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Bring Your Toys to Works

Desk Displays at the Animation Studio

Abstract
Animators distinguish themselves through decorating their workspaces, which is why we should explore how this social ritual reflects the values inherent in animation production culture. Previous analyses have interpreted these practices as resistance to the alienating power of the studio, focusing on large companies such as Nickelodeon. However, many diverse office environments remain unexplored. Drawing from long-form interviews with animators across Atlanta, Georgia, this research uses discourse analysis and ethnographic methods to study how decorations differ in their purpose and function. Participants revealed myriad motivations for their choices: some decorations, such as calendars and anatomical models, were purely utilitarian, while others served an expressive purpose, grounding the animator aesthetically and fostering communication with coworkers. Yet, as studios actively brand themselves as cool, fun workplaces displaying toys as part of their décor, individual items may no longer resist corporate power. Recalcitrant animators find other means, displaying a parody of a family photo or snarky slogans such as "I'm Dead Inside." Some refuse to decorate their desk at all, either as a means to avoid infantilization or to maintain a clear division between labor and leisure.

Keywords
animation, creative labor, cultural capital, material culture, media industries, production culture

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Introduction

Animation is a profession that resides at the intersection of creativity and industry, characterized at once by imagination and whimsy as well as by alienation and anonymity. It is this alienation which pushes animators to express their creativity in the workplace through eccentric behavior, dress, and ostentatious desk decoration. John Caldwell, citing Lisa Leff's research on Nickelodeon Studios, suggests the ritual among animators is an adapta-

tion to resist the alienation experienced as studios sort them into anonymous "cubes."[1] The desk decoration ritual demonstrates the participant's capacity to think, act, and express themselves as an authentic creative professional. So, animators enact this ritual in part to ward off the inauthentic "suits" (upper-level management), partially alleviating their own anxieties over finding themselves stuck in an abstract and commercial position. Such an act allows the animator to superimpose a personal place upon the studio's anonymously designated space.[2] Through a study of workspace personalization, this article builds on John Caldwell's insights, exploring how such rituals allow animators to make daily tasks easier and more pleasant, communicate amongst coworkers, and express values outside the commercial scope of the studio's objectives. The animation industry can be described as a multi-dimensional space which spans from economic production to social status. A solely financial appraisal fails to appreciate the "symbolic struggles" that occur in and across disparate fields. What is at stake is one's very representation within this social world, as well as one's place in the social echelon.[3]

This article continues Caldwell's thread of research by drawing from thirty structured interviews from animators based in Atlanta, Georgia, to argue that animators make use of desk decoration rituals for *helpful, inspirational, expressive* and *resistant* purposes. Helpful objects fulfill utilitarian roles, functioning as tools to assist in the production process. Inspirational decorations create a pleasurable aesthetic zone that simultaneously makes the long workdays more endurable while expressive objects enable conversation with peers, establishing the animator as a fellow geek and signaling their dedication to their position in a precarious work environment.[4] Resistant decoration practices have emerged in response to animation studios branding themselves as fun places to work, adopting open floor plans and filling the space with toys and other whimsical paraphernalia. Primal Screen Studio, for example, once adorned available shelves and rafters with myriad robot figures, from the retro to the futuristic.[5] If the studio actively cultivates such a reputation through this decor, animators may turn to more sarcastic or minimal forms of decoration to resist the managerial invitation to have fun, in an effort to define their identity as something opposed to corporate strategies.

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1) Lisa Leff, "The Creative Spirits of Nickelodeon Animation Studio Have Turned Their Drab Office Cubicles into Celebrations of Personal Style," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, November 28, 1999, 22, as cited in John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 78.

2) This friction can be described as a politics of place and space, in which places constitute the local and the personal, necessitating negotiation with the spaces defined by political institutions and global capital. David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992), 282, as cited in Serra Tinic, *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 30.

3) Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 229.

4) The term geek refers to an individual knowledgeable in particular niche subjects, typically of the pop-cultural variety. Because animators are creators of pop-culture in their own right, knowledge regarding various television shows, films, and video games provide an advantage in communicating with colleagues and clients alike.

5) Primal Screen was Atlanta's oldest animation studio, establishing itself in 1995 before closing down in 2024. Amid Amidi, "Atlanta-Based Animation Studio Primal Screen to Shut down after 30 Years," *Cartoon Brew*, accessed October 27, 2024, https://www.cartoonbrew.com/business/atlanta-based-animation-studio-primal-screen-to-shut-down-after-30-years-239621.html.

Animator desk decoration practices constitute what Michel de Certeau would distinguish as a tactic, defined by its grassroots manipulation of resources and improvisatory nature, as opposed to a strategy of preconceived maneuvers imposed from the top down.[6] The animation studio's strategies are oriented around the production of commercials, television shows, video games, and films that can be monetized across a variety of products as intellectual property. In this setting, capital manifests both economically and culturally, with cultural capital — achieved through degrees, portfolios, and displays of shared interests — often dictating who advances or secures greater job stability. Animators tactically accrue cultural capital, in the form of portfolio pieces, degrees, and enthusiastic displays of geekiness both online and at the workplace to negotiate better jobs and attain a degree of stability in an otherwise precarious industry. Cultural capital tends to determine who is considered legitimate, whose contract is renewed, or who receives the promotion to become lead or director.[7] This type of capital also plays a role in deciding what practices, strategies, and forms of knowledge are useful or usable in the field. Animators accumulate this capital by skillfully navigating a competitive and precarious profession, while using decorative rituals to assert their creative identity and to resist the impersonal standardization of the studio environment.

These desk decorations are rituals in that they represent a habitual practice that stand in for some greater social or transcendental value.[8] The purpose of this ritual, according to the animators, is to exercise creative autonomy, as Derek Iverson says in Leff's article: "they kind of have to let us do what we want because they want to encourage creative expression…"[9] The animators decorate their office space in wild and whimsical ways, and they frame this liberty as stemming from their status as creative laborers. Caldwell argues that media analysis requires study of the cultural and symbolic significance of production spaces and the rituals of production undertaken.[10] Production spaces have a culture and rituals unique to individual locations; they only make sense as workers enter and legitimize the site as a studio. For Émile Durkheim, rituals function as a system of ideas through which individuals imagine their society and their relations within it, externalizing values onto ritual objects and defining the sacred from the profane.[11] Rituals within media production are self-reflections in addition to expressions of production culture.[12] A study of production spaces would be myopic without attention to the particular practices and rituals that transpire there. Thus, it is vital to scrutinize not only the workers' trade rituals but also the animator's tactics in which they transform their work spaces into habitable places from the bottom up.[13]

6) Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 30.
7) Ibid., 30.
8) Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.
9) Leff, "The Creative Spirits of Nickelodeon Animation Studio Have Turned Their Drab Office Cubicles into Celebrations of Personal Style."
10) Caldwell, *Production* Culture, 69.
11) Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 227.
12) Ibid., 70.
13) Craig Calhoun, Richard Sennett, and Harel Shapira, "Poiesis Means Making," *Public Culture* 25, no. 2 (2013), 197.

