THROW with US

Stories from the New York Yoyo Community

Designed by Jonah Koen
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Graphic Design Thesis Project
SUNY New Paltz Class of 2022
PART ONE

Introduction
Meet the author

Who am I and what is this book about?

My name is Jonah Koen, and this book serves as my senior thesis project in Graphic Design at SUNY New Paltz. I’ve been a member of the yoyo community for 8 years now, and it has been a wonderful journey. I first picked up a yoyo around the age of seven, when I got one as a gift for the holidays. I learned some basic tricks on responsive yoyos, like rock the baby. One of my fondest memories is standing on my couch or other elevated surfaces to play with the yoyo, since the string was long and I was short, and I didn’t know you could just cut it to length. My yoyoing phase at this age didn’t stick around for more than a year, if that, and I had no idea I would re-discover it later on.
Some years later during my freshman year of high school, I saw an older friend of mine (who I no doubt admired) with a yoyo hanging from his belt loop. It looked fancier than anything I had seen before, and I went by the library one afternoon to see him play. I was quickly immersed into the string formations, the pretty anodizing of the yoyos, and the whirring sound they make as they cut through the air. Shortly after that, I picked up my first unresponsive yoyo, a plastic YoyoFactory OneStar, and I learned the bind return (required to bring the yoyo back) in one day. I was hooked!

I practiced every single day, eventually working my way up to the purchase of my first metal yoyo; a big stepping stone for me. Since then, I discovered the New York Yoyo Club (NYYYC) and made so many new friends through attending club meetings and yoyo contests around the country. I've developed my trick set over years of practice and absorbing other players' movements, and yoyoing is still one of my favorite ways to engage with my communities, which is what this book focuses on. Yoyoing is also an art form, a passtime, a process, and even a job in some cases. The stories and events documented in this book illustrate these attributes present in yoyoing, and seek to give a close look into what community play looks like, for those new to yoyoing and for seasoned veterans alike.
What is a Yoyo?

An overview of yoyo information, some things you should know.

Most people picture something similar to the Duncan Butterfly when they hear the word 'yoyo.' They would be pretty spot on if so; the Butterfly is one of the most classic and well known beginner yoyos to start on. Yoyo technology has progressed astronomically since the release of the first Duncan Butterfly, and now players can find all sort of designs available, made of plastic, aluminum, titanium, and wild combinations of these materials.

Yoyos date back as far as Ancient Greece, but the first surge in the Americas was in the mid 19th century. What began as a simple toy is now an international community of dedicated players, hobbyists, and collectors who have an intense fascination with what yo-yoing has to offer.

Over the next few pages, I’ll go over some key points that will help everyone understand the breadth of what yoyo is today, including the types of yoyos available and the many play styles present in the activity.

Types of Yoyos

Each yoyo is made for a specific purpose, and they all play differently from one another. This section is a rundown of the basic categories of yoyos.

1. Fixed Axle Yoyos
2. Transaxle Yoyos
3. Ball Bearing Yoyos

Early yoyos featured a basic wooden axle, which were fixed in place. Spin time is generally very low on these yoyos, and different materials were quickly used to increase spintime and playability.

Later came the ‘trans-axle’ system which features a loose fitting plastic sleeve around a wooden axle, enabling a longer spin time.

One of the most important developments in yo-yo was in 1979; an American Dentist named Tom Kuhn created the first successful ball bearing axe yo-yo which changed the history of yo-yo forever. As more and more manufacturers produced ball bearing yo-yos, the tricks possible became more and more complicated thanks to the advanced technology and extremely prolonged spin times. This led to the development of the unresponsive yo-yo, which would require the ‘bind’ to return to the hand. Players used this to their advantage, as it allowed more string layers to fit in the gap and even more complicated tricks were possible. This is considered the standard for high performance 1A yo-yos today.
Responsive vs. Unresponsive

Yoyo types can be generalized into two important distinctions; responsive versus unresponsive. Responsive yoyos are what most folks are familiar with; you can throw the yoyo and have it spin at the bottom of the string, and when you give it a tug with your hand, it promptly returns, traveling back up the string. Unresponsive yoyos are a bit different, and all of these kinds of yoyos are equipped with ball bearings, while responsive yoyos can be fixed axle, transaxle, or have a ball bearing.

Unresponsive yoyos tend to be able to spin longer, and they require a trick called the bind return to even get it back to your hand. The gaps on these yoyos are wider, meaning the string has to be layered to give the yoyo a chance to catch the friction of the string and return to the hand. As a result of these differences, unresponsive yoyos are much more catered to practicing and performing string tricks, which involve the yoyo mounting on various string segments of complex formations, with the hopes of weaving in and out of potentially knot-producing structures.

