the one they don't think is going to get picked. And then they're like, 'Well, someone else will definitely get that obvious choice.' And then the obvious choice never gets it. Yeah. Which happens sometimes. So there's that. As far as, you know, choosing what you're going to bring in, other than just the* [collectively identified needs], *there's, you know, how much of me is in the show? Can I get away with having a second monologue this week? Can I.. can I bring in this thing, or is it going to look too much like this person's other thing they pitch last week? There's, you know, there's the order you pick it in, where you're, where you pitch it, and where you're trying, like, Hey, where's the room right now? Are they going to be receptive to a funny play right now? Or do I have to go dark? Yeah, I think those are all like, meta game considerations.*"

I hesitate to insist on the validity of this 'game' structure as a particular truth for the NYNF. I suspect, while members of the NYNF might recognize similarities between their process and a game structure, they likely would not label it as such. Yet, I do think, in the context of the 'Meta-Game' and mechanics of the *Infinite Wrench*, that the NYNF have crafted a machine that generates designed play. And, if nothings else, the mechanisms of *The Infinite Wrench* machine have created a powerful context within which the play element of the NYNF culture can thrive.

B. THE RITUALS OF PLAY

Beyond a context which enables a play culture to thrive, the NYNF practice a wide range of rituals of play. These rituals encourage and make space for forms of play and playing with one-another which are thoughtful and gentle, while also radically fun and adventurous. There are many different rituals and they are constantly evolving.[47] They reinforce and support each other. During my research I came to recognize three rituals of profound importance: (1) A Practice of Presence: Embodying the Values of the NYNF; (2) Demonstrations of Trust, Affirmation, and Validation; and (3) Holding Tensions.

1. A Practice of Presence: Embodying the Values of the NYNF

The NYNF hold four values, which were alluded to earlier, with primary importance:

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[46] Field Notes. April 16, 2019.

[47] All of my participant commented on the nature by which the NYNF and the rituals they practice have shifted over time. Originally, they had a more white, punk orientation, but over time, as the company has grown more diverse, the expectations and rituals have changed. They now embody more familial, egalitarian, affirming, and communal tones. Each participant also commented on how these should and will continue to evolve in this direction.

1) *You are who you are.*
2) *You are where you are.*
3) *You are doing what you are doing.*
4) *The time is now.*[48]

These values guide what kind of plays are created, how plays are selected, and, perhaps most importantly to this study, how the members of the NYNF ensemble engage and interact with each other. During Play Pitches, Rehearsals, Shows, and even the interviews we conducted, the NYNF members are highly focused and present with one another. As I noticed during my second night of Play Pitches with the NYNF:

> *"Everyone is… tremendously cued in during the play run throughs. They follow along carefully with the plays on their computers or phones… Folks' eyes move back and forth from the play on their screen to the individual sharing. There is particular eye contact with that individual while* [they] *explain set up and while going off-script."*[49]

And, even more notably, as one participant put it:

> *"I think that is just a shared understanding, that our stories and who we are, are really precious. Our time is limited together and really precious. And we are all there to just support each other in the end. In making this like machine of a show continue; And this machine of a community continue.*
>
> *And I think so. So a lot of the functions of the show, like the way that it's set up in terms of what happens what days of the week and, like the continual churn and taking really like, playful and hilarious and sometimes really poignant and tender parts of ourselves, and putting them into two minute things and seeing what will happen to us on stage. A lot of the structure is that. We are there just, kind of, allowing this feeling of like, okay, we're going to listen to each other, we're going to show up for each other. If we say we do something we're going to follow through, but it has never felt obligatory. You know.*
>
> *And that's been really special about this space is like, it's like, I know. I know my commitment. And I know that the commitment, there's a lot. There's a lot, but just being a company member.*
>
> *…It's a lot of labor of love. But I've never felt obligated by it. It feels like this community that I … want to keep breathing life into."*[50]

This kind of presence is absolutely the norm, the expectation, and a practiced ritual. Each Neo is who they are, in the spaces they are in, in the specificity of that moment, present with and for their fellow ensemble members.

2. Demonstrations of Trust, Affirmation, and Validation

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[48] "New York Neo." *Futurists*, www.nyneofuturists.org/about/.

[49] Field Notes. April 23, 2019.

[50] AB Interview. April 28, 2019.