Method

As a part of studying these rituals, in-depth interviews with thirty animators were conducted between December 29, 2018, to August 29, 2019. These participants needed to meet two requirements: first, they were employed in the production of animated content or had received training as an animator; second, they had lived in Atlanta for at least a year. Keeping the research constrained to Atlanta represents an effort to control the vast number of variables at work in everyday interactions; at least they have a geography in common. Participants range in age from twenty to fifty plus, with the average being in the late twenties and early thirties. Everyone had an undergraduate education or vocational training, with some even having MAs or MFAs specifically in animation. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to four and a half hours, averaging around ninety minutes. Conducting interviews face to face proved difficult for the many who work late hours. In the end, the majority took place over Google Meet.

Twelve of thirty respondents were employed at the same studio for more than two years. The remaining individuals moved between short-term contracts, working from home, or relocating offices regularly. While all twelve studio-based participants worked on animated content, not all of them are categorized as "animators" by industry standards. Some held roles such as background designers, illustrators, modelers, riggers, and compositors for animated content. A few individuals with animation degrees and/or industry experience transitioned to full-time employment in animation-related fields such as motion design, game design, and visual effects. Some worked on television programs, but the majority produced digital content for advertising and streaming. The majority of participants were white, followed by African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics. At the time of the interview, fifty six percent identified as female, while forty four percent identified as male. For demographic information, see the Appendix at the end of this article.

These interviews involved twenty-five pre-written questions, although participants often wandered into topics to be asked about later, resulting in omitting questions and reordering on the fly. These questions and the interview process were approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) which holds a Federal Wide Assurance with the Office for Human Research Protections. This assurance confirms compliance with Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for human subject protection, incorporating the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. The IRB is responsible for safeguarding the rights and welfare of human research participants, adhering to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. In compliance with the IRB, participants must remain anonymous, ensuring this research could not result in potential retribution from employers. Because the animation industry in Atlanta is relatively small, mentioning specific studios at which participants work has been avoided for this reason.

This article focuses exclusively on the physical accessories on the animator's desk. This is due to the structured nature of the interview process, in which one of the questions approved was "What is on your desk? Why?" Participants did not bring up what is on their digital desktop, neither backgrounds nor screensavers, although a few discussed their favorite software and methods of customization, such as brush presets and hotkeys. This is

partially due to the nature of the question asked, along with potential technological factors. For example, screensavers are rarely used in animation studios now that cathode-ray tube (CRT) monitors, which were susceptible to burn-in, have largely been replaced with liquid-crystal displays (LCD). Digital backgrounds are rarely visible at the studio as well, because animators typically have software like Toon Boom Harmony, Adobe After Effects, or Autodesk Maya open when they are working. This means that backgrounds are only visible for a few seconds when switching between programs or logging off, while toys and posters remain on display regardless of the task at hand. While digital technology is essential for animators and can be customized in categories similar to helpful, inspirational, and resistant, its expressive capacity remains in question. How animators in Atlanta incorporate digital displays into their daily tactics would need to be explored in a future article.

Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the cultural industries outside a few coastal elites such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Vancouver, rendering Atlanta uncharted territory regarding the animation industry.[14] Serving as an intermediary city, it captures resources such as creative laborers and outsourced production from the aforementioned coastal hubs to sustain itself in a post-industrial economy focused on the production of intellectual property.[15] This process is heavily influenced by the entrepreneurial ideology imported from California's media and technology industry, where digital exceptionalism flourishes, leading to a disconnect between the interests of the locals and the global companies which set up shop in their neighborhoods.[16] An optimal location for studying the strategies of creative laborers, Atlanta is a city in-between the influences of global cultural and commercial hierarchies.

Participants provided data for micro-level analysis, comparable to describing a location on foot, whereas macro-level analysis would be comparable to charting a city from a jet aircraft.[17] To continue this analogy, this research follows a mid-level "helicopter" view, examining social forces as they are experienced and communicated by participants. Game development,[18] web design,[19] and other animation-adjacent industries have already undergone mid-level analyses. This study divided and categorized these transcriptions according to broad categories, following Grounded Theory's spiraling approach, in which narrower groupings became components of grander themes.[20] These themes were ar-

14) Michael Curtin, "Thinking Globally: From Media Imperialism to Media Capital," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Hoboken: Wiley Publishing, 2011), 108–119.

15) Lealan LaRoche, "Introduction," in *Fostering the Creative Class: Creating Opportunities for Social Engagement*, 2008, 3–7, accessed October 27, 2024, https://georgiaplanning.org/student_reports/2008/8--Creative%20Region/Creative_Region_report.pdf.

16) The Web 2.0 delineates the internet of 1997–2001 from the "2.0" era, characterized by a renewed emphasis on "transparency, participation, and openness." Alice E. Marwick, "You May Know Me from YouTube: (Micro-)Celebrity in Social Media," in *A Companion to Celebrity*, eds. P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 333–350.

17) Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009), 234–253.

18) Casey O'Donnell, *Developer's Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014).

19) Helen Kennedy, *Net Work: Ethics and Values in Web Design* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011).

20) Antony Bryant, *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 96.

ranged into productive dualisms, including enjoyment vs. alienation, traditional practices vs. digital software, and tactics vs. strategies, to name a few.[21] Including professional perspectives to describe industry discourse and practices while maintaining a broad framework is imperative, as the animation industry is influenced by the unrelenting explosion of technological innovation and cultural shifts. From poorly understood yet potent digital tools to the overwhelming force of the market, the ethical frameworks and values of the profession are perpetually shifting. Although this qualitative approach is not suited for making general claims applicable to a global industry, it does provide a nuanced view of the specific circumstances and opportunities these creative laborers face.