The majority of modern yoyos produced and used today are unresponsive. There are five styles in yoyoing, which will be expanded upon further soon, and four out of five of these styles use unresponsive yoyos today. The predominant style of yoyoing, called 1A, typically uses an unresponsive yoyo at advanced levels, with the string attached to both the yoyo and the player’s hand. This style of play is what you might think of as classic yoyoing. It typically uses an unresponsive yoyo at advanced levels, with the string attached to both the yoyo and the player’s hand. 1A focuses on complex string tricks that benefit from unresponsive yoyos.

2A is often called looping. This style of play uses two imperial shaped, responsive yoyos, one on each hand. The string is attached to the yoyo and the player’s hand. These yoyos are finely tuned so the player can continuously perform loop tricks in which the yoyos interact with one another.
3A uses two 1A style yoyos, usually unresponsive. The player has one in each hand, with the yoyos attached to the string and the hand. Like 2A, the tricks performed in 3A revolve around yoyo interaction, but in 3A the player must be sure to bind both yoyos to complete the trick, since they are unresponsive.

4A is typically called offstring. The yoyos used in this discipline are usually made of a durable plastic like Delrin, and are designed to have abnormally large diameters in order to be extremely catchable. The string is attached to the player’s hand, but not the yoyo. A 4A yoyo is thrown off the string and players can do a myriad of tricks with this ability, including incorporating the rest of their body into tricks or sending it high up in the air!

5A is referred to as freehand. This style of yo-yoing uses a yoyo similar to that of 1A, usually unresponsive. The string is attached to the yoyo, but not the player’s hand. Instead, there is a counterweight at the end of the string, held by the player. This counterweight can be manipulated along with the yoyo to create flashy displays of tricks in which two objects can move through the air at once, creating a pendulum of sorts.
PART TWO

Stories
Justin Weber is a yoyo performer, illustrator, graphic artist, and juggler. I first met Justin 5 years ago at the New York Yoyo Club, and was greeted by an amiable, kind-hearted man who had a visibly immense joy for yoyos. Justin has been yoyoing since 1998, when he remembers the yoyo boom happening at school. His passion for performance has taken him far, and Justin now performs as an independent contractor, entertaining groups of people, holding shows, and getting in stage time when he’s not designing.
Interview with Justin
December 12th, 2021

There was a yoyo fad around 1998, which is when I started. My neighbor had one and fellow classmates as well. There wasn't much of a lull in my yoyoing journey — once I started I was hooked and kept going well beyond the fad.

My first yoyo was a Yomega Fireball. It was dark blue with black sidecaps and silver graphics (there are no longer any silver graphics on it as I wore the thing out). It still works well. It was a Christmas present that ended up changing my life forever.

A few years into yoyoing I got sponsored by Yomega, and they supported me in getting to and from contests and even a performance tour in Japan my senior year of high school. I fell in love with Japan through yoyoing and made sure that the college I went to had a Japanese program. I got a minor in the language & culture, studied abroad there twice, and since then I've been there a total of 7 times. I made a lot of good friends in Japan, including but not limited to yoyoers alone — and this is an experience I'm not sure I would have had it weren't for yoyoing.

Yoyoing has been a real confidence-builder. I'm naturally very introverted and I used to be quite shy, but it's given me a way to relate to just about any person I come into contact with. Everyone knows what a yoyo is. If I felt misunderstood in other ways, I could always depend on feeling understood through yoyoing.

It also gave me a chance to meet people from all around the world (pun intended). It was so cool to meet so many talented, creative, fun people from all different backgrounds, because I grew up in a white suburban town without much diversity.

I don't think I really felt like I fit in the environment I grew up in, so it was refreshing to meet so many friends who were into the same things I was — drawing, design, animation, juggling, and a plethora of other skill toys.

The Japanese yoyo players were always really influential in my experience — their sense of discipline and determination, as well as their humor and playfulness. I would see them do their best, have their breakdowns, but then try with just as much vigor year after year. On the other hand, when they were not preparing for the competition off-stage, there were some really funny antics and silly interactions here and there that were so enjoyable to partake in. Also, I love that Taka would use the ironing board from the hotel room as a table for all of his wild eccentric yoyo creations for the Artistic Performance division.

