Disrupting Hustle Culture

An explorative research project addressing the question, “what does it mean to be productive?”. 

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 Term: VT22
 Subject: Visual Communication + Change
 Level: Bachelor
 Course code: 2D168E
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ABSTRACT

This thesis report details my exploration into the topic of hustle culture with the goal of opening conversations. This exploration centres around my process of producing an animated short film Pursuit and aims to address the question, “what does it mean to be productive”?

Hustle culture is introduced as a masochistic work-ethic way of life that causes productivity to become toxic and self care to get lost in the noise. I take a closer look at other creators who inspire my work and why in order to position myself as a change agent in relation to visual communication. This report touches upon the disparities and similarities between work culture now vs in the past, taking into consideration the longer historical, social and economic influence of work culture over time. It also investigates the phenomenon of increasing speed that media/information is spread and absorbed today and emerging practices of resistance like the concept of slow living. This thesis report concludes that even though there is no one size fits all solution, tangible change can still be made to mend our relationship with time and productivity by first talking about it.

KEY WORDS

Hustle culture, toxic productivity, animation, slow living, work ethic, self care.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all my tutors, Matilda Plöjel, Olga Nikolaeva, Cassandra Troyan & Mirai Nemoto for their patience, support, guidance and willingness to bail us out of jail in the name of Change. I would also like to thank my classmates and friends for their love and support whenever I felt stuck in my work and in life. Also a huge thank you to all those who participated in my project as collaborators, co-conspirator and flies on the wall. And lastly, I want to thank my Mum, my bro and sis, and host family for their support, care and concern whenever life threw me a fast one!
INTRODUCTION

Hustle culture is an almost masochistic work-ethic way of life where productivity becomes toxic and self care gets lost in the noise. My role as a visual communicator and change agent in this project and in a larger context within society is to create triggers in the imagination, to open people’s minds without necessarily telling them how or what they should think. This design project aims to address the question, what does it mean to be productive?

The goal of this project is to open conversation around the topic of hustle culture, productivity and self care, through exploring it in my own visual communication practice and process of making an animated short film. I intend to use techniques of subtle messaging in the film to leave room for target audiences to come to their own interpretations and reflections as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to conflicts and issues facing society today. The explorative research and overall theoretical framework that this project documents, builds an important foundation for the animated short film and is a necessary part of the process for its completion. By sharing my exploration, process and reflections in this project, it has the potential to influence change by normalising and destigmatising the conversation around the issue. My process stands as an insignificant resource for other creatives and even those not working in areas perceived as “creative” fields.

Developing an animated short film while both exploring and experiencing hustle culture and toxic productivity was initially very frustrating until I became aware of the concept of slow living from Paola Merrill, an artist, teacher and YouTube creator known as The Cottage Fairy. Slow living is a concept that encourages taking a slower approach to life because it is important in a world that values speed over self care. This initial inspiration contributed greatly towards the direction of the project in terms of validating the existence of a societal issue and the need for change in the way we view work and productivity. My work also takes inspiration from a number of other people within the creative industry whom I admire for their work ethic, style, storytelling and concept creation abilities and technical knowledge (see Positioning And Contextualising).

As a student, artist and animator, hustle culture and the effects of toxic productivity exist in many ways in personal and professional/school life. To elaborate, I have always noticed a feeling of pressure, of needing to always be hustling in order to achieve goals, constantly improving my skills to find work, be fast, efficient, and be productive. If I don’t, then I end up feeling like I have failed and start seriously worrying if I will be able to feed myself in the future. It is a nagging little voice in the back of my head that makes it very hard to fully enjoy the free time that I have at times. “Society gives time an enormous power over us as if we need to fear misusing it, making us put an overly high value on being productive and using our time in a way that achieves a goal”, (Merrill, 2021). This productivity guilt (which is a mindset where you feel bad as if you should be creating, working harder, doing or being more, even if you are), can be quite paralysing. Is this a normal experience or rather a byproduct of a longer history of work that has strong social and economic influences?
Other artists and animators that I found inspiration and reference from include Michelle Cheng (Lemoncholy), Olof Storm, Ian Hubert, Paola Merrill and the legendary Hayao Miyazaki of course just to name a few.