This is already a well-established path in the study of media industries; some early examples include Leo Calvin Rosten's *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers*[22] and Hortense Powdermaker's *Hollywood the Dream Factory*,[23] which examine the ways in which creative laborers in Hollywood become alienated from their work. Hesmondalgh and Baker undertake a study of three different areas of the cultural industries, television, music recording, and magazines, to form a larger theory of ethics and labor.[24] Areas adjacent to animation, such as game development,[25] or web design,[26] have undergone mid-level analyses in which interviews from laborers inform arguments about the industry's power-ladened structure. However, critical media industry studies have not been applied to the animation industry specifically in Atlanta.

Analysis

Animated media have entered a state of hyper-fragmentation, as innumerable genres in countless forms and formats are produced for proliferating platforms and applications.[27] This has blurred the lines between special-effects heavy live-action films and animated movies as well as professional and amateur production, as careers in animation become increasingly casual and precarious.[28] Digital platforms dramatize this contradiction, as amateur and professional animation diffuses, so too must the professional identities of those that produce it.[29] One is told to follow one's authentic desires, seeking out careers that inspire passion, but this often amounts to trading security for the opportunity to

21) Dualistic theorization is an ancient method for structuring arguments, as Plato positions form against substance and Kant delineates the sublime from the beautiful. Janet Borgerson and Alf Rehn, "General Economy and Productive Dualisms," *Gender, Work & Organization* 11, no. 4 (2004), 457.
22) Leo Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers* (New York: Arno Press, 1970).
23) Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1950).
24) David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (London: Routledge, 2011), 14.
25) Ibid., 14.
26) Kennedy, *Net Work*, 32.
27) Dave Valliere and Thomas Gegenhuber, "Entrepreneurial Remixing: Bricolage and Postmodern Resources," *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* 15, no. 1 (2014), 5–15.
28) c.f. Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2010) and Melissa Gregg, *Work's Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 250.
29) Phoebe Elefante and Mark Deuze, "Media work, career management, and professional identity: Living labour precarity," *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook* 10, no. 1 (2012), 10.

practice aesthetic judgment on commercial products.[30] Self-expression becomes a means to accrue cultural capital, bulking up the resume and bolstering the online portfolio, turning animation into a game in which one strategically presents oneself according to an increasingly mobile and global culture.[31]

These self-presentation tactics are contextualized by a precarious industry characterized by increasingly short-term contracts and lengthy hiatuses. Participants in this study report similar career trajectories. Freshly graduated from art school, they sought out jobs that add to their portfolio, taking on short term work until linking up with studios that promised better pay and benefits, despite warnings about long hours. Soon after starting, they experienced periods of "crunch," with several reporting working over ten hours a day and six days a week. Some saw working hours increase significantly as deadlines approached, reaching twelve-hour days, eventually escalating to an 85-hour workweek, with barely any time off. The constant extended hours led to fatigue and depression, while a few had to seek medical attention to treat carpal tunnel syndrome, lateral epicondylitis (tennis elbow), and other repetitive stress injuries. It is clear this grueling schedule is often a part of the animation industry's standard operating procedure. A few participants stated they felt deceived, as initial promises of aesthetic freedom and work-life balance were broken, and they were left questioning why they remained in the field. Several found a need to "recalibrate," taking on less work or strategically accepting crunch for limited times, particularly as they entered their thirties, gradually improving their capacity to negotiate through the accumulation of cultural capital.

In spite of the industry's challenges, participants regularly report enjoying their work, preferring a job that allows greater degrees of self-expression over a more stable career. Cynical interpretations of this phenomena chalk it up to the sunk-cost fallacy or, worse, ideological conditioning. For example, Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan argue that uncompensated labor performed in the hopes of future employment is "largely not experienced as exploitation or alienation,"[32] implying that some ideological veil renders the worker unable to recognize the conditions of their exploitation. The *illusio*, to make use of Bordieuan terminology, is not an illusion so much as the result of the animator admitting that the stakes of the game are worth pursuing.[33] Acknowledging self-exploitation proves a viable strategy to attain full-time employment and greater degrees of creative autonomy and professional status therein. Some researchers grow myopic as they focus on the *illusio* of these creative careers, missing the participants' genuine enjoyment in the production process, instead claiming they are caught up in some form of social parlor trick.[34] Others lament digital technology's power to enchant, deceive, and control the masses, such as Michael Siciliano's research into music engineers and professional Youtubers.[35] He argues

30) Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).
31) Ibid.
32) Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas Corrigan, "Hope Labor: The Role of Employment Prospects in Online Social Production," *The Political Economy of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2013), 9.
33) Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 76–77.
34) For a basic overview of these approaches, see Michael L. Siciliano, *Creative Control: The Ambivalence of Work in the Culture Industries* (New York: Columbia Press, 2021), 10.
35) Ibid., 13.

that the cool atmosphere of the studio and the regular rotation of cutting-edge gear enable states of pleasant concentration, sweetening the working conditions without fully masking their bitter aftertaste. However, Siciliano primarily focuses on the gear supplied by the studio, but animators in this study brought their own toys to work, emphasizing their willingness to infuse their workplace with personal meaning.

As desk space is primarily for digital production purposes, the vast majority of objects listed by participants were electronic, including computer monitors, headphones, drawing tablets, and keyboards. Photographs, stationery, and food/beverage were also common, along with the occasional house plant. Video game controllers and puzzles allow for playful activities, which seem categorically different from the myriad toys and action figures that served an aesthetic rather than utilitarian function. In addition to sorting the types of objects listed, this research also defines how these items are used and why they are considered significant.

The interview with Carmen serves as an ideal starting point, because she provides a set of emic categories for the use and purpose of desk decorations at the studio at which she works.[36] In spite of her tight schedule and imminent move to California, she responded to the interview questions, albeit through the relatively data-poor medium of email rather than an interview face to face. Offering a wonderful guide to decoration etiquette in the workplace, she also grants insight into her own practices as well:

> **CARMEN** I like to have a balance of things that inspire me and things that help me.
> **Inspire:** I have a calendar from one of my favorite artists, plants, a sketchbook and a small packet of traditional drawing materials, typically some art books that might be helpful resources, and a very pretty stained-glass lamp from my mother.
> **Help:** A couple small personal pictures, a small bottle of calming hand lotion, and an 8×10 print out of different wrist and back stretches, water, snacks, plus a few other personal items like a stuffed animal from my best friend and a couple small toys from one of the first projects I ever worked on. Small little objects that don't distract me, but really help the space feel like my own. Oh, also a small bottle of natural cleaning solution. I like being able to clean and dust every so often.

