

# A Platform for Sustainable Creativity: Lessons from the Neo-Futurists

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of early research into working methods used by successful collaborative artists and their relevance to design teams. The goal of this research-in-progress is to gather collaboration techniques, examine their potential use within a design context, and develop a toolkit for developing sustainable design teams. A preliminary ethnographic study of The Neo-Futurists, a Chicago-based theater company, was conducted in November and December of 2005. Their signature production, *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*, is a unique platform for continuous creativity, supportive collaboration, artistic success, and financial sustainability. The resulting case study examines the components, processes, and team relationships inherent to the *Too Much Light* platform.

## KEYWORDS

collaboration, group dynamics, platform, theater, creativity

## INTRODUCTION

Design is intensely collaborative. Highly functioning teams can produce experiences that fundamentally alter cultural or social fabrics. However, an inability to effectively manage conflict, prioritize goals, and overcome personal agendas can lead to lengthy, unpleasant projects and unsatisfying outcomes. Design teams increasingly recognize that structured, sustainable creativity is crucial to their ongoing success.

Humans have a lot of experience with creativity. Though many design managers understand the potential of repeatable inventiveness in their work, proven frameworks for systematic creativity also exist in other areas of society. In the arts, collaboration methods have been developed, tested, and improved, sometimes over decades. These systems have allowed groups of creative individuals to develop consistent high quality, artistically successful work. This paper presents research-in-progress into the systems used by successful performing arts groups to generate and develop new ideas.

## BACKGROUND

The Neo-Futurists and their highly successful production *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind* have been a

fixture in Chicago since December 2, 1988. Every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, 149 people gather at the Futurarium, a small theater above a funeral parlor on Chicago's north side. Billed as "an ever-changing attempt to perform 30 plays in 60 minutes,"[1] *Too Much Light* attracts over 30,000 people a year. The plays, like a living newspaper, strive to convey the daily experiences of their six Writer/Performers with absolute honesty. New plays are written weekly and the Menu, or program of plays, may turn over completely within two months. [2]

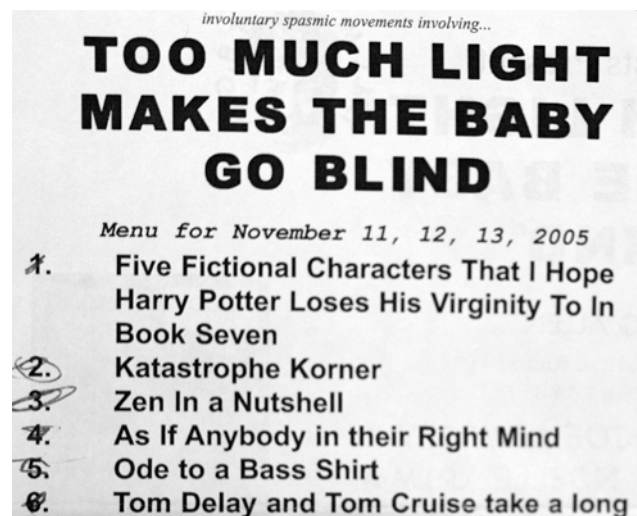


Figure 1: The *Too Much Light* Menu

Greg Allen, creator of *Too Much Light* and Founding Director of the Neo-Futurists describes *Too Much Light* like this:

*"[I] created the formula for Too Much Light from an amalgam of different influences. In typical postmodern fashion, a theory was borrowed from here, a form was stolen from there. From our namesakes, the Italian Futurists, came the exultation of speed, brevity, compression, dynamism, and the explosion of preconceived notions. From Dada and Surrealism came the joy of randomness and the thrill of the unconscious. From the theatrical experiments of the 1960's came audience interaction, breaking down all notions of distance, character, setting, and illusion.*

Finally, from the political turmoil of the 1980's came a socially conscious voice and a low-tech, "poor theater" format. This aesthetic, embraced by an ensemble of highly dedicated, talented writer/performers, became *Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind*." [3]

The secret to *Too Much Light's* success lies in this unique formula. Over sixteen years, thousands of performances, and ongoing cast rotations, this system for continuous creativity supports its participants artistically and itself financially.

### RESEARCH FOCUS

The focus of this research-in-progress is to investigate techniques used amongst collaborative artists and apply findings to the development and maintenance of design teams. Specific attention is paid to developing a complete picture of the context, actors, and other factors operating on the system.