Michelle Cheng, known as Lemoncholy, is a Toronto/LA based artist and animator and a BFA2 Character Animation student at CalArts. Her work explores themes of history, literature and explorative storytelling. Her short film, Enemy (CalArts Film 2020), explored strong emotions like fear and regret and portrayed a message that could be read a few different ways. One interpretation that I came to was to not be so quick to judge, because when humans react irrationally, we can instead become the monsters. Another short film that stood out from her work is one called (DINNER) | A One Week Film. This contrastingly shows a sweet and wholesome experience of cooking with mum over the phone. Although I was initially drawn to the powerful effect of moody, dark and more melancholic themes, (this perhaps reflected personal feelings of isolation and stress over the past two years of the pandemic), I felt more compelled towards the positive and uplifting concepts like those explored in the DINNER film. This is because the emotional impact of any content that we absorb can linger with us throughout the day, and something positive is always better for mental wellbeing.

Olof Storm is an artist and filmmaker who posts videos about animation and digital art on youtube. He shares some of his process of exploring different 2d and 3d techniques while working on his animated short film on youtube and more in depth on patreon. His content has been a great source of learning, visual reference and inspiration for this project as well as collaboration.
Ian Hubert creates stunning 3D sci-fi animations and visuals using Blender, which often have post-apocalyptic and humorous themes. Although I chose not to pursue 3D animation for this project, the style of his work and passion for what he does is still inspirational and offered some visual reference for early conception.

Paola Merrill’s YouTube channel “The Cottage Fairy”, was also a calming, positive source of content that I didn’t know I needed. When starting this project, I considered the social, economic, environmental and political issues of today and I found myself increasingly wanting to disconnect and not focus on the overwhelming amount of problems in the world. Although there are many pressing issues that need addressing in society, I also have to take into account the capacity of change in which I am capable of achieving in my work. The calming and positive effect of slow living, specifically disconnecting/consuming less digitally, and prioritising slowness in everyday life was a sustainable action that benefited my design process and relationship to work. It influenced my way of working and aimed to prevent toxic productivity and risks of burnout.

A YouTube creator known as KindaNeet looked into Hayao Miyazaki’s creative process by watching all of his documentaries from The Kingdom of Dreams and Madness to Never-Ending Man: Hayao Miyazaki, to, 10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki. In this short collection of notable clips from those documentaries, one quote from Miyazaki stood out to me, “easy to understand movies are boring and logical storylines sacrifice creativity, kids get it, they don’t operate on logic” (Kinda Neet, 2020). This influenced how I approached storytelling in the film, to critique hustle culture and what it means to be productive in a subtle enough way that allows for open interpretation and further conversation. Hayao Miyazaki’s unique process of filmmaking is something I admire and his way of thinking/approaching topics is something I try to achieve in my own filmmaking process. Further reflection can be found in the “Design Process”. Contrastingly, Miyazaki’s work ethic also represents a wider socially accepted mentality of work culture and leaves much to be said about deeper social and economic roles in history. Further elaboration can be found in the “Theoretical Framework”.

By contextualising and positioning my project in relation to other creatives, I was able to conclude that hand drawn animation methods along with more positive themes is something that I want to adapt more into my work, relating to issues of hustle culture.
Theoretical Framework

What is toxic productivity and how does it affect us? Brittany Wong, a senior reporter at HuffPost states that toxic productivity is basically the unhealthy desire to be productive at all times, even when it detrmines our mental and physical health, the need to go the “extra mile” even when nobody expects you to (Wong, B. 2021). There is a specific language that exists online too, on social media platforms like Twitter for example (see figure 3, twitter post), that enforces a sense of pressure that if you aren’t doing these three things under quarantine then you simply lacked discipline. This is almost derogatory and very untrue. This kind of thing is sadly not uncommon as entrepreneurial communities, companies and individuals of high societal status encourage this ideology that you must work hard and hustle in order to become successful. This contributes to creating a feeling that you are worthless if they are not working 24/7.

Erika Ferszt, founder of Moodaly, dives a lot deeper into what toxic productivity is on a more scientific and psychological level. “It is a phenomenon that emerged as a result of the unique dynamics happening during the pandemic” (E. K. Ferszt, 2021). She mentions how productivity is used as a sort of emotional response to keep unwanted moods, thoughts or emotions at bay, so being productive is like a coping mechanism to deal with the discomfort that arises in stillness or silence, which is similar to how one may smoke to relieve stress or drink when they’ve had a bad day.

“Toxic productivity has an element of control about it. With a cognitive thought equation that works out to “if I do more and if I achieve more then I’ll be safe” or “they’ will love me”. (E. K. Ferszt, 2021).

There were a few conclusions that we made as to what kind of people are most likely to be affected by this mindset, including children that were raised to believe that they had to be special, unique and better than other people, or those who have had difficult childhoods, whose daily life was unpredictable or had huge expectations and responsibility placed on them. “It’s people who equate doing more with surviving better to the point that relaxation, and not being productive, almost feels risky or dangerous. It feels like failing.” – (E. K. Ferszt, 2021).