Carmen provided *inspirational* and *helpful*, two categories for desk objects reflecting a tension between contemplation and action, aesthetic and utilitarian quality.[37] Many animators evaluated their decorations in this manner, although the specifics of how they categorized these objects varied. For example, Carmen defined her sketchbook as inspirational but other animators characterized it as a helpful organizational and conceptual tool for taking notes and mapping out tough scenes. This latter category serves as a reminder against a prejudice so ingrained as to appear obvious; technology is helpful. Carmen's placement of toys such as stuffed animals within the helpful category suggests these ob-

36) For demographic information on Carmen, see #7 in the Appendix.
37) Arendt defines the human condition as an unresolvable tension between contemplation and action, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 150.

jects serve a utilitarian purpose in addition to the power of resisting alienation that Caldwell observed.[38]

Helpful

Animation as an industry is unique in how such whimsical desk objects blur the line between the useful and the purely decorative. For example, some animators keep models for anatomical reference on their desks, figures which can be articulated into funny poses or fiddled with during long meetings. Oscar, a 3D modeler, reported keeping anatomical models on his desk when he needs to reference the human form, over an interview conducted online.[39]

> **COLIN** What's that behind you?
>
> **OSCAR** I recently got this, like, an anatomy model, you know? So, it's just, like, a naked guy who's standing in front of me… and half of it is just muscles. It shows all the muscles on the bones, and the eyeballs, and stuff. Yeah, that's really helpful. I've been using books, but this kind of thing is easy to just look for … like, what you're looking for, the right muscle. Looking through books, well … you're just searching for the right angle, so it's confusing because they'll show you the same arm … but the same muscle at every angle is different. In my background, I'm not so much checking for animation. But I'm checking more for like, the quality of the character, right? If they show a sculpture, the first thing I check is the faces. And I always grab the sculpture and tilt it so it's facing from the chin up. So, that's one thing that a lot of 3D artists kinda struggle with. They come from a 2D background, sometimes. So that's why you tilt it, to see the curvature that kinda connects the front of the face to the side and that's one of those things that I don't do consciously, right?

Digital sculptures require an understanding of three-dimensional space, yet the interface this sculptor uses remains confined to a two-dimensional screen. As a means to bridge this gap, he keeps an anatomical toy on his desk, an object he can freely manipulate in actual space in accordance with the virtual object that he sculpts. Behind the simple ingredients of the face, the bones, the muscles, the eyeballs, and "stuff," lie infinite possible combinations and recombinations. Oscar's capacity to generate cultural capital is directly linked with his expertise in anatomy and form, a strategy born from years of studying sculpture as fine art. Anatomical models are tactically displayed both for their usefulness and their capacity to generate cultural capital, incorporating the tools of his trade like a scholar might fill out the bookshelf in their office. This speaks to the fluidity of these categories, in which desk objects can fulfill multiple functions according to the needs of the animator.

38) Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 78–79.

39) For demographic information on Oscar, see #22 in the Appendix.

The same can be said regarding the ways Oscar customizes his desktop, creating specific keystrokes and making use of apps like Kuadro to both speed up his workflow and express his individuality and expertise in the office.

> **OSCAR** Well about programs… I use Z-Brush, Maya or 3DS Max, one of those and maybe something to render like either V-Ray or Keyshot. Something like just to show my clients what I'm doing. Those are my bread-and-butter. I got Z-brush, Photoshop, maybe some extra programs like… Maya or something like that… There's that little Kuadro program… it's only a little extra thing. It's free; it doesn't take too much time. And I carry all my brushes with me, that's one thing too. I got this little USB drive that has like all my brushes and my hotkeys. My presets and stuff. My hotkeys are really what cuts my workload down to half, right? And everybody's different, like my friend. They tried to use my Z-Brush; they couldn't use it! It's like, where is everything? Why is everything different? … Everybody has a different way of doing things. I don't let anybody… you can take their opinion but it's just an opinion.

In addition to generating cultural capital through sculptural proficiency, Oscar establishes his acumen with digital software through the customization of his office's computer. While this allows him to work more efficiently, it also renders others at the office unable to interface with the software in its current configuration. This cements his role as an expert with skills that cannot be easily replaced, a tactic that expresses the specificity of his proficiency. Like the anatomical models, the digital tools and presets he keeps stored on his USB move fluidly between helpful and expressive categories, simultaneously producing cultural capital while augmenting his ability to accomplish his daily tasks.

Oscar also demonstrates his skill in 3D modeling by displaying three-dimensional prints of his digital sculptures, such as a 5" tall plastic figurine of himself featuring various alien and cybernetic augmentations. He also shows off some physical prototypes he has built, called maquettes, which were constructed as a part of his research process for sculpting digital characters. In a similar manner, Blue Sky's[40] lead sculptor, Vicki Saulls, takes her maquettes and scans them with a 3D scanner to produce a digital mesh.[41] After the scanning process, the maquettes serve as decoration like on Oscar's desk. These physical objects function as helpful tools and expressions of acumen, illustrating how digital tools allow for ubiquitous "hackability and remixability" and, as Lev Manovich argues, represent tactics that can no longer be considered "outside of the system."[42] DreamWorks studios prominently display these maquettes in their behind-the-scenes features and videos online, suggesting these prototypes serve a promotional purpose as well.[43]

40) An American animation studio, Blue Sky Studios, Inc. was based in Greenwich, Connecticut, from 1987 to 2021.

41) Grace Randolph, "Rio 2, Epic, Ice Age 4: Blue Sky Studios Tour! — Beyond The Trailer," *YouTube*, 2013, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/WgK_kBxKwz0?t=94.

42) Lev Manovich, "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009), 325.

43) CNN, "Inside DreamWorks' studio," *YouTube*, 2011, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/JzMzFom9eX0?t=142.

Fig. 1: Chris Wedge and Vicki Saulls at Blue Sky Studios, with maquettes on display behind them. Retrieved from: Grace Randolph, "Rio 2, Epic, Ice Age 4: Blue Sky Studios Tour! — Beyond The Trailer," *YouTube*, 2013, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/WgK_kBxKwz0?t=94.