This example of a balance of being disciplined in your craft versus enjoying the hobby for what it is and the people that you meet stuck a chord for my life — that I should try my best at whatever job or skill I do, but on the other hand not forget to enjoy the journey and humor along the way, and that I can't force anything to happen — it will happen if it's meant to be.
The contests were really fun, especially Worlds. It was really fun to stay in the same hotel and stay up til 5am / 7am playing games like Egyptian Rat King and a “grimace” game where you sit in a circle and make the goofiest grins you can muster and whoever laughs first is out. I spent quite a bit of time with my team mates Mark Montgomery and Eric Koloski (as well as Mikhail Talibut) playing these hilarious games. Also, we weren’t exclusive — anyone could join the game if they wished.

Competition-wise, I was always pretty determined to make music for my own freestyles and synchronize specific moments of the music with my tricks. So even though I placed 4th in 1A at Worlds one year, I seemed to approach the competition moreso like an artistic performance than some. I did want to get high scores and win, but I was content with the ways in which people seemed inspired by the trick innovation and overall experience they had from the freestyles.
There was a website called Sector-Y that was hosted by Citadel, a yoyoer on the west coast who helped popularize the tricks that the west coast players were creating. Meanwhile, I’m in Delaware downloading the videos on a dial-up connection through AOL. Each 3 minute clip video would take 2-3 hours to download, and sometimes the connection would be interrupted by someone calling in on the landline phone, because the internet was routed through the same line or something back then. So I’d have to start the download ALL over again. But it was worth the wait.

There were also illustrated tutorials on how to do 1A tricks on the site. I’m talking about diagrams and still images. They were hard to learn from, but they did work! With the rise of slo-mo video and YouTube today, yoyoers have a much easier chance of learning the tricks that they want to learn, though it is still difficult either way.

These images show off the old Sector-Y website, a great yoyo resource founded in 1999. The first image is what the website looked like in its first year of operation. The second is an example of a trick tutorial found on the site, this one is for a trick called Kamikaze. The illustrations and little bits of writing/description were all the instruction you got!
I really love performing. It gives me a thrill and I believe it inspires onlookers / audience members. I also love the travel opportunities associated with creative skills such as this one. Talent can open doors to experiences I don’t think I would have ever had access to if I hadn’t put in so much time (enjoyable as it was).

I believe performing and doing illustration and animation really balance each other out in a practical way. Performing breaks up the monotony of working at a computer desk, while working at the computer gives my body a rest from the physical work.

I’ve probably spent more hours towards yoyoing and performing in the past, but now most of my week is design-related, and performing happens on the weekends. However, it could flip-flop at any season or point — I could receive a long-term contract in yoyo / circus that has me performing 4-5 plus days a week, in which case design would probably take a bit of a rest.

I like this back and forth (like the yoyo) because it keeps me engaged and interested in what I’m doing, and prevents boredom. There are times that I feel like doing just one or the other for a while and there is flexibility to do that as an independent contractor.
Nate Sutter is a yoyo legend. He came up in the scene very early, and toured the country with Duncan Toys, one of the biggest names in yoyo. He recently moved to New York, and started coming to the NYYJC meetings. When I met him I was shocked to find out that it was the same Nate Sutter I had heard about online and at contests, and was eager to become his friend and gain some yoyo knowledge.
I got into yo-yoing in 1998, I believe, I was 12 years old. Yo-yos just got popular, and some demonstrators had come through town, and it was the talk of the town at school. Everyone was playing with a yo-yo, and I was an anxious child with a nervous attachment style and had a hard time connecting with others. So, I really needed a way to do something cool or be somebody because that’s what middle schoolers do, you know? They don’t know who they are. They’re trying to figure it out. I started yo-yoing to try to figure out what my thing was. Was it yo-yos? And it turns out, yeah! I love them, super fun. I mean, it’s a hobby that stuck with me ever since because of that.

I think there is that thing of being in those formative teenage years, you’re looking for something to be about and be good at. And for me it was something I could do and focus on, on my own, that I could just show to the world and be a little bit more performative and dip my toes into that. As far as stopping, I have always played with yo-yos, but I’ve taken little breaks here and there over a couple of years, but now I’ve been doing it for over 20 years. So, it’s been a long time.
Directly I can attribute a lot of great things that have happened in my life to yo-yoing. I can’t attribute that much bad to yo-yoing. I’ve gone on tour as a demonstrator and got to travel the country and go to a whole bunch of places to just show off yo-yos. That was an amazing experience. I got to go from basically Massachusetts to California, to the National Yo-Yo Competition. The first time I saw the redwoods was on a yoyo tour. The first time I saw the salt flats in Utah was during a yoyo tour. The first time I was in Chicago and saw that city, I was on a yoyo tour. But besides that, less directly I can attribute yo-yos and being a member of the yoyo community to some of the best, deepest and most meaningful personal relationships that I have had in my life. The friends I made as an awkward teenager getting into yo-yos have been my friends for life, and we keep in contact regularly, which is awesome. They’re spread all out over the world too!