This information turned a few cognitive wheels and made me question what my personal tendencies towards productivity are and if I use it as a coping mechanism or emotional response in some way. This psychological perspective gave insight for me on a personal level, about why the intrusive/toxic feelings related to productivity exist, and how it may emerge in daily life, student and even work life.
Slow living is a concept, mentality, a lifestyle that is essentially about creating opportunities in life to disconnect and slow down. It can be an act of resistance against the fast-paced attitude or lifestyle that society pushes many of us to have or it can be considered as just another one of those ‘healthy living’ or ‘self-help’ inspired practices that influencers and even entrepreneurs try to sell you. Unfortunately, many healthy concepts do fall into consumer culture where the bait for example can look like, “buy/do this and your life will be better”. Not everyone is going to benefit from the motivational messages or tips that ‘experts’ or gurus’ determine will lead to happiness and success. It can lead to more harm than good when we don’t achieve these unrealistic goals. It is important to self-assess and not just look to articles or videos that promote these ‘quick fixes’.

Many people in today’s society are more and more trying to integrate principles of slow living into their day to day. The pandemic is also a global stressor that prompted many to want to slow down and reassess how their time was spent. Royo Zeitoune, the Head of the Culture and Trends team at Google and Nicolas Szmidt, the International Trends Research Lead at YouTube, have analysed this further in an article called ‘Slow living: The new fast-rising consumer trend. Their team uncovered a growing trend on YouTube of viewing habits having a 4x increase between 2019 and 2020 for videos about slow living or similar themes of simple living and minimalism (R.Zeitoune and N.Szmidt, 2021).

I too fall into the demographic of people who want a slower life, one that has a much healthier relationship with time. I was initially drawn to slow living for the fact that it encouraged disconnecting, and consuming less digitally because the rate at which information is spread and absorbed is sometimes overwhelming. But it also means respecting one’s own limits and recognising when to stop and how to disconnect and slow down. Slow living in a practical sense to me is watching clouds, going outside, cooking food rather than getting takeaway, taking a break to do laundry, shower, go outside, cook, read, clean etc. It is spending time on hobbies and mundane activities that don’t relate to work. Most of all it’s not forgetting the things that make you feel good, because when we hustle and feel stressed, we tend to stop doing those things. Remembering this helped me not feel guilty about my level of productivity, which hopefully leads to having a healthier balance between work life and personal life.

When did the idea of working overwhelmingly hard become cool? Hayao Miyazaki is a great example of someone who represents hard work equating to success. His ‘working to the bone’ work ethic is sort of seen as a meme in today’s society, but at the same time it’s widely admired for the results and therefore a socially accepted mode of working, especially in the animation industry. Do I also need to work just as hard as the legend Miyazaki himself to be considered successful too? While his high level of ambition and vision speaks for itself, I think the logical answer would be no. In the field of design, speed and productivity has become a kind of brand/trend that corporations and then workers desire, because that is what is profitable. Freelancers, designers, animators, people in the creative industry are a perfect example of people who have had to adapt to hustle, be efficient and fast at what they do, because producing things fast and efficiently is what seems is required to succeed. Has it always been this way? Ruben Pater’s book, CAPS LOCK: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design, and How to Escape from It, takes a closer look at the history of work and the social and economic influences in society (2021).

Chapter two of Ruben Pater’s book, A history of work, talks about the rise of mass production and consumption and how Fordism, the ‘golden age of capitalism’, played a large role in how workplaces today are designed. This term is attributed to US industrialist Henry Ford, who closed factories on Saturday and Sundays, doubled wages so that his workers could afford the cars they were producing, allowing workers to have more leisure time to consume and also suggested that factories should pay workers by piece rather than by the hour (2021). This only rewarded the fastest
and punished the slowest. We also have an engineer, Frederick Taylor (1865–1915) to thank for inventing a 'scientific management' system that monitored every activity to see how it could be done faster. As digital technologies developed, employee monitoring softwares were able to calculate and optimise tasks for maximum productivity and profit (2021).

Although this period of capitalism lasted until the 1970s, it’s fascinating to see how little has changed when looking at how modern day work environments function. Ruben Pater writes about a journalist Emily Guendelsberger who shares her experience working in Amazon and Mcdonalds. She explained that each task was optimised by the second and taking longer would generate warnings from which she would expect to be yelled at by the manager (2021). Employee monitoring techniques like this are uncomfortably familiar when I look back to my experience working in fast food too in 2016. "Amazon uses clocks and metrics to constrain the inefficiencies of human workers so they act more like robots." (Pater, 2021).