Inspirational

When toys are not actively being used, they still serve to create an affective environment around the animator, turning an occupational jail-cell into a carefully curated museum of one's favorite things.[44] Alfred Gell defined art as a "technology of enchantment;" one becomes momentarily overwhelmed by the technical perfection and intricacy of the object, losing oneself in an aesthetic experience.[45] Arranging objects around them according to their affective capacity to inspire a sense of place, animators keep desk decorations orbiting in the periphery of their attention as they enter and exit aesthetic states of flow. Thus, their decorations allow for a free recombination of attention at various levels of the individual, cultural, environmental, etc., such that one's focus orients away from the individual towards a multi-layered system of meaning.[46]

Animation production culture encourages the formation of *mono no katari no hitobito*, or "a person who talks about things;" a phenomenon symptomatic of the increasing intimacy between personal identity and material possessions.[47] Animators bringing their toys to work has become a part of the industry's mythology, a widespread tactic to authen-

44) Leff, "The Creative Spirits of Nickelodeon Animation Studio Have Turned Their Drab Office Cubicles into Celebrations of Personal Style."

45) Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Jeremy Coote (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 46.

46) Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

47) Ken Ōhira, *Yutakasa no seishinbyō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 1990), as cited in Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 87.

Fig. 2: Dave Weatherly animating at DreamWorks Studio, with toys from *Shrek* (2001) and *Flushed Away* (2006) on his desk. Retrieved from: CNN, "Inside DreamWorks' studio," *YouTube*, 2011, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/JzMzFom9eX0?t=142.

ticate their creative role, but each of them have their individual reasons for displaying these particular items. Anna McCarthy's study on decorating the area around the computer, what she refers to as the "geekosphere," including desk objects and stickers on laptops, delineates the ways these spaces express something about the worker and their environment.[48] They reflect current cultural trends within the studio, speak to the accelerated pace and increasing impermanence of the workplace, as well as expressing professional frustrations and anxieties. The geekosphere and the office space represent fields within "a multi-dimensional space" which reflects everything from economic strategies of production to the creation of aesthetically pleasant workspaces.[49]

Carmen continued her explanation of her desk decoration practice with a list of reasons why she finds the practice valuable.

> **CARMEN** I really love getting to decorate my desk and I really think it's important for a couple reasons:
>
> 1. It shows that you're excited to be there and that you're "setting up shop" / "moving in" —> aka you're there for the long haul. You're showing that you like working there and that you want to stay.
> 2. It helps people learn a little bit more about you. I never really thought this was that important until I started working in a studio and saw all of the people's desks that were either filled with stuff or not. I'm a visual learner so seeing all

48) Anna McCarthy, "Geekospheres: Visual Culture and Material Culture at Work," *Journal of Visual Culture* 3, no. 2 (2004), 213.

49) Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 42.

this stuff around people's desks helped me learn their names and remember more information about them.

3. It really helps me feel more at home. I can relax and get into the flow of work much quicker when I feel at home than when I feel uncomfortable. I mean you spend half of your time at work so why not really make it enjoyable for you. Have some snacks neatly stowed in a desk drawer, have a small rug if that's your thing. I can guarantee that people will notice what you're doing and genuinely enjoy it.

   One word of warning: Don't have too much stuff on your desk. It overcrowds you and then everything starts getting really dusty and grimy and that's not a fun thing to have to see. So, if you're going to have figurines or little statues and such sitting on your desk, please for the love of all that is good, take five minutes to dust your desk once a week. Keep a cloth and a natural cleaning solution under your desk. This not only puts you at the pinnacle of professionalism, but it really helps with your health. Let me just say I would not feel good if I sat in a cubby full of dust every day. No thank you.

Although she did not define them as such, objects on one's desk also serve an *expressive* function, communicating to oneself and one's coworkers, as mute material rises out of the real world and takes on significance within a network of meaning. Unlike the relative privacy of the home, desk objects exist in a semi-public environment and therefore not only represent what animators keep for themselves but also what they present to others. These objects can be valuable tools, in that it becomes easier to start a conversation with a coworker if one shares a common interest, facilitating communication in the workplace. This practice also allows for easier differentiation between coworkers, as new animators can get to know their colleagues quickly through the variety of symbols arranged around them. Bringing toys to work, above all, generates cultural capital by participating in the media ritual that helps make the office space fun. Laying down paraphernalia can feel like growing roots, communicating commitment and enthusiasm, while an undecorated desk may suggest that the animator will not linger there. The quality and quantity of the decorations functions as a tactical shorthand for investment or seniority.

Expressive

The decoration practices of animators at Nickelodeon Studios in 1999 transformed each cubicle into a place rich in personal value, featuring themes ranging from angels and winged goddesses for spiritual renewal to a surfer motif for the aspiring SpongeBob animator.[50] Studio tours occur fairly regularly at Disney and Pixar studios, suggesting these decorations are a branding strategy by which studios demonstrate being an entertaining

50) Leff, "The Creative Spirits of Nickelodeon Animation Studio Have Turned Their Drab Office Cubicles into Celebrations of Personal Style."

Fig. 3: Nick Pitera presents John Lasseter's office. Retrieved from: Nick Pitera, "Pixar Animation Studios Tour with Nick Pitera | Disney Live," *YouTube*, February 17, 2017, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/mjMQyeZKLto?t=1116.

place to work. Here, animators have contributed to their studio's narrative and reputation,[51] which has turned into a recruitment strategy. Indeed, the success of Pixar's features and shorts are often linked to the studio's fun and creative atmosphere, with filmed tours of the workspace only augmenting their reputation.[52] Nevertheless, in the online guided tour at Pixar, Nick Pitera emphasizes that the animators all did this "on their free time, they kind of collectively decide what they all want it to look like, and they go to town."[53] These decorations are like Hollywood sets, demonstrating a high investment in their position if they would sacrifice their weekends to build it. Toys are ubiquitous throughout the video, on display on animator's desks and in the lobby. The tour concludes at John Lasseter's office, the appearance of which blurs the line between toy store and museum.[54] The sheer number of objects inspires awe, as if he has made it a point to show every toy from every single film he has worked on, as a display of cultural and economic capital. Many of the toys appear in duplicates and in their original container, signaling their value as collectibles by retaining their "mint condition" — an unusual practice for animators. Here, the sheer number and value of items on display establish Lasseter as the most authentic creative in the studio, dazzling others with material representations of the myriad successful franchises he produced.

