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THOSE LED-LIT WATER-KOOLED MULTI-SCREEN STREAMLINE BATTLESTATIONS

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Abstract

Battlestations are customized desktop computers, typically devoted to gaming. In this paper we present analysis of the all-time top 50 up-voted battlestations on the /r/battlestations subreddit. Through an examination of these highly commended battlestations and the community criteria defining a “good” battlestation we provide insights into the material culture of computer customization and its significance within an internet gaming sub-culture.

Introduction

In his 1963 essay for *Esquire* magazine, *There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm)*..., Tom Wolfe (1968) argued that custom cars were, in effect, sculpture (p.83). They were the crystallization of an anti-authoritarian new youth-culture that emerged as a result of (and in tandem with) the introduction and subsequent transformation of American society underpinned by the automobile, and America’s unparalleled economic growth. Like religious architecture and other encumbered art forms that materialize particular cultural values and beliefs, custom cars were monuments built to celebrate the values of this youth-culture, its “devotion to form”

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(p.79) and the automobiles central transformative role in the creation and liberation of the American “lower” class.

In this paper we present an initial analysis of customized gaming computers, drawing on posts shared on the “/r/battlestations” reddit sub-forum. Like custom cars, we suggest these battlestations can be understood as “art objects”; creative devotions to the technological materialities that enable and express contemporary gaming cultures. Battlestations are, we contend, monuments built and displayed to celebrate the personal computer’s central transformative role in the creation and liberation of internet gamer cultures. This work is situated within broader studies of gaming within domestic media ecologies (e.g. Carter et al. 2014; Enevold 2014; Giddings, 2007), which have looked at the use of technology in the domestic environment, and how its context within the home influences its use and experience. Our analysis adds to the studies of physical computer configurations and layouts in domestic environments (e.g. Quandt and Pape, 2010) and in social LAN contexts (Simon, 2007) by highlighting the forms of cultural and social capital valued in these monuments to gamer culture by highlighting the hedonistic (Maines, 2009) impulses displayed in their material forms, display, and maintenance.

Methods

We downloaded and saved all materials associated with the all-time top 50 up-voted posts on the battlestations subreddit, “/r/battlestations”. We chose to examine the most up-voted battlestations because these examples by-and-large represented the most critically acclaimed battlestations within this community forum, and thus exhibit qualities characterizing a “good” battlestation, rather than the breadth of this cultural form.

To analyze this material we conducted an iterative open coding of each battlestation submission. Once we had collected and collated all of the themes, we analyzed the relationships amongst these codes, and then returned through each submission re-identifying themes that emerged later in the analysis. In our analysis we examined what people built and chose to display in their postings and what features commenters chose to celebrate or denigrate in order to understand the values, attitudes and tastes of this community and how they are materially enshrined.

Battlestations

r/Battlestations is the place to post and look at clear photographs of desktop battlestation setups. Battlestations are ‘A desktop computer setup including the tower, monitor, mouse, keyboard, mouse pad (if applicable), audio playback and recording devices (if applicable), and even wires/cables if desired.’ (Reddit)

As is to be expected, computer hardware features prominently in battlestation images. Up-voted battlestations are typically high performance gaming machines. They feature enormous display real estate, often involving the integration of three or more screens. Most run multiple graphics cards, top-end, over-clocked CPUs, and were water-cooled. While expensive, high-performance components are typically featured and celebrated,

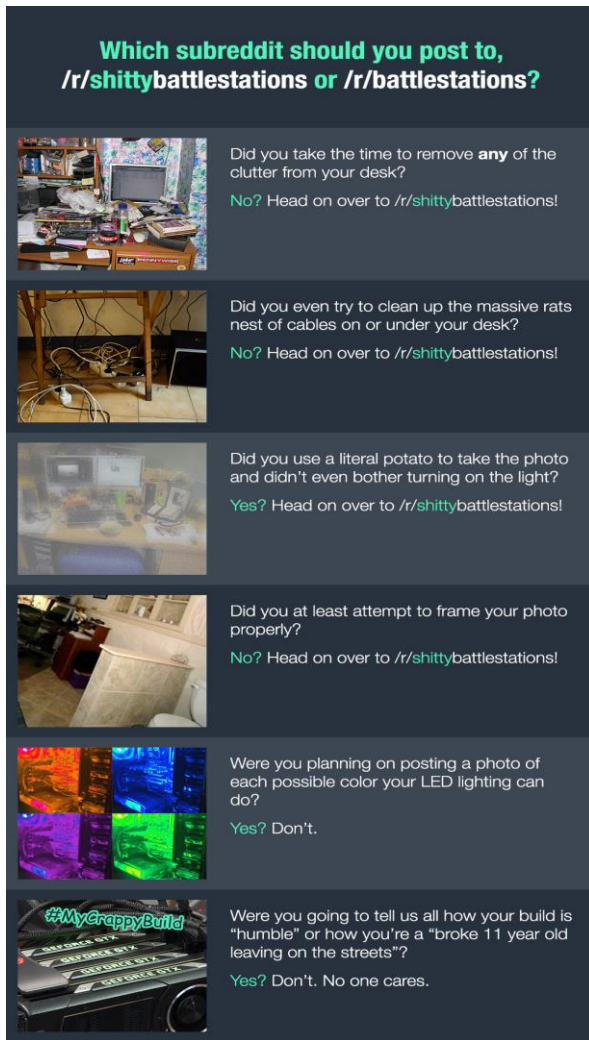


Figure 1 [Meta] At least fucking try people.
Source: <http://i.imgur.com/X4oPdlk.jpg>