“One characteristic of the Post–Fordist work ethic is that it demands all workers to be creative and flexible beyond their formal work requirements.” (2021. p.250). It is perhaps not too far a stretch then to weave education systems into this conversation by saying that hustle culture is encouraged, rewarded and enforced not only in workplaces but also schools. This becomes clear when we simply think about the concept of homework and how it conditions us from a young age to be comfortable with the idea of working overtime and hustling.

In this second chapter, A history of work, Ruben Pater also mentions how Christianity hugely shaped society’s view of work. “Religious doctrine held that work was a blessing, and repetitive or heavy labour—like that of monks who meticulously copied manuscripts—was seen as a service to God.” (2021, p.244). This was called ‘the protestant work ethic’ which basically meant that you work hard not only because it’s an economic necessity but also because it is the highest duty in society, a moral practice/obligation to God (2021).

These factors all contribute to stigmatising the conversation surrounding hustle culture too. This stigma refers to the “must hustle to achieve success” mindset (capitalistic work ethic) and if you don’t participate, then you are not working hard enough and get labeled as lazy. Fear of being seen as anything less than hardworking jeopardises our chances of success/survival in this capitalistic world that values speed. It makes us not want to acknowledge that hustling is a problem or that we are affected by it. In reality, hustling and working exceedingly hard to the detriment of one’s mental and physical health is not normal. It is rather unnatural and unsustainable on a societal level.

This project acknowledges the absurdity of work culture and aims to open the public’s mind, destigmatizes opting out of hustle culture and inspire them to see possible alternatives to the mainstream work ethos. My design process also shows how I actively chose to opt out of hustling to achieve a goal, to create change in my own work (see design process). Aside from the scientific and psychological research done into toxic productivity, looking at how work culture has evolved (and not really evolved) throughout history helps to understand the topic further. Productivity has a considerable role in society in terms of economic benefit but the questionable social sustainability of it points out a serious need to slow down. Can incorporating concepts of slow living more into not only everyday life but in work, help shift the attitudes and culture surrounding work, productivity and success? The world values speed and efficiency but how far is this mentality going to take us in terms of creating sustainable futures?
METHOD / METHODOLOGY

My process involved quite a lot of positioning, to figure out what kind of message and visuals I wanted to visually communicate. There were a lot of things that I knew I didn’t want to do and finding out what I actually was motivated to do was a challenge. I initially didn’t feel motivated to convey negative, doom and gloom end/future scenarios, because there is enough negative things to absorb from the world around us already.

I used illustration as a method to map out different moods and possible concepts. (See Figure 7 for early storyboarding/mappings).

The story I came to develop for the short film evolved with the idea of this constant pursuit, hustling/being productive which emphasises the need to slow down and disconnect. Figure 8 and 9 show this idealistic positive and calming mood.
It is a bit ironic since I initially wanted to address the topic with more positive and uplifting themes in the story, to contrast the negative impacts of hustle culture, but then ended up relating to some negative aspects anyway. That is perhaps still a good way to ensure that this project does not by mistake come across as a feel good quick fix. Incorporating negative aspects of hustle culture into the film can more easily get people to start reflecting on the project’s research questioning, “What does it mean to be productive?”. The film’s decided script/pitch, further design decisions and visual development can be found in the “Design process”.

I pitched the animation concept to a few of my class peers and they responded with their thoughts. One interpretation stood out, “you cannot find happiness in the place where you lost it”, and also contrastingly another person added to this with “maybe you need to revisit all the places you lost happiness in order to move on”. It was interesting to see what conversations came up after seeing the film’s concept so far. Both interpretations can be considered correct, because the goal of my animation is not to just create an obvious true or false message, but rather to open the public’s mind and spark conversation around the topic.

Throughout this project, I chose to collaborate with a wide range of people rather than one specific person, group or organisation. Toxic productivity is something that everyone experiences to varying degrees and therefore relevant for me to explore different perspectives, not only those of animators.

I met with the Accountability Discord Community to ask them some questions about toxic productivity, from which we discussed how they experience it in personal life and in work life. We talked about a constant toxic productivity that exists in life where you can’t allow yourself to, for example, play video games because it feels like a waste of time. There is also a stigma attached to video games, that if you play all the time then you are lazy or ambitionless. This provided some valuable insight into other people’s relationship with productivity. This meeting felt a bit awkward too since I only had one question and didn’t know what to follow up this initial inquiry with. Their experiences contributed to my project offering confirmation and proof of existence that hustle culture is a valid problem at least.