51) Calhoun – Sennett – Shapira, "Poiesis Means Making," 196.
52) Richard McCulloch, "Whistle While You Work: Branding, Critical Reception and Pixar's Production Culture," in *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age*, eds. Roberta Pearson and Anthony N. Smith (Berlin: Springer Nature, 2015), 174–189.
53) Nick Pitera, "Pixar Animation Studios Tour with Nick Pitera | Disney Live," *YouTube*, February 17, 2017, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/mjMQyeZKLto?t=1116.
54) Ibid.

Desk decorations reflect the economic capital necessary to purchase them; however, this differs from collectible culture in that the economic value of the figure is often secondary to its cultural meaning. This is evident in the fact that few animators keep their desk objects in their original boxes or concern themselves with how the toy's condition impacts its economic value. Thus, cultural capital generated through decoration usually supersedes its economic value. These objects often reflect personal values, as shaped by one's age, history, and context of consumption, generating cultural capital based on taste while facilitating communication by establishing common interests. Figures such as Totoro, Pikachu, and the ubiquitous Pusheen provide a dash of cuteness, while Batman or Lt. Judy Hopps serve as reminders of the characters' best qualities. Totoro, Pikachu, and Pusheen contrast the guns and muscles typically associated with Western toys by combining cuteness with immaculate character design. This reflects an evolution of the Hello Kitty aesthetic, which emerged on the international scene in the 1970s.[55] Between fans of Japanese anime and those who do not understand it, this divide is deeply felt across a generation of animators, as Lila explains:[56]

> **COLIN** Do you share a lot of common interests with your coworkers?
>
> **LILA** Oh yeah, especially like, people my own age. It's weird because the older generation at the studio … Anime. It changed animation forever. Everyone I know, who's older than our generation, never got into anime. Everybody younger than that has watched different things, their humor is different.
>
> **COLIN** It warps your perspective, huh? I guess older animators aren't discussing whether you're more *tsundere*[57] or *kawaii*.[58]
>
> **LILA** The answer is *tsundere*, in case you want to put that in…

Desk objects that represent characters from Japanese media function as a specific form of cultural capital, reflecting whether one is "in the know" or not. Their presentation at the office speaks to a form of communication involving the ad-hoc assembly of symbolic objects, such as toys and tee-shirts, to facilitate the formation of relationships. Without hesitation, the interviewer introduced organically formed Japanese/English fan-speak, cracking a joke about the cultural differences between Lila and her coworkers, indicating a shared cultural literacy. Lila responded with a challenge, disbelieving such a trivial thing could make it into an academic document, while also communicating in such a way as to authenticate the fan-to-fan relationship. The distance between the interviewer and participant closed, with fan-speak rendering them equals from the same community. While these moments may seem insignificant, they are an example of a shared work experience. These toys, and the ideas they represent, contribute to the affective qualities of studio production culture. This describes a texture that grows in richness over accumulated experi-

55) Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 22.

56) For demographic information on Lila, see #9 in the Appendix.

57) A stock character who initially acts coldly but gradually behaves more warmly over the course of the story, or one who oscillates between these emotional temperatures. Susan Noh, "Subversion and Reification of Cultural Identity in Global Fandoms," *Gnovis Journal* 17, no. 1 (2016), 31.

58) "cute, loveable." Ibid., 31.

ence, disrupted by precarious working conditions that produces mobility over stability. Even though this shared fan-language marks sites that span the cultural and the affective domains, as careers in animation become increasingly characterized by working remotely or in open office spaces intended for short-term occupation, desk decoration rituals lose the ritualistic power to resist alienation as it did before.[59]

Resistant

This loss of relevance began when Apple kicked off a wave of sleek open office designs in the 1980s, implementing the most cutting-edge floor plan, in an effort to distinguish themselves from their competitor, IBM.[60] Following Apple's lead, chinos, chill-out rooms, and "hot-desking" have become the norm for many offices. Game studios such as the Electronic Arts branch in Playa Vista, which feature diversions like arcades and swimming pools, all aimed at fabricating a "fun" space that contrasts with the corporate image of beige cubicles.[61] Resistant uses of the desk decoration ritual signify an emerging trend in the precarious industries, as animators demonstrate authentic creativity by defying professional expectation. Unlike the Nickelodeon animators, participants added their toys to the existing assortment provided by the studio, answering the managerial invitation to ritually demonstrate their creativity.[62] Relating back to Manovich's argument that digital tools blur the boundaries of strategies and tactics, Deuze and Lewis suggest that the boundary between "suits" and "creatives" gives way under such forces as convergence culture and web 2.0 allows anyone to perform creative labor.[63] Richard Florida expands the definition of the creative labor to include such professions as lawyers, technicians, and managers,[64] in order to make the claim that the generation of intellectual property has become the central economic driver in the United States.[65] The limitation of this ritual's resistant function becomes clear when one considers the ways in which creative and professional roles have continued to destabilize.

Lila, for her part, does not engage in decorating her desk in a very elaborate manner, displaying a purposefully awkward family photograph and a plaque reading "I'm Dead Inside." While demonstrating creative authenticity can lean on the playful or whimsical elements of the artistic, Lila instead utilizes aspects of the archetype which specifically resists the managerial invitation to conform. Studios exert aesthetic authority over those who occupy them by presenting the studio designer's image of the fun work environment as legit-

59) Ibid.

60) Chris Bilton and Stephen Cummings, *Creative Strategy: Reconnecting Business and Innovation* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2015), 220.

61) Ibid.

62) Michael Siciliano defines the managerial invitation as the administration's promise that routine workers can engage in a certain freedom of expression, a bid that must be accepted if the worker wants to remain employed. Siciliano, *Creative Control*, 30.

63) Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis, "Professional Identity and Media Work," in *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, Continuity and Change in the Cultural and Creative Industries*, eds. Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill, and Stephanie Taylor (London: Routledge, 2017), 162.

64) Richard L. Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (London: Routledge, 2003), 74.

65) Ibid., 330.

Fig. 4: Inside DreamWorks Animation's "hidden room," a crawl space repurposed into a hangout lounge complete with Christmas lights and beer kegs. Retrieved from: Louis Cole, "Amazing DreamWorks Tour," *YouTube*, 2014, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/rFu3Mlz1mPM?t=180.

imate or commonsensical.[66] Desk objects also provide a relatively safe space for ironic denial of workplace fun; some animators at Nickelodeon incorporated elements of sarcasm, such as covering their computers with tiny bits of tape as a form of job security, because someone would have to clean it up if they were fired.[67] While Caldwell is correct in reading the decoration ritual as resistant to authority, this method of tactically generating cultural capital is distinguished from previous research, as this resistance is complicated by the managerial invitation to participate.[68] While decorating one's desk functionally capitulates to the studio's efforts at promoting a positive image, precarious working conditions reduce the incentive to emotionally invest in the role or the space. This ritual is meant to resist or recapture the forces behind this constant state of uncertainty. Establishing oneself becomes all the more important when one's position remains tenuous, and precarious conditions in the creative industry have found expression in the animator's decoration practice. Refusing the managerial invitation to decorate one's desk generates cultural capital through rebellion, playing into the independent risk-taking mindset associated with the creative entrepreneur.