Figure 2, My first triple screen battlestation
Source: <http://imgur.com/a/HIWiN>



Figure 3, I present you my watercooled wall mounted rig
Source: <http://imgur.com/a/x75U2#0>

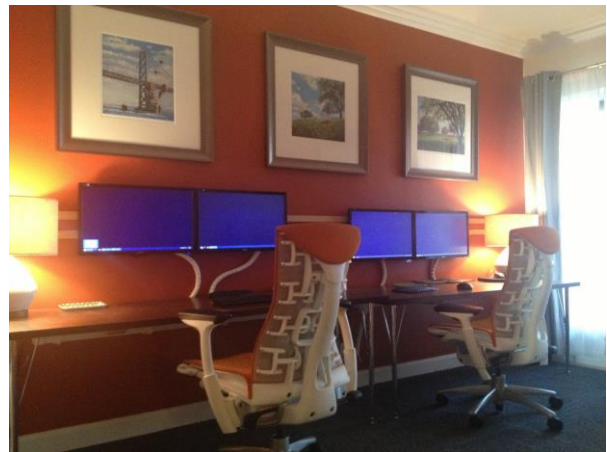


Figure 4, More Deathstar than Battlestation
Source: <http://imgur.com/a/dqShV>



Figure 5, My Battlestation Room
Source: <http://imgur.com/a/zoGUL>

cultural capital is demonstrated through customization, technical prowess, and carefully chosen monetary investments.

The presentation of the interior of the battlestation is important, often through windows in the chassis, or tower, with color-coordinated LED lighting, cabling, water cooling systems, and the like. Cable runs are neat as well as fitting the battlestation color scheme (see Figure 2). As Simons (2007) has argued for “case modders” at LAN parties, the interior “material guts of their computers” (p.175) are a spectacular materialization of a masculine subculture that values “the visual aesthetics of machines combined with demonstrations of functional performance.” (p.190) This displaying of interiority and technical mastery is taken to an extreme with some battlestations that subvert the typical form of a desktop computer and eschew the traditional computer case/tower altogether. Like the custom car, these computers are turned inside out, with all components on display and presented explicitly as sculptural art objects (see figure 3).

Although the definition of a battlestation (above) refers to the computer itself, in emic usage, “battlestation” refers to the desk, chair and surrounding environment as well. Furniture choices are central to the design aesthetic of battlestations. Celebrated chairs are sleek, highly adjustable, and very, very expensive (see figure 4). The functional value (comfort) provided by the chair justifies the high cost while the functional and aesthetic value of desk is achieved economically. The room is also an important feature; with whole rooms, even whole houses or apartments, devoted to gaming (see figure 5). The “man cave” is a recurring motif (see figure 5).

Discussion and Conclusion

The material practices and culture of battlestations – devotion to form, excessive while still utilitarian – stands in stark contrast to prior studies of the personal computer in domestic environments. Quandt & Pape (2010) have argued that computers are typically situated in a peripheral or “sloppy” location, vis-à-vis televisions, which have often been noted for occupying a prominent shrine-like position in the home (e.g. Tichi, 1992). However, this configuration is inverted when we examine battlestations. Rather, than being sloppy, battlestations are valorized for being tidy. This includes careful management of cables, maintaining streamlined and artfully configured screen real estate, orderly and clean desk spaces and so forth. Indeed, a recent and highly uprated meme/post to battlestations succinctly highlights the value placed on tidiness and presentation (see figure 1).

Similarly, the placement of the computer is important in terms of how it is displayed, situated and cared for within the domestic environment. Indeed, while battlestations are shrines to gaming, they reconfigure media consumption practices in ways that no longer neatly distinguish televisions and computers. We see “television” content consumed on battlestations, while notional “television” spaces are devoted to console gaming. The battlestations rigs are hybrid configurations of technophilia and domesticity, gendered in multiple ways through assemblage, computing power, cleanliness, and familial location. While universally absent of people, the traces of use point to diverse gaming activity,

from solo and locked away to centrally located and shared as in the 'his' and 'hers' rig (figure 4).

Importantly, battlestations are not just sites of media consumption, but expressions of a culture of creative and vernacular production. Maines (2009) suggests "any technology that privileges the pleasures of production over the value and/or significance of the product can be a hedonizing technology." (Maines, 2009, p.3) Pleasure is found in the process of production, often with blatant disregard for efficacy or efficiency. The content of /r/battlestations reflect the hedonistic pleasure derived from assembling and displaying these baroque computers/sculptures. Like custom cars, the long hours of labor involved in constructing a battlestation serve to demonstrate technical prowess and cultural capital within a masculine subculture that finds pleasure in intimate and performative technology relations.

Battlestations are, we contend, monuments built and displayed to celebrate the personal computer's central transformative role in the creation and liberation of gamer and internet cultures, finding important expression through internet forums such as the battlestations subreddit.

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