I reached out to an animator community on discord called Animators Guild, hosted by Howard Wimshurst who is an award winning filmmaker and artist who specialises in 2d drawn animation. I received no response from this community. I believed that this was because either I did not formulate my message well enough or the people who mostly communicate in the channel were not interested. The kind of communication that I found in this discord community mostly revolved around games, memes and other indecipherable lingo which indicated to me that they were perhaps younger audiences. For me to ask about hustle culture in this community felt very out of place, so no further communication happened.

The second discord community that I reached out to was Olof Storm’s. His workflow and quality of work is a huge inspiration. I decided to become a patreon member, not only to support one of my favourite creators but to learn more from him and have access to more in-depth tutorial content and resources that could be useful in my own short film production. The most important resource was the patron discord server where I would be able to connect with other more serious members of the animation community and Olof Storm himself. My approach for collaboration this time was to instead get more objective feedback since I didn’t have a clear idea of what my project needed from people. I introduced myself and the other members including Olof Storm himself welcomed me and were very excited and interested to see my short film progress. So I sent some background art to see what their impressions were and also what advice they had for improvement. The feedback mostly consisted of visual adjustments like contrast, lighting, highlights etc. The topic/themes of hustle and chaos was also noted to be well visually communicated in the scenes.
I hosted a 20 minute workshop with my peers, VCC (Visual Communication + Change) third year students, to loosely test this concept of slow living with others. The objective was to paint clouds as a form of disrupting toxic productivity/hustle culture. My goal for the workshop was to create an open dialogue about the impact/effects of toxic productivity & hustle culture, while allowing participants to disconnect from it, disrupt it by taking a moment to do a fun/calming activity together. My peers (students) are a very relevant target group to collaborate with in my project since they are experts on the topic themselves. They experience hustle culture and the effects of toxic productivity first hand, especially during the final weeks leading up to exams. With this in mind, I designed the workshop to be a casual, calming environment by setting up background ambiance of nature hiking videos and providing snacks, paint and paper to occupy our hands and minds.

This exercise didn’t go exactly as I thought it would. While the intention was to create an opportunity for people to disconnect from the stress of their work, the questions I prepared were a bit too counterintuitive. They were too heavy in contrast to the calming activity we were supposed to be doing. Perhaps the questions should have been angled more towards slow living and what the participants do to disconnect etc, rather than focusing on a stressful topic. The workshop could have included more classes, but due to limited resources only my direct peers was invited.

I was not able to analyse much from this exercise as the discussion also became very sidetracked and I wasn’t sure exactly what I wanted from the exchange. Overall this workshop was an important part of my method as it challenged me to reframe what I really want/need from my collaborators and what is feasible to arrange for future collaborative exercises.

The target audience I hope to reach are people who are experiencing or are vulnerable to hustle culture. This could include those working within creative or non creative fields, students or everyday people struggling with societal demands of speed and efficiency. The process that is project documents can also be used as a conversation starter, at schools, seminars, online in different communities, even in spaces designed for creatives to be productive as it could critique and challenge their sense of productivity and what it means. I intend to create an online space for the film to exist, or use an appropriate existing space like social media so that its progress can be followed until it is complete. I would like for the animation, when it is complete, to be shown at a film festival to further reach people relevant to the topic. The finished film has the potential to be used as a discussion point from which a more sustainable work methods could be formed, at schools, seminars, online in different communities, even in spaces designed for creatives etc. It could perhaps even be seen in counselling offices as it relates to themes of mental health. The film’s broad connections to mental health and issues of work culture makes it versatile for use in multiple scenarios.
DESIGN PROCESS

To create an animated short film, I tried to establish a production pipeline based on what the industry standard is. This included pre-production, production and post-production. Pre-production involves storyboarding, scripting, visual development of environments and characters, and an animatic. Production includes layout and animation. Post-production involves compositing in After Effects, sound design, and overall editing. For this project to also critique hustle culture, I decided that using hand drawn techniques can be considered a practice of slow living too, therefore critiquing hustle culture. This makes another statement, considering how big corporations like Disney, Pixar and other commercial production outlets are more and more opting for 3D methods as a fast and cost efficient option. So taking the time and care with how the scenes are crafted contributes to this critique.

Watching a lot of short films on YouTube and seeing how other creatives like Olof Storm and Michelle Cheng have used storytelling and different animation techniques gave me a lot of reference and inspiration. The first storyboard I created was loosely inspired by a Gobelins student film that I saw on YouTube, called One day – Animation Short Film 2012 – GOBELINS. I interpreted the message of this film being a classic, ‘home is where the heart is’. The aspect of the house moving in this short film captivated me the most and was something I wanted to adapt into my work now working with themes of hustle culture. The house in my concept would instead symbol a sense of restlessness in the character’s search.