Not all studio spaces are quite so curated as Lasseter's office. At DreamWorks, for example, one cubicle was themed around "found objects."[69] While the tour guide describes

66) Gabrielle Hosein and Daniel Miller, "Food, Family, Art and God: Aesthetic Authority in Public Life in Trinidad," in *Anthropology and the Individual: A Material Culture Perspective*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 2009), 159.

67) Ibid., 159.

68) Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 78–79.

69) Louis Cole, "Amazing DreamWorks Tour," *YouTube*, 2014, accessed October 27, 2024, https://youtu.be/rFu3Mlz1mPM?t=180.

it as "so random," the animators have actually converted their cubicle into a college dormitory, recombining junk into a pastiche of sleepy-stoner vibes. This is an example of generating cultural capital by resisting the studio's call to immaculate desk decoration. DreamWorks also has a "hidden room"[70] which the animators began using to chat and sneak a drink away from the security cameras, very much against the wishes from the higher ups. This is a story that presents the decoration as a resistant practice, done in spite of studio authority. When very few emotional states are permissible in the workplace, snark or sarcasm becomes one of the only viable tools for communicating negative emotions, suspending authentic grievances within a relatively safe field of ambiguity.[71] The openness of the ritual allows it to tactically resist the decoration mandate, enabling the subversiveness of the action to disappear or reappear within the context of the everyday, emerging as a resistant object only relative to particular situations.[72] The playful element likewise only adds to this capacity to ridicule or reduce the powerful, as questions of seriousness are suspended when the toys ironically establish the space of professional animators.

Out of the animators interviewed, a third of them did not adorn their personal areas with anything at all. Leff reported only one undecorated desk in her article on Nickelodeon, belonging to a background layout supervisor who would clearly rather be outside with his dog.[73] The reasons that animators in Atlanta gave for opting out reflected a more atomized workforce. A few animators cited laziness as the primary reason for not decorating their desks, either feeling no desire whatsoever or taking pride in constructing an identity around being "the boring one" in the office. Some animators have found themselves operating in corporate environments, sharing the building with a business firm, working as the sole motion designer for a bank, or organizing film festivals. Without an environment of animators to establish a collective production culture, those working in more traditional office spaces tend to keep their desk objects understated. Animation freelancers expressed frustration with the juvenile treatment they receive from clients or higher-ups, finding a kiddy demeanor was a hindrance for negotiating real business. Although stickers, decals, and other forms of decoration offer a way to customize computers and other tools, shared computers and workspaces disincentivize even this. Ultimately, generating cultural capital through desk decoration serves as a form of communication in a highly contextual environment, with the refusal or subversion of this practice acting as a new way to signal creative authenticity in a precarious workplace.

Conclusion

Many of the tactics employed by animators in the 1990s have since become a part of studio culture, not so much a subversion as an anticipated and endorsed aspect of hiring authentic creatives. Studios not only legitimize categories and designate spaces but also ex-

70) Ibid.
71) Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, 250.
72) de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 24.
73) Gina Neff, *Venture Labor Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 6.

ert an aesthetic authority around which animators must tactically navigate. The ritual of warding off "the suits" has failed; everyone's creative now, as the post-industrial marketplace smooths the distinction between professions. Rather than engaging in the performative aspects of participating in a studio, many animators find the practice futile. Still, the majority persist in decorating their office to some degree, if only to capitalize on that ambiguous space between serious office work and authentic expression of the self. Oscar's hotkey presets are so specialized that only he knows how to operate the software under such a configuration, and some cultural references are so obscure that only Lila could catch them. Both tactically produce cultural capital to cement their position as authentic creatives in a precarious work environment. Yet, many desk decorations call out to be seen and touched, inviting a connection between coworkers in an environment in which turnover is high. Working remotely, an increasingly common practice after the Covid-19 pandemic, severs this tactility but offers new modes of expression online. Animators decorate their desks and desktops as expressions of their professional and creative selves, speaking through a shared language of objects representing fandoms.

Drawing from these interviews, the four categories of *helpful, inspirational, expressive*, and *resistant* explain broadly what animators gain by decorating their desks. The former two suggest utilitarian and aesthetic approaches that mirror findings from research on objects in the home,[74] while the latter two provide a basis for communication and establishing oneself in the relative sociality of the office space. Carmen assembles materials around her to help her with daily tasks and to surround her in a pleasant aesthetic field, carving out a place in an otherwise open office's anonymous space. Lila's resistant use of sarcastic placards simultaneously amuses her and subtly resists the office's invitation to make the workplace fun. With a comparatively higher number of animators opting out of the ritual entirely, the question then becomes whether this new form of resistance though abstinence will still generate cultural capital or not.

Today, the animation industry brands itself as a space of play and exuberance, if behind-the-scenes features like Pixar's studio tours are anything to be believed.[75] This is not to say that desk decoration is an unusual practice in any industry, nor that there was something outrageous about the way it manifested in places like Nickelodeon Studios or John Lasseter's office. Expressions of identity are on the move, as sites of meaning seem to shift onto the personality derived from web presence and engagement. Even then, it is clear that animation studios like Pixar derive enormous benefit from being perceived as a creative environment,[76] as evidenced by their willingness to tour fans and prospective employees.[77] The animator's decorations turned the studio from anonymous cubes into a "cool sweatshop" reminiscent of the internet startups of the 90s, where seventy-two-hour work weeks are considered a feature rather than a bug.[78]

74) Csikszentmihalyi – Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, 94.
75) Carly Kaplan and Tarreyn Van Slyke, "Nickelodeon's Animation Studio Tour: SpongeBob & Lincoln Loud | Inside Nick Ep. 3 w/ Tarreyn & Carly," *YouTube*, April 4, 2018, accessed October 27, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gfx8JiKx6M.
76) c.f. McCulloch, "Whistle While You Work," 174–189.
77) Neff, *Venture Labor Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries*.
78) Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It*.