Along with a consistency of being present, members of the NYNF constantly take specific actions to demonstrate trust and affirm and validate one another. I witnessed this consistently during play pitches, after each play was pitched and during rehearsals when notes were brought up thoughtfully, constructively, and with a conscientiousness toward the receiver. For example, when I was sitting in on Play Pitches on Tuesday, April 23, I noticed:

> "[After each play is pitched] *there are lots of nods, 'that's great,' 'I love that,' even 'Wow... that's genius,' along with laughs and smiles and 'mmm's murmured in agreement. These are almost always present during and after plays. Exceptions include collective pauses after particularly heavy topics or plays which seem especially personal. These latter forms of plays tend to get some form of the affirmational comment or nonverbal response.*"[51]

As one participant commented, this kind of ritual creates the safety necessary to be present and playful. The consistent demonstrations of trust, affirmation and validation create a space "*to feel safe to be challenged and take risk... [and] that's what play feels like.*"[52] Thus, this ritual is clearly critical to the play element of the NYNF culture.

3. Holding Tensions

The ritual of holding tensions may be the most challenging of the NYNF's rituals to describe. This is because this ritual is much more intuitive and felt collectively than ascribed or practiced structurally. It is the practice of finding balance in "going there" while "keeping it light."[53] This is the ritual of holding seemingly contrasting moments or memories amongst each other. This happens in the way the 30 plays may coexist, as one participant describes:

> "*We talk about overlap all the time with, like,... is one play being pitched stealing the ability of another play, that's already in the show, of being able to communicate its message effectively.*
>
> *And while we do lookout for that, what we miss is like the, you know, 10, 20, 30 other connections that are, like, just the way even a single word is used in one play can change how it's perceived in another play depending on which one comes first? And those are ones we don't have an eyeball on, because we can't, you know, because* [The Infinite Wrench] *can happen in so many different ways.*
>
> *There's no way for us to imagine all possibilities.*"[54]

And, as another participant describes, this holding of tensions is happening, with support from the other members, in the minds of the individuals themselves:

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[51] AB Interview. April 28, 2019.

[52] KH Interview. April 26-27, 2019.

[53] "Going there" and "Keeping it Light" are references to a statement from one of the members of the ensemble who described the balance of the show for a certain night as "A good balance between going there [i.e., orienting toward a more personal, vulnerable, or challenging topic] and keeping it light [i.e, more fun or funny]." Field Notes. April 23, 2019.

[54] MP Interview. April 27, 2019.

"What I explore a lot…
is the difference between incongruence and containing multitudes.
And, I feel like performing with the Neo-Futurists has been super healing
because it's been [a realization], like, 'Oh no, these different parts of you aren't incongruent.
They're just different parts of you, like: absurd you, a little pissed of you,
and really, joyful and excited and playful you.
All of those get to sit together."[55]

Thus, a ritual of holding tension, collectively and individually, was evident in the play element of the NYNF culture.

4. The Power of Rituals

As I engaged with the NYNF over the course of the pilot study, I became increasingly aware of the profound and powerful nature of their rituals. The ritual of presence enables a community of folks to truly see themselves and each other moment by moment, as exactly as they exist in the time they are together. The ritual of demonstrated trust, affirmation and validation, creates a culture in which individually and collectively they feel safe enough to be bold, to take on risk, and challenge themselves. Finally, the ritual of holding tension enables a community and a company which is empowered to genuinely embrace the complexity and ambiguous challenges of taking on topics like race, misogyny, and transphobia, and make a resonant and affecting, positive impact.[56] Therefore, it is quite evident to me that the rituals of play which underlie the play element of the NYNF culture are a tremendously important component for their capacity to navigate and affect change on complex and ambiguous challenges, i.e., to stay with (and play in) the trouble).

C. PLAYFUL ATTITUDES

One additional critical component of the play element of the NYNF culture, is the playful attitudes of the individual members and the way those take form in the collective. It is these attitudes which, in the experience of my study, enable an embrace of the generative potential of complexity and ambiguity. It is these attitudes which support and, I believe, create, the playful nature of the New York Neo Futurists. The three most common attitudes, which emerged during this study are: (1) An excitement toward risk and challenge; (2) a high value for vulnerability; and (3) extreme attention and curiosity.

These three attitudes became apparent during all three portions of my research. During my ethnographic study, I witnessed the members of the ensemble decide to take on specific Wrenches because they felt more risky and challenging or chose certain plays because "*they felt risky in a really good way*"[57] I saw the ensemble members be vulnerable with each other, with the stories they shared, and the trauma they carry. And, I experienced the acute attention they paid to each other, the details of each play's movement, and the thoughtful curiosity they exhibited to each other.

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[55] AB Interview. April 28, 2019.

[56] Throughout my ethnographic study of the performances of the NYNF I observed countless moments of individual audience members finding themselves in the stories told on stage and the members of the NYNF ensemble telling them. I also observed the effects of transference, most notably on myself, *i.e.*, a sense of relationality and compassion to a topic I previously had not been associated with or invested in.