Figure 11: Image of first complete storyboard, made by me.
The Pitch:

A person lives in a house that is always moving, they are constantly searching for something. This endless pursuit takes its toll on the inhabitant. Tension builds, turning the pursuit sour and their sense of productivity into a toxic work ethos, until an unexpected call eases the stress.

We as the viewer do not get to know what they are searching for, this makes the story more mysterious and interesting as viewers can interpret whatever they think is relevant to them regarding what the character is pursuing. The unexpected call will be the voice of a mother, calming and always there for you in times of crisis. This voice on the phone disrupts the character's buildup of negative emotions, which could be interpreted as a burnout/meltdown or what results from unsustainable work ethics. The house is a symbolic piece of the film too, representing many things: how we have had to adapt to work from home in pandemic times or how we can sometimes be closed off from those around us, shut in and isolated, tunnel visioned when pursuing something, unable to disconnect from work or societal pressure etc.

My first storyboard was quite ambitious and there were perhaps too many scenes to realistically complete in the time frame of 10 weeks. I kept getting stuck in the production process for the backgrounds, unhappy with how they looked and becoming increasingly stressed about the time constraints.
After simplifying the storyboard and identifying what scenes were necessary to get the story across, the workflow became faster and I experienced less hesitation and stress when painting the scenes. At least so far. (see figure 13). A lot of design decisions were made to simplify the film’s production. Effects like lightning and certain character scenes were removed as they weren’t completely necessary to tell the story. If I had time I would go back and add those details later. In my initial vision, there would be a lot more scenes where I could develop and explore more of the character’s daily activities, expressions, interactions, how they spent their day, maybe even develop more visual effects for the house that represent the themes of speed and restlessness etc. Character animation is completely new to me too so that will take time to learn. Designing the interior of the house was also a big challenge which I was hesitant to include. I decided to remove these scenes from the storyboard since I realised that they would require a lot more time than I had to execute how I wanted.

To make the film more concise, I chose to focus more on close up scenes like the pin-board, the messy floor and the coffee cup because they best represent the key moments of what it means to hustle. It lets the viewer into the world or mind of the character and this needed to be communicated clearly.
Figure 16: Messy floor scene, made by me.

Figure 17: Coffee cup scene, made by me.
Aside from storyboard changes, I worked on refining the opening scene so that it communicated the story more clearly as some feedback I received was confusion about the house and character connection. The rocky landscape of the first scene initially panned down to the character, who's sitting on the rocks, looking down the valley to where the house sits, as indicated in figure 18. This was changed to instead follow a bird flying towards the house from the rocks, camera following and then showing the character entering the house. This storyboard change happened because I realised that proximity matters, it has to be clear that the house is the character’s house and not just a random house. Also depending on the species of bird, it could further add meaning into the scene ie. a raven would symbolise transformation/change or ill omen.

The environments were painted with soft colors to contrast the stress and frustration that will build up later in the film. It is a strategic visual aesthetic meant to handle the topic and the viewer with care. The character’s meltdown will be the only scene where bold and chromatic colours are necessary to drive the story.

It is also important to note that there is a delicate balance between the film’s focus being on the character’s experience or it being about the house and why it moves. The nature of the house and how it moves is connected to the character. The house and the character are more like a unit, rather than separate entities. It's like a joke, if you have to explain it then it's not funny. This detail about why the house moves does not need to be explained in order to understand the story. Also, just as Miyazaki argues, we don’t need to know why all the time.

Unfortunately, even after simplifying the storyboard I still felt unsure about the workload and if I was able to complete a short film like this under the time limit. I also felt a lot of pressure, a persistent need to hustle to show something, at feedback sessions with teachers and peers. This bred a lot of struggles and self critical feelings towards my own sense of productivity and success. My toxic productivity mindset of, “I should have something complete by now” forced me to stray from the animation pipeline structure I initially made, rush and throw something together in order to “show” something. This is ironic since I was just embodying the issue in which I was addressing in my project.

*Internal screaming*. 
I eventually talked with one of my peers about my confusion and uncertainty with what the final result would be. I was stuck under the mindset that a finished film is a finished project, that my project is not successful if the film is not finished. And if it isn’t finished, I will be a failure and I haven’t worked hard enough. I then began to ask myself, how do I proceed if my final project is not a finished film? What is my project’s goal then? How will my project look? They suggested that it means embracing the other parts of this school project, making the project more about the exploration of the topic, toxic productivity, rather than the project being the film alone. From this conversation, they helped me see what my project could be, and that an unfinished film is still okay and it doesn’t mean my project is unfinished.