Animators decorate their desks as a tactic to negotiate abstract and short-term labor, demonstrating they have a broad set of unorthodox tools, while also finding novel and multiple uses from what they have available. Cultural capital embellishes professional expertise, showcasing one's capacity to think and express freely. Desk decoration practices also provide insight into how animators balance the need for space with the need to generate cultural capital to facilitate communication with their coworkers and peers. This conspicuous consumption is only part of the story, however, as such objects can oscillate between inspirational and expressive, utilitarian and resistant, according to the needs of the animator.

These practices can express membership, but they may also alienate, as such brand-name rituals cannot help but delineate the sacred from the profane, or those who get the reference from those who miss it. As studios continue to brand themselves as fun places to work, cramming the halls and offices with cool paraphernalia, they present a managerial invitation to return to an office enchanted by these commodities. However, as offices trend towards more open floor plans and shared workspaces,[79] this also communicates to the animators not to become attached to a particular spot. Management will need to navigate between the changing needs of the studio space with the value of granting employees enough aesthetic autonomy to demarcate their personal place.

The desk decoration ritual animators have employed fluctuates according to the cultural context at the studio. As Caldwell argues, this began as a means of differentiating oneself from the stifling corporate environment,[80] this ritual has shifted as offices promote themselves as funhouses when they are not disappearing in favor of remote laborers. Now that a huge swathe of employees is accustomed to working from home, offices call for them to return, and many refuse.[81] In the future, studios may need to adopt yet more "fun" features to entice laborers to come back, but the individual animator's desk is unlikely to be so spectacularly contrary to the bureaucratic style, when this same style has absorbed play into its ethos.

Remote work allows these rituals to be incorporated into decking out the home office, although the communicative potential of such tactics is unclear. Modifying, decorating, customizing, and "pimping out" of personal electronic devices, like slapping a sticker on a laptop, displays cultural capital while deepening the bond between the user and the machine.[82] Some animators would prefer to ignore this invitation, as they see more value in generating cultural capital by raging against the machine. It is unclear if these same rituals will retain their meaning as objects viewed through a webcam. Video conferencing also allows for screen sharing, which briefly reveals art on desktops, but it is typically only visi-

79) Brodie Boland, Aaron De Smet, Rob Palter, and Aditya Sanghvi, "Reimagining the Office and Work Life after Covid-19," *McKinsey & Company*, June 8, 2020, accessed October 27, 2024, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/reimagining-the-office-and-work-life-after-covid-19.

80) Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 78–79.

81) Tovia Smith, "Returning to the office, a moment of joy for some others, would rather stay home," *NPR*, March 8, 2022, accessed October 27, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/911128317/march-back-to-office-work-from-home.

82) Meredith W. Zoetewey, "A rhetoric of ornament: Decorating mobile devices in the aesthetic economy," *Computers and Composition* 27, no. 2 (2010), 138–157.

ble for a few seconds before the user opens the material intended for presentation. The capacity for digital displays to fulfill expressive or resistant functions remains dubious and further research is required.

Studio owners must balance the desire to create an appropriate space with customizable places that encourage laborers to meaningfully generate cultural capital. The conversion of a tactic to a strategy is nothing new, as Lev Manovich has argued, particularly during an era characterized by digital labor.[83] It is the function of a studio to capture and commodify creative energy, rendering them knowable and fungible. As labor increasingly shifts to remote work, however, decoration practices are likely to enervate. Yet, this does not mean that animators have lost all recourse to mischief. The ways in which they assert their humanity amidst anonymity and alienation are as myriad as they are ad hoc. In this way, they continue to spontaneously carve out opportunities from precarity.

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83) Manovich, "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life."

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Biography

Colin Wheeler researches creative discourse in media industries, with a focus on the animation studios in the United States. A passionate creator and critic of animated media, he makes short experimental films which incorporate animation, puppetry, and live-action film.

Building on his BA in Theater, he completed an MFA in Animation at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Desiring to understand the animation as a career, specifically, the lives and motivations of animators as creative laborers, he went on to earn a Doctorate in Communication at Georgia State

University. Exploring the industry as a practitioner, he uses his on-the-ground perspective to inform higher theories on production cultures and the creative class. His findings are published both in print and online.

His teaching interests span from History of Comics, Cartoons, and Animation to Media and Popular Culture. He is currently teaching Storyboarding Composition with an emphasis on the art of storytelling. Stop motion animation is his passion, and he has a collaboration on two films that have screened at The Center for Puppetry Arts, bringing to life ancient stories and ecological parables.

Appendix

Number	Gender Presentation	Ethnicity	Age	Years of Industry Experience	Current Position
1	M	Asian	31	2	Full-time animator employed at studio
2	F	African American	27	4	Independent animator funded by Kickstarter
3	F	African American	25	1	Full-time animator employed at studio
4	M	Latin American	49	7	Owner of small animation studio
5	F	African American	29	3	Animator working remotely
6	M	Caucasian	35	7	Animator working remotely
7	F	Caucasian	25	2.5	Full-time animator employed at studio
8	F	Asian	31	3	Animator working remotely
9	F	Pacific Islander	26	4	Lead animator at studio
10	M	Caucasian	34	6	Owner of small animation studio
11	F	Caucasian	31	6	Lead animator at studio
12	F	Caucasian	23	3	Experimental animator as hobby
13	F	Caucasian	25	5	Animator working remotely
14	F	Caucasian	36	15	Animator working remotely
15	M	Caucasian	23	.5	Full-time animator employed at studio
16	F	Caucasian	25	2.5	Full-time animator employed at studio
17	M	Caucasian	57	30	Animation director employed at studio
18	M*	Caucasian	23	0.5	Full time animator employed at studio
19	M	Caucasian	22	2	Animator working remotely
20	M	Caucasian	22	0.5	Animator working remotely
21	F	Southeast Asia	23	3	Animator working remotely
22	M	Latin American	33	10	Full-time digital sculptor employed at studio
23	F	Caucasian	26	5	Full-time animator employed at studio
24	F	African American	49	0.5	Animator working remotely
25	M	Caucasian	30	9	Lead animator at studio
26	M	Middle Eastern	30	1	Production Assistant at Animation Studio
27	F	African American	26	5	Animator working remotely
28	F	Caucasian	30	4	Full-time employed at studio
29	M	Caucasian	40	18	Animator working remotely
30	F	African American	27	9	Animator working remotely