### METHODOLOGY

During November and December of 2005, an initial pilot study was developed. An ethnographic approach was used to build an understanding of the Neo-Futurists, their work, and their culture through interviews and observations. This research included attending a performance of *Too Much Light*, conducting an interview with founder Greg Allen, a rehearsal observation, and an informal talk with several Writer/Performers.

### ANALYSIS: THE TOO MUCH LIGHT PLATFORM

Much of the success of *Too Much Light* lies in Allen's deliberate creation of a platform. The notion of platform, a common expression in design, business, and manufacturing contexts, is not typically discussed in the arts but exists in practice. Framing the Neo-Futurists' work within Ulrich and Robertson's platform definition can yield insights for potential applications in design team management.

Ulrich and Robertson define a platform as a collection of assets shared by a set of products, services, or human interactions. These assets can be divided into four categories: components, processes, knowledge, and people and relationships. [4] The *Too Much Light* platform, like any sustainable platform, is carefully constructed from multiple assets for the rapid development of new work while sustaining and growing an audience for the work.

**Components** *Too Much Light* performances are made up of four components: the plays, the Writer/Performers, the audience, and the physical space. Writer/Performers create and prepare plays, using the constraints of spare theater, for performance with an active audience.

**Processes** Defined by Ulrich and Robertson as the design and practice of specific building, assembling, and delivering procedures, the *Too Much Light* process is discussed in detail below.

**Knowledge** Knowledge assets include the Neo-Futurist performance aesthetic, a teachable methodology

(production technique) and an iterative performance practice that strengthens some plays over time and removes others systematically (testing method).

**People & Relationships** In *Too Much Light*, working relationships exist amongst cast members and between the cast and audience. In addition, the idiosyncratic creative and performance abilities of each cast member significantly impact the performance.

### THE TOO MUCH LIGHT PROCESS: DEVELOPING, REHEARSING, AND PERFORMING

Codified procedures exist within the *Too Much Light* platform for the consistent development, rehearsal and performance of new work. The rehearsal-performance cycle lasts one week and runs throughout the calendar year. Performances occur on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Rehearsals occur on Tuesdays.

**Building Components: Creating New Work** On Fridays and Sundays, an audience member rolls a large die. The results of both die rolls are summed to determine how many new plays must be developed for the following week. On Sunday nights, the cast meets to do "Cuts", a process for determining which plays will be removed from the "Menu." Cast members then work individually on new plays. On Tuesdays, the cast meets to pitch new play ideas, select the most promising candidates, and rehearse selections for the weekend's performances.

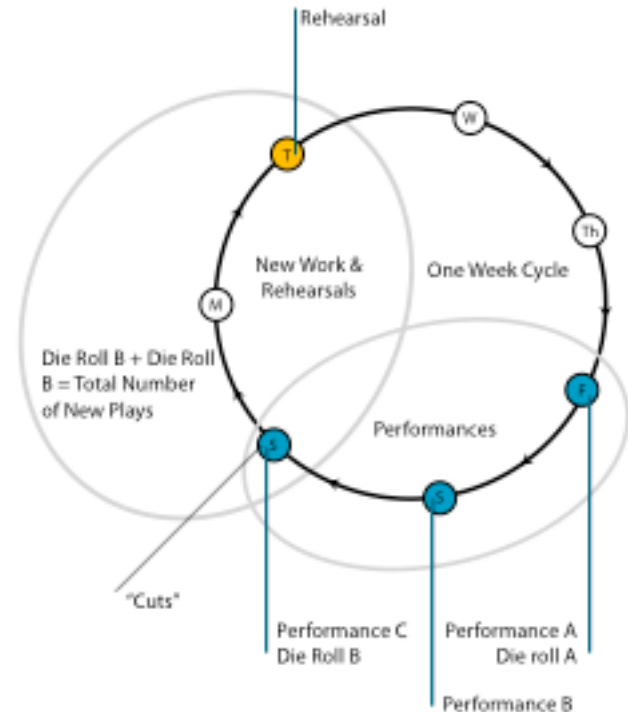


Figure 2: Rehearsal-Performance Cycle

**Assembling Components: Rehearsal** Rehearsals are efficient and highly structured. The first half of the rehearsal is dedicated to the pitching and selection of new works for the Menu. The second half of the rehearsal focuses on running the plays, adjusting timing, and coordinating technical requirements. The rehearsal process has six steps, each with distinct tasks and procedures. Members of the group know the procedures well and deviate from the structure only when it means the rehearsal can proceed more quickly. The rehearsal process is outlined below.