Nate Sutter

I was on the early internet back in the days before YouTube, and I got into posting videos that my friend would record, he had a high eight video camera. We would record yoyo videos in his house and his backyard and upload them to some guy’s yoyo website, back when you used to have to download a video to play it. And so, through doing that and going to competitions, I got an offer to be a demonstrator for Duncan because they liked my tricks. At first, I was young and was self-promoting, so they brought me on to do more local shows, like at a science center or at a toy store or at a school. Then they said they were doing a big promotional tour with a new line of yo-yos that was coming out. They asked me if I wanted to be part of it. And I was a resounding yes! I was about 19 years old; I think. It was the 80 years One World Tour. They told me, “It’s three months though. So, you want to go on tour for three months?” I was like, yep! And ended up staying on tour for about six months! It was great. It was a blast.
Through that journey I met team members that were doing it with me. I got exposed to the national community of yo-yos as well. The yo-yo community is tightly knit and small enough that when you are in another yo-yo city, you can be like, “Hey, I’m going to be in Detroit, you should come out. I’m going to visit Jake. Amazing. He lives in Detroit.” So, I had a chance to make those connections and meet people around the country doing that, which is awesome.

I still run into yo-yoers who are at competitions and events that say, “You came through my small town in wherever, in such and such a year” and I’m like, “I did, hooray!” I don’t necessarily remember it, but I know it was fantastic, and the memory and connection is still there, and it really warms my heart.
The community at large is massive, but beyond just the community, I think for me personally as a human being in my day-to-day life and for my own stress and mental health, playing with the yo-yo for me is something that’s super Zen. I can just move my body and do a trick and if I put my musculature on autopilot, then my brain starts to get into a flow state. I start to relax and it’s helpful for me in my life. Anything from being in a stressful situation to my day job, I’m like, “Oh, I need a 10-minute break. I’m going to do a cool yo-yo trick and just throw this around with no specific intention.” I mean, as a toy, it’s the epitome of carefree play and joy. You know how in an old cartoon you might see someone playing with a yo-yo to demonstrate the idea of “I haven’t got a care in the world, I’m idle right now,” you know? And so, I find it’s really helpful for me to just throw a yo-yo around to get to a meditative space of idleness.

The concepts of failure and perseverance definitely come up for me in yoyoing. They are kind of two sides of the same coin, or a double-edged sword, or whatever tired metaphor you want. I feel pressured to say something inspirational, like “Yo for it,” which is an old slogan for a yo-yo company. But I think yoyoing has definitely taught me that there is an absurdity to anything you do. And so, if you just keep doing the thing that you seem to be enjoying, even if you’re failing at it, it’s okay. Just keep doing it. That’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be a 35-year-old man playing with yo-yos on the subway. I don’t care. That kind of mentality keeps me going, even in my professional life and everything else I want to do. I think I flipped the script in that being bad at things is the fun part now.
Will was one of the first people I met in the New York Yoyo community. We share a lot of common interests and hit it off as friends right away. Will is an amazing yoyoer with over 15 years of experience, and I found myself constantly learning from him, mesmerized by his trick sets. He’s also an incredible designer, and has his own company called Spintime Yoyos. He makes an effort to spread yoyoing to different communities around the world and organize club meetings in New York every week. Will Chavez has a big soul and a heart of gold, and I see him as an integral part of the yoyo community.
I got my start in yo-yo during the boom back in the 1990s when I was about 5 years old. My brother Jeffrey Chavez had a small collection of yo-yos including the wooden Black Panther and Yomega Brain, nothing like what we have available today. My brother would occasionally allow me to use his yo-yos and would put me up on a small chair so I wouldn’t bang the yo-yo on the floor and break it. My brother grew out of the yo-yo fad to pursue other hobbies and interests. Yo-yos became a familiar toy to me, so after many years when I was shopping in a Toys “R” Us with my brother, we came upon a wall of yo-yos and decided to pick one up.

I was about 14 years old and mostly practiced alone for a few years until I found out about the yo-yo club. The first yo-yo I bought at that store was the Duncan Reflex, which was a butterfly shape with an auto return mechanism like the Yomega Brain. When I got back to my house and looked up yo-yo trick tutorial videos I saw Andre Boulay doing advanced 1A yo-yo combos and I was hooked. The experience of learning and creating tricks and weaving combos together was very gratifying. After about 4 years I took a 2 year yo-yo break because of an injury that occurred with a yo-yo as well as other hardships in life, but I quickly returned to the New York Yoyo Club as a way to heal and enjoy myself. I’ve been at the club now for 9 years.