This conversation helped me separate my goals in terms of what is an academic requirement and what is not. The first is the film's goal (which is long term and will continue beyond school). The second goal is a 'school project' goal where I should focus on my exploration and documentation of the topic of hustle culture. The first goal aims to establish the foundations for the short film in terms of concept, collaboration and theoretical research to back it up. This separation of goals was an important design decision. Aiming to not finish this animated short film is choosing to go against the issue that this project deals with and is a radical decision. It is an act of disrupting the toxic productivity and hustle culture. It leads to a more sustainable outlook on work.

To summarise my design process, there were many significant alterations to the project and challenges that I faced in the process. The decision to aim for an unfinished film (letting the production be as long as needed) is not only because I didn’t have enough time, granted, I am an independent creator and have no real experience completing a short film before, but it was also a statement against hustle culture. I would feel very unsatisfied with my work if I simply rushed the production for the sake of having a finished film for this final school project, which also isn’t a completely necessary criteria to fill. So identifying separate goals for my work also allows me to use this animation as a learning tool in the long run, to further master my craft as an animator. It was an important revelation to recognise how the documentation of my exploration and process could still create change.

There is more that I could have done to further explore the concept of slow living in relation to disrupting hustle culture. I could have created stronger collaborations if I knew what I wanted from them. But to force myself to do more for the sake of achieving more would in a way go against the very point of this project – to disrupt hustle culture.
I approached contextualisation for this project using both online and in-person methods. The process that this project documents, provided me with a deeper understanding and perspective of the topic and also material for which I could use to further contextualise my work in society.

A slow living inspired workshop with my peers was my first attempt at putting what I learned into context with others. I learned that the goal of the workshop (to disconnect from the hustle culture) contradicted the goal of the project (to open a discussion about the hustle). This provided important insight into the scope of which hustle culture affects us, and how approaching the issue with a solution based mindset, like perhaps this attempt was, isn’t something that works very well, in terms of “disrupting hustle culture”. This says a lot about the issue itself, being more nuanced and complex than any one solution could address.

To further contextualise my work in relation to one of the project’s goals - opening conversations, and also learn more about hustle culture in hopes of better navigating the issue in my own practice and work life, I initiated an open discussion within creative Discord communities. I chose a large creative discord community Ben Marriott’s Motion Design Community since it would have a wide reach. I opened this discussion by explaining how designers, animators, people in the creative industry are a perfect example of people who have had to adapt to hustle, be efficient and fast at what they do because that is what society demands, and it’s what many of us seem to think is expected of us too. I gave examples of my experience struggling in my own animation practice and in previous work environments, about working overtime when I wasn’t asked to, feeling like I need to be productive all the time to be considered “good” enough, equating self worth and success with how productive I am and thinking that if I am faster/more efficient, then I will “make it”, aka, be successful. I wanted to know if anyone from this community of 4065 members do anything in particular to avoid this, how they deal/cope with this toxic productivity and if it’s something they notice or just pass off as normal. I also asked what needs to change individually? Or on a societal level?

I was able to have two very insightful voice chats, one with Juan Pablo Francés, a freelance Motion Graphic Designer, known as Still Remain. Many relatable experiences were shared. I wasn’t really able to follow the initial questions I had written, or direct the conversation in an investigative manner as this is something I am not so comfortable or used to doing, so I just let the conversation happen. It was a very uplifting and encouraging conversation.

“There have to be honest with ourselves, with how much time and energy we are able to invest into something.” - Juan, Still Remain.

This sentiment stood out when talking about negotiating rates for client work. When you become overworked or burned out, you start to stop doing things for fun and when you don’t particularly enjoy what you are doing anymore, what do you do? The solution for him was to raise his rates, not unreasonably, just to charge higher. I thought this sounded empowering as I know that the topic of “how much do I charge for my work?” is often a difficult thing to determine and many creatives charge too low for their work. But Juan’s reason was to charge higher for the work he didn’t enjoy, so that the money was at least motivating. He pointed out that it should be the other way around, the work you enjoy should also be charged higher rates too, not just for the ones you don’t like. This makes sense since it’s also a reflection of your worth.
The second conversation on discord was with Ash Beezmohun, known as Beezmo. He is a Social Creative Lead based in London, UK and was able to give me insight on this topic from a full time perspective. We talked about the rate of information and media being spread and absorbed, the increasing demand in the industry for fast and efficient content and how our attention span is diminishing over time as a result.