1. **Proposal** Writer/Performers sit in a circle. In turn, each member proposes a play by title.
2. **Pitch** Writer/Performers describe their play in more detail, perhaps sharing a script or briefly acting out the play.
3. **Pick or Discuss** Group discusses merits and weaknesses of each play.
4. **Throw or Go** Members of the group nominate other plays for inclusion. Final plays are selected for inclusion in this week's menu.
5. **Rehearse** Writer/Performers work with a technical specialist and rehearse new plays.
6. **Conclusion** Conductor assigns tasks, ties up any loose ends. Rehearsal is concluded.

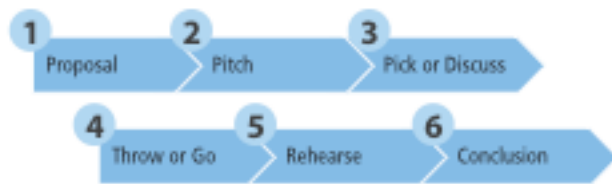


Figure 3: Rehearsal Timeline

**Delivering Components: Performance** For performances to be successful, audience members must become absorbed in the experience. The *Too Much Light* process accomplishes this with game-like interactions between audience and cast members. Examples include roll-of-the-dice admission fee, headphone-clad greeters, and humorous nametags.

### SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING GROUP DYNAMICS THROUGH EXPLICIT ROLE ASSIGNMENTS

Much of the *Too Much Light* success can be attributed to a carefully constructed method for maintaining constructive group dynamics. Supportive relationships, built on trust and shared experience, exist between group members and are at their best during *Too Much Light* rehearsals. The *Too Much Light* method includes explicit role assignments, volunteer leadership responsibilities, and individual ownership over creative works.

**Writer/Performer** Cast members conceive of and write their own plays. At any time, they may have several works

in progress. Each active cast member must propose at least one play each week. Plays must be original and inspired by the Writer/Performer's life and personal experiences. The Writer/Performers must perform their own work.

**Director** Once a play is selected for performance, the writer becomes that play's Director. Responsibilities include assigning roles, developing blocking, designing the set, and working with the technician for technical cues. Directors hold final decision-making powers over their work.

**Supporting Performer** Supporting Performers appear in the work of others. A Supporting Performer works with the play's text and follows direction. Supporting Performers may also act as stagehands.

**Conductor** Every two weeks, a cast member volunteers to fulfill the role of Conductor. The Conductor handles logistics management, ensuring that processes run efficiently and task assignments are made.

**Performance Support** Cast members volunteer for support jobs, like running the snack bar, handing out programs, selling tickets, greeting audience members, or opening and locking up the building and make sure that responsibilities are evenly distributed.

### DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLABORATION

From this initial work with the Neo-Futurists, several ideas emerge that might apply to the development and management of participatory design initiatives, product design strategy, or the ongoing collaboration of existing design teams.

**Explicit Process** The processes and methods used in *Too Much Light* have remained largely unchanged over its sixteen-year life. Procedures are universally understood and internalized. Existing members can articulate and teach the method to new members. This provides well-defined structures in which members can freely ideate and explore.

Further, *Too Much Light* includes several characteristics of flow as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [5]. Goals are clear, feedback immediate, and the challenges presented are appropriate to group's skill level. Group members feel a sense of belonging and a confidence in their ability to succeed.

In design, success is often difficult to measure. Frameworks, games, or clearly defined techniques (card sorts, consolidated affinity models, etc.) can give the group a sense of shared purpose, support common understanding, and offer reassurance.

**Role Distribution** Cast members know the rules and expectations for each role and can move fluidly between each role. All tasks, whether unpleasant or exhilarating, are equally distributed amongst the group.

**Ownership** A sense of ownership over one's own work develops engagement both with the work and amongst team members. In *Too Much Light* each member can create work and control its presentation. Role distribution also ensures that the group supports each member.

## CONCLUSION

*Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind* is a thriving platform for continuous creativity. The platform's components, knowledge, processes, and human relationships together make up a system that supports its creators, produces an artistically successful product, and sustains itself financially.

Design managers can apply many of these same principals to the development and maintenance of successful design teams. Focused collaboration can be supported through an explicit design process. This process should function independently of individual contributors and should be easily taught. Individual responsibility, a fair distribution of tasks, and clearly communicated rules of interaction can foster an dynamic environment, open to experimentation and creativity. Careful nurturing of this process may result in a design team that willingly explores challenging ideas and consistently produces outstanding results.

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