I’m a yo-yo collector, and since I’m part of the community, all of the yo-yos I’ve accumulated have been finely curated to my preferences and carry memories from my 8 years of collecting them from drops online, local meets, and at events like: regional contests, national contests, and world yo-yo contests. Each yo-yo is unique like a snowflake, each has a different feeling and look, even yo-yos from the same manufacturing run can have a different feel depending on how it is set up.

Interview with Will
April 1st, 2022

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The whole experience started off as a hobby, which turned into collecting yo-yos. I enjoyed the creative aspect of forming new tricks and combos, and having a nice yo-yo that was set up perfectly really elevated the experience. What kept me yoyoing most were the people and interactions that came with yo-yo. It took a few years before I connected with other players locally and around the world through my travels. The courage to perform in front of an audience, or anyone for that matter, also took a while to develop. I worked my way up to be able to teach and demonstrate with the help of the club, and Joe managed the NYYYC page.

People from all over looking for other yo-yoers would reach out to him for opportunities that we could help out with, for example the chance to yo-yo at a local mom and pop toy store for yo-yo day, demonstrating for yo-yo brands at toy fair, or showing off on local news outlets to get new people involved in the yo-yo community. Other members like Brian Melford, Richard Pickett, and Justin Weber also played a big part in preparing me to teach yo-yo and demonstrate. I’ve had the opportunity to teach and interact with thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds thanks to these members of the yo-yo community. Our reach as a club is incredibly large and it’s nice to know that yo-yo is being represented by such a unique group of people who each have experiences of sharing yo-yo in their own way.

I’ve collected One Drop yoyos since I first started, with the 54 and later the Markmont Classic, the signature yoyo of Mark Montgomery, in the nickel plated collectors edition. I have since gotten to work with Markmont on a special version of his revised 7075 aluminum Markmont Classic Magnum Opus for the New York yo-yo club. It’s a surreal feeling to have a yo-yo I collected early on next to the new version that I played a role in.

Joseph O’Neil, one of the founders of the NYYYC, bestowed upon me a rare 1 of 6 special club edition Turning Point Positron 2, which was custom made for members by a friend of the club and owner of Turning Point ya-yos, Kentaro Kimura. The colorway of the yo-yo is made to represent the bronze color of the Statue of Liberty, and the green oxidized color that forms on it. There were 3 shiny polished versions and 3 blasted (matte) versions.

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Yo-yo has brought many unique experiences and opportunities into my life. I’ve gotten to work with some amazing brands and companies doing yo-yo demonstrations. Some of the brands I’ve worked with include, FAO Schwarz, Toys "R" Us, YoYoFactory, Duncan, and Samsung. None of that would have been possible without the community being there. I’ve also gotten to attend, sponsor, organize, and vend at some of the biggest and best yo-yo contests. Another really fun experience was when I was able to help out on the set of a comedy series called Dickerson by Apple TV; I was a yo-yo advisor to teach someone how to use the yo-yo for a scene in the series.

Yo-yo is an art for me in terms of the actual yo-yos themselves and the performance art aspect of the toy. The act of yoyoing in a flow state is very meditative. Ultimately, it’s a way to express yourself. Each yo-yo is like a sculpture. During my short break from yo-yo my mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer and was going through treatment. When things got better I wanted to go back to a familiar place and the yo-yo club was there to take me back like I never left. There’s a camaraderie amongst NYYY members that doesn’t fade, if you come visit us we’ll remember you and you’ll always be an honorary member.

When I started going to the yo-yo club I would often arrive late and find that everyone had left, but I kept trying until one day I made it there and met some members like Brian Melford and Joseph O’Neill, and I started going every week. I was there for a few years and started up the @nyyc Instagram page and later became an admin of the Facebook page, so I was able to schedule meetings every week. Now the yo-yo club has competed at the world yo-yo contest as a finalist twice and we’ve organized the New York State yo-yo contest twice. It’s a great responsibility rallying the yoyoers of New York, and it is important for me to keep the yoyoing community together in NYC.

I started making my own yo-yos with the club around 2015. We made a round of 10 prototypes, but we didn’t like them very much. After letting many people try them and getting feedback we decided to scrap the design. Two years later, I decided to revisit the concept of making a yo-yo, it was still important to me to get my designs in the hands of as many people as possible. The club is such a great resource for this and I always felt it was important to look out for those that support my brand locally, so that face to face connection is very important. I now have my own company called Spintime Yoyos and have produced upwards of 5 designs that we have offered to the public, and I am constantly prototyping new ones.

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The NYYYC at the World Yo-Yo Contest, pictured prepared for their routine in the Artistic Performance (AP) division.