I mentioned how work environments encourage a capitalist work ethic because it pays to reward the fastest and punish the slowest. Our conversation raised many questions: Do we set the standard and expectation for how fast things should be done? Or is it something out of our control rather and we are just conforming?

We concluded that maybe it’s both. This kind of individual hustle culture can be created and perpetuated by us and also within workplaces. “London is one of the biggest culprits of hustle culture” – Beezmo. We figured that this is perhaps because there is a higher competition and lower demand so everyone must strive to be the best in order to get paid and survive. And so the “best” aka the fastest sets the standard, and the rest must grind as if it’s now expected of us to meet the same standard. We also talked about humanity’s diminishing attention span over time and how it’s connected to the increasing speed at which media and information is designed, spread and absorbed in todays society. Many connections and origins could be drawn as to why, but the question remains, what can we do about it now? Questions of, where do we draw the line? were brough up too.

“Is it something that is just evolving with us?”, “Can we change this or are we doomed to evolve faster and faster?” – Beezmo.

I wish I had all the answers and solutions, but my work is an explorative research project, rather than a solution generating one. The contextualisation of this project solidified my view of hustle culture as having no one size fits all solution. Change occurs slowly, in this context, it’s not something that can be found through heavily marketed lifestyle tips or extreme entrepreneurial advice that is promised to help you succeed or be happy. Even if this issue is something that we individually create and perpetuate, an external or internal form of pressure or if it’s something that’s evolved to exist in society as a result of industrialisation, capitalism, and digitisation, we can still create change by addressing it within ourselves first, setting new boundaries and simply talking about it.
CONCLUSION / FURTHER REFLECTIONS

What does it mean to be productive?
Society's definition of what it means to be productive, referring to the socially accepted notion that you need to hustle in order to succeed, points to a serious need for change. Faster does not always mean sustainable. This project acknowledges the absurdity of work culture and challenges one to reframe and rethink what it means to be productive.

Work–life balance and having a sustainable relationship with time, success and productivity is a challenge for anyone, especially during periods of high levels of crisis like a pandemic. I started this project exploring visually before any research or focus on any one issue, this approach was inspired by Hayao Miyazaki’s methods of film conception. I found that I ended up addressing the topic not only through visual communication but through the process too – one radical design decision reflecting this was aiming for an unfinished film. In this context of disrupting hustle culture and creating change, I let the visual’s influence my research and the experience of hustle culture guide my process. This led to the important decision to embrace my process, as successfully unsuccessful as it is, with the aim to normalise and encourage more sustainable, if not conventional, perspectives of working.

I don’t think I managed to adopt a perfect sustainable, slow living method to my practice yet, but whether or not I succeeded, I was still able to use what I learned and have constructive conversations with society (different creative communities and individuals) to spread awareness and destigmatize the conversation. This project gave me valuable insight and feedback that I can use to better communicate the themes of hustle culture and toxic productivity in the future. I intend to continue using the connections I have made to support and influence the production of my animated short film – Pursuit.

This project serves a purpose in the larger context of change by offering a starting point for people to reflect, question and talk about reshaping what it means to be productive.

The work in progress, animated short film – Pursuit, can be found at: https://designportfolio.lnu.se/studentwork/disrupting-hustle-culture/
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IMAGE REFERENCES

All figures indicated with ‘made by me’, have been digitally painted by me using Procreate.

Figure 1: Image capture of Michelle Cheng’s film “Dinner”. Sourced from her website. Online available at: https://www.lemoncholy.net/work/chotto-motto-xrcbl. [Accessed 25 March 2022]

Figure 2: Image capture of Michelle Cheng’s film “Enemy”. Sourced from her website. Online available at: https://www.lemoncholy.net/work/chotto-motto-xrcbl. [Accessed 25 March 2022]

Figure 3: Image capture of Olof Storm’s Youtube channel. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/c/OlofStorm/videos. [Accessed 25 March 2022]
Figure 4: Image capture of Ian Hubert’s Instagram. Online available at: https://www.instagram.com/ianhubertz/. [Accessed 25 March 2022]

Figure 5: Image capture of Paola Merrill’s YouTube channel. Online available at: https://www.youtube.com/c/TheCottageFairy. [Accessed 25 March 2022]

Figure 6: Image capture of a twitter post, sourced from Britany Wong’s Huffpost article. Online available at: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/toxic-productivity-work_l_606655e7c5b6aa24bc60a566 [Accessed 24 February 2022]

Figure 7 to 9: made by me.

Figure 10: Photos taken By Allis Ohlsson from my Peer Workshop on 13 March 2022.

Figure 11 to 18: made by me.

Cover image and closing/last footer images (below) are also made by me.