[57] Field Notes. April 16, 2019.

Within my interviews, each participant articulated the value of risk and challenge as part of their perspective on play.[58] They also were vulnerable with me, an action I tried to reciprocate, because their openness inspires the same from those around them. I even had moments during the interviews when the questions turned, and the curiosity of my participants became the driving force of the conversation.[59] Lastly, in the responses to my cultural probes, I saw an exhibition of all three attitudes on display from all five participants. I saw the attitudes in the seemingly minutia of what my participants noticed, I saw it in their excitement to challenge themselves to record in challenging ways,[60] and I saw it in the openness, sincerity, and vulnerability of some of the postcards.

To speak of the power of triangulation in research methodology is to speak of different approaches pointing to similar insights. This happened in my research. The playful attitudes of the NYNF participants, particularly, their excitement toward risk and challenge, high value for vulnerability, and extreme attention and curiosity, were present throughout and across my research. Based on this finding, I am convinced the playful attitudes of the individual members of the NYNF, and the way those attitudes coalesce in the collective, are a root of the play element of the NYNF culture.

D. THE NYNF PLAY ELEMENT IN PERSPECTIVE

As has been mentioned repeated, play is not necessarily the defining characteristic of the New York Neo-Futurists. But, given this research process and the insights which emerged, the play element of the NYNF culture is certainly critical to the ways the NYNF engage and create. The context of *The Infinite Wrench* 'meta game' generates play and playfulness. The rituals of play the NYNF practice enable the conditions for forms of play to evolve which are as thoughtful as they are complicated. Furthermore, the playful attitudes of the NYNF, individually and collectively, root the company in a risk-taking, yet vulnerable, and attentive plethora of playfulness.

Over the course of this pilot study, I have learned the nuanced and sophisticated ways by which intellectual and "good, dumb play"[61] can, and do, coexist within the NYNF. Based on what I have learned, I would argue, the play element of the NYNF culture is an excellent example of the ways by which play, *as a means and an ends*, can generate unexpected and profound ways of navigating and affecting change on complex and ambiguous challenges. Therefore, The play element of the NYNF culture is a powerful example of how a collective might stay with (and play in) the trouble.

VII.   META LEARNINGS

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[58] For example: "*there are certain things that we need as part of the show. And I think risk is definitely a part of that. Like when there isn't risk in the show. We're always like, we need more risk. … risk mess, personal stories and dialogue are always things that make the show shine.*" AD Interview. April 25, 2019.

[59] SEE KH interview. April 26-27, 2019.

[60] SEE MP Interview. April 27, 2019. AND MP Culture Probe: D20 die drawing.

[61] Field Notes. April 16, 2019.

Throughout the experience of conducting this research pilot with the NYNF, I have experience several meta learnings beyond the specificity of my research questions.

I have learned the value of loosening my hold on the questions themselves and along the initial interpretations from participants to guide much of the process. I could feel the tension in forcing a particular direction, and by reflexively choosing to loosen my grip, I able to reach the relational and interactional point I did.

Additionally, as this project developed, I became increasingly cognizant of the importance of and relationship between, time consistency, and trust. When I initially began this research, I was cognizant of how my own micro-behaviors, like turning on a recorder or filming, or joining the conversation too early,might do in terms of creating discomfort, unease, or distrust. I still feel as though this is a project in which there is much more to be learned and I expect the further learnings only come from considerably more time invested, a consistency of behavior on my part, and establishment and development of greater trust.

Overall, I am incredibly grateful to have worked with a group of folks who so openly invited me in and with whom I could so readily form a collaborative research relationships.

VIII.   <u>CONCLUSION</u>

As I said when I began this paper, play and playfulness feel like relatively simple concepts. I hope this research has helped indicate otherwise. Play and playfulness is complicated; it's messy, it's risky and challenging, it take presence of mind, attention, and curiosity. Moreover, play and playfulness are shifty and contextually formed, so what it means in one space might not be the same in another. The same could be said about the way play elements of certain cultures exist, evolve, and differ. It is important to contextualize and complexify one's notion of the concepts of play and playfulness.

The point of this research was to explore the relationship between the play element of the New York Neo-Futurist culture and the abilities which have emerged for them to navigate and address complex and ambiguous topics. Topics like identity, politics, race, and racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and the patriarchy. I aimed to articulate how the playful context, rituals, and attitudes, which compose the play element of the NYNF culture, enable them to navigate and address seemingly complex and, at times ambiguous topics, Put more simply, I aimed to illustrate how the New York Neo-Futurists stay with (and play in) the trouble.

IX.   <u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>

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