As an artist I’ve learned to use the Adobe suite and 3D design programs like Rhino, Fusion 360, and Free CAD. Design school definitely helped sharpen my skills with these applications, but it was fun to continue to learn other programs in my free time to supplement my skills. I use all of these programs to create an identity for the NYYYC. The feeling of comfortable familiarity it evokes comes from our main logo, which is inspired by the MTA logo and borrows from a shade of blue similar to that of the Facebook logo. I have also helped the Argentinian community with their logo which is an Argentinian flag yo-yo. Other fun projects include working with other boutique yo-yo brands to create collaborative designs and artwork.

For me yo-yo was just a toy for a while, but when I started attending the New York yo-yo club it opened the door to the entire community; from attending contests in person, to buying, selling, and trading online, and having interactions with people from across the nation and the world. I’ve had such a pleasant experience with yo-yo and the community that I’m compelled to share it with anyone who’s interested. I’ve done demonstrations all over the city with the New York Public Library system, Brooklyn summer camps, community activation events in the Bronx, toy fairs, corporate events, retail stores, live performances at Dixon place, and with the New York yo-yo club at a Japanese festival and on the news.
Yo-yos aren’t as common as they used to be, and the lack of physical toys and toy stores makes it hard to find an outlet that provides yo-yos. It’s even harder to find yo-yos in more rural areas or even other countries, where even online stores aren’t an option. I was compelled to collect yo-yos to give away in Mexico during my visits over the past few years. Since 2018, about 100 people have participated in my program and have walked away with their very own yo-yo. I was teaching a kid the very first steps to use a yo-yo and could tell that their parents were eager to try it too. Sometimes the parents will yo-yo first and the child would be that much more excited about the chance to try the yo-yo after. Yo-yoing is a great activity and lifestyle that anyone can enjoy with family or with the community, and also serves as an amazing tool and pastime for personal enjoyment and growth.
PART THREE

Events
BINDLESTIFF FAMILY CIRKUS

Flatbed Follies in Flatbush, BK

with a performance by the NYYT
Bindlestiff Family Cirkus Flatbed Follies is an outdoor mobile venue that brings circus and variety arts into the streets. Developed in response to the continued COVID reality, Flatbed Follies has become a vehicle offering joy and wonder to a recovering world. Performances take place upon an innovative series of parade float stages modified to present circus acts. There is even a calliope wagon providing authentic circus music.

Harkening back to the days when the grand circus parade came through towns across the country and captivated everyone who saw it, Flatbed Follies offers a much-needed celebration and brings art back to the streets. The repurposed parade floats are equipped to showcase incredible and eclectic talent from clowns, jugglers, wire walkers, acrobats, aerial acts and more. The stages are also equipped to feature live music, plus have lighting available, offering after-dark options including silent movies with live musicians. Flatbed Follies can become the focal point for a full day street activation, or it can bring the show to multiple locations in a day.

Justin Weber asked me to perform with him at the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus event. I was a bit reluctant at first, it would mean waking up at 7am or so and leaving by 8 to make the train that was early enough to get me into Brooklyn at call time. With a bit of push from my friends, I was convinced, and happily accepted his invitation.

I was told to come prepared with a 2-minute routine to my chosen music. I got to come up with a freestyle that would be flashy, impressive, and serve as a good demonstration for the kids and parents who were seeing modern yo-yoing for what may have been the first time ever. Justin also informed me we would be doing a workshop with the audience after our performance, which sounded like an awesome new experience to me.
In total there were three of us performing from the NYYYC; Justin Weber, Nate Sutter, and myself. Justin demonstrated the styles of 2a and 4a, while Nate performed 5a and 5a, and I showed off the 1a style of yoyoing. Between the three of us we were able to cover all the main styles of modern yoyoing, with descriptive commentary to go along with the performances.

It was so interesting to see the difference in performance styles; Nate and Justin were much more playful and charismatic, I’d say, while my routine was full of tricks without a lot of extra fluff. To me this was just the beginning of the learning I did at this event; the exposure of performing at a public event was new to me and I learned about some possible options for how I could engage with the stage and audience.

I also had the opportunity to create myself as one of the Cirkus performers that day. I had access to the back tent, which had refreshments and a place to practice or rest before going on stage. This too was new to me; conversing with and meeting the other clowns, jugglers, and improv artists was a great look into a world I hadn’t been immersed in before.

The scene felt like an extension of the yoyo community, giving me the opportunity to be a part of a new group of people. The whole event felt community based, which was really special. The Cirkus’ Flatbed Follies seek to re-introduce fun and play in the public sphere, especially after the impacts of the pandemic. Being around people committed to play was very special, and stood out to me as an attribute present in the performers that was of utmost importance. Being able to step outside of yourself and who you know yourself to be in order to become a confident, performative act on stage is a skill that takes a simple toy or concept and turns it into a connection.
One of the most impactful parts of the event by far was the workshop section. After our performance, we had a swarm of children crowd the stage, all eager to get their hands on a yoyo and try their skills at some of the tricks we had just shown off.

The children’s excitement was contagious, and a bit overwhelming at times. There were only three of us there and able to teach, and as a result, we had to balance time in order to ensure as many kids as possible would get to try a yoyo.

There were also a variety of ages present, with lots of young kids 8 and under, and a handful who were older than that. In many cases, we had 3 and 4 year olds eager to try a yoyo, and due to their age and motor skills, they were the hardest ones to work with. Young kids tend to be a bit closer to the ground too, so we had to make sure the yoyo strings were cut appropriately to length.

The workshop was an excellent lesson in patience and teaching. Having already taught children in many settings, this wasn’t so foreign to me, but it was the first time I was stooping down to a 4-year-old’s level to teach them how to throw a yoyo. It was great preparation for my Community Yoyo Day event that was in the works, so having hands on experience in the precise area it was needed proved to be greatly influential.
The NYYYC had a set amount of time for our performances and workshop. This constraint was helpful in the sense that there were tons of kids that wanted to try yoyos. Not only did it help us move from person to person quickly enough to get to as many people as possible, it also meant we had to stop at a certain point to let the next performers take the stage.

It was also good to notice that it was harder to teach tricks than expected. Yoyos really do tend to me more challenging than us performers make them look, and that is something I took note of as I left the stage to be on the ground showing children the mechanics of how we do what we do. Spending time on the basics is so essential; learning how to throw straight and with enough power, how to consistently get the yoyo back to the hand, and how to control its general movement are all things to know before attempting the first string trick. Most of our workshop time was spent showing kids how to string the yoyo to their finger, how to hold it, and how to get it to go down and (hopefully) come back to the hand.

While some children were eager to learn how to swing it around in elaborate formations, it was evident that we had to spend our time teaching the fundamentals first, and even this came at different challenge levels for different kids depending on their age and motor skills.
COMMUNITY
YOYO DAY
Hasbrouck Park in New Paltz
Organized by Jonah Koen
Community Yoyo Day was an event I organized as part of my senior thesis project. The goal of this event was to be in a public space and showcase yoyoing to anybody who wanted to stop by. The event was geared towards play in community, so having it take place in Hasbrouck Park was the perfect idea. I wrote a proposal to the New Paltz town board to hold the event in the park, and they granted permission to have it there. I also bought about 50 demo yoyos to bring with me to the event for everybody to try out.

The yoyo community spans a wide range of ages and includes people from all backgrounds. This event was meant to highlight this aspect of community, and bring people together to experience how yoyos can be more than a toy. Community Yoyo Day went from 12 - 5pm on Saturday, April 2nd, and we had over 100 people stop by throughout the day. Some folks stayed longer than others, and I am truly grateful for the connections I was able to make at the event, and the amount of people I was able to share my passion and project with.

I spread the word that the event was happening about a week prior using a poster I designed for it. Not only did I put these around campus, but it was also shared on social media, namely Instagram and Facebook. I got friends to share it and spread the word verbally as well; it was shared to the New Paltz Community group on Facebook and I was able to invite kids from the surrounding schools in New Paltz thanks to connections through my friends and community members. I also made sure to tell everyone in my classes here at school, including the Graphic Design cohort, so there was support on all sides.

As a result, the day was a huge success, and we had people show up from all around Ulster county. Participants varied heavily in age, from 5 year olds showing up with their parents to 80 year old seniors with a fond memory of yoyoing from their past.
From set up at noon to breakdown at five, there was a steady stream of engagement at Community Yoyo Day. There were little hands who were experiencing their first ever yoyo, expert hands that threw with years of experience, and everything in between. It was impossible to know what to expect for Community Yoyo Day upon setting up, the weather was lovely and we were in the park so it was bound to be a magical day full of play and connection. Spoiler alert: it totally was!

Playing with a yoyo is fun, but when you play with other people, you open yourself up to be inspired. Groups of families would come by and see the young kids learning on beginner yoyos as well as experts playing with more advanced styles, and their eyes would widen, “I had no idea yoyoing like that even existed!” they would say. Some of the kids saw the extensive collections of yoyos the more advanced players had and the super cool tricks they could perform and got hooked. They practiced their first tricks over and over again trying to perfect the technique. Yoyoing takes a lot of practice, so to plant the seed of what is possible when they are first learning is very special. Getting to have that experience around other people all playing with the same toy made a huge impact.

Theo, a young boy who took interest in learning about unresponsive yoyos. Here he is seen winding up and untangling his yoyo before attempting another throw.

These two kids were friends, and already had some yoyo experience. One of their mothers was there, who took interest in trying to learn.
Wren Kingsley, who was a helping hand in the set up and organization of yoyo day, performing a trick taught by the man standing next to her.

A man who was at the park with his grandchildren came over and asked if he could play with a yoyo. “I bought one for my granddaughter at Christmas time, but maybe she was too young to get into it,” he said. “The Duncan yoyos were everywhere when I was a kid, I used to play all the time,” he told me as he fitted the string on his finger and began playing with the toy, “I even won a competition once”. I watched the memory flow into his hands as he started to recall tricks he learned in his youth. One of which was Rock the Baby, and I asked him if he could teach me. The trick entails pinching the string above the yoyo while it is sleeping, then holding open the resulting loop and swinging the yoyo back and forth through the opening. After a few tries, I too could Rock the Baby.

“How long has it been since you’ve played with a yoyo?” I asked him.

“Oh gosh…probably 60 years!” He replied.

This moment was the heart of Community Yoyo Day for me. Bridging gaps across generations using only a yoyo and an invitation.

Wren Kingsley shares an anecdote from Community Yoyo Day

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Professors from Graphic Design, Sculpture, and Photography watch closely as Jonah demonstrates the kinds of tricks one can achieve with lots of practice.

Professor Joshua Korenblat gets an up-close and personal yoyo lesson to refine his throwing.

With all the preparation I did to make Community Yoyo Day a success, I was happy with the turnout. I was equally as glad to have some support in doing workshops and teaching yoyoing; there were some seasoned yoyo players in attendance, which helped make sure everybody’s curiosities could be answered. It was also great to have the ability to pass out demo yoyos to whoever wanted one, and the Duncan Butterfly XT made for successful first forays into yoyoing.

Throughout the day there were children being inspired, people playing and chatting and just having a great time outside with the community. It was great to introduce yoyoing to young people, but for me the real gift was the surprise of putting a yoyo in the hand of an adult and asking them to play too. There were children, parents, grandparents, dogs, college students, professors, and other members from the community who came out and played. If there were two words to describe Community Yoyo Day, I would use: vision fulfilled.
There were all kinds of skill toys present at Community Yoyo Day, including juggling balls as seen here. Pictured are three students from SUNY New Paltz enjoying their time in the park.

All my classmates from the Graphic Design department who came out in support of my event.

After Community Yoyo Day was over, I received comments, questions, and congratulations from tons of people, even those who weren’t able to make it to the event. I was also approached by The Oracle, the SUNY New Paltz school newspaper, asking if I would be interviewed about my event for an article feature. Of course I said yes, and I was delighted to have more press coverage for my project. In my interview I was able to share about Community Yoyo Day and how the project was going overall, and it felt like it made me that much more connected to the campus community.
There is one more story from Community Yoyo Day I’d like to leave you with. Mid-afternoon we had a young boy named Theo show up (if you recognize that name, it’s because he is featured earlier in this section!). He was there with his aunt, and took a liking to yoyoing quite quickly. After getting the hang of using one of our responsive demo yoyos, Theo took great interest in learning how to bind, and was eager to know how to get an unresponsive yoyo back to his hand. He was eyeing the metal yoyo I was using, and at one point asked to see what other yoyos I had brought with me. I let Theo try a few high end unresponsive metal yoyos, and his passion filled me with joy and excitement. He wanted to know everything, and seemed to absorb information like a sponge hitting water for the first time.

As we approached 5pm, Theo was one of the last few kids sticking around, delighted to keep playing with yoyos. Having noticed the great strides he made and his passion for learning about yoyos, my partner Wren chose to give him what used to be her first yoyo. When I first met Wren, she was amazed by my yoyoing, and wanted to get involved, so I gifted her a pink metal yoyo as her first to start learning on. Now after almost 2 years, it was re-gifted and will serve as the perfect first yoyo for another budding player and member of the community.

To me, this is what the yoyo community is all about, and what any community should be about. Having Theo show up that day and walk away later with his very own unresponsive metal yoyo was the most impactful part of Community Yoyo Day for me, and really demonstrated how far reaching yoyos can be, and the touching stories and memories they can create.
Special thanks to all of my teachers, mentors, friends, and family members that have supported my journey in education and in discovering myself. An additional thank you goes out to everyone who participated in this project; my interviewees, friends, teachers, and community members all came together to form a robust support system.