

Building the Ultimate Battlestation: Producing and Consuming Gaming Setup Videos on YouTube

Dahlia Jovic

University of Sydney

Sydney, Australia

dahlia.jovic@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

gaming setup, battlestation, gaming hardware, content creation, YouTube

ABSTRACT

The possibility to share and learn about players' gaming (and gaming-related) practices (such as 'Let's Play' videos on *YouTube*, or streaming on *Twitch*) has been enabled, in large part, by the proliferation of digital media (e.g., Bruns 2007; Burgess 2013; Stokel-Walker 2019) and the domestication of gaming hardware (e.g., Aslinger 2013; Jörnmark, Axelsson & Ernkvist 2005; Nichols 2013). In gaming setup videos on *YouTube*, for example, gaming enthusiasts create content about their gaming hardware, peripherals, accessories, and the immediate environment/s in which their play takes place. From modest desks with a laptop tucked away in a bedroom corner, to RGB-lit caverns that resemble esports stages, the 'spectacle' of setups (Carter, Nansen & Gibbs 2014; Simon 2007; Taylor 2009) is put on display for others to see and appreciate. In these viral videos, players and gaming fans take centre stage and invite the anonymous public (Rebane 2019; Ruberg & Lark 2021) to view their otherwise private 'battlestations' (a popular, alternative term for 'gaming setup'). Producing or consuming such content seems, at first glance, likely to be a niche activity – yet these undeniably popular media items command millions of fans (Jenkins 2009), and are entangled with important concepts of gamer self-identity and self-branding (Marwick 2013; Senft 2013). Players' dedication to these videos, and the mass spectatorship they encourage, therefore calls for the same level of attention that other, more well-known gaming practices have received.

I will present the findings of a project undertaken in 2021 that looked at the production and consumption of these videos on *YouTube*. The project was guided by two central aims: to explore the performance of capital (Bourdieu 1986) through the representation of gaming setups on *YouTube*, and to investigate player attitudes towards (and tastes in) the functional and aesthetic aspects of their setups. To achieve these aims, a content analysis of the top 50 gaming setup videos and the top 10 comments for each video was conducted on *YouTube*. Content creation practices surrounding gaming hardware were apparent on various social and digital media sites (e.g., the r/battlestations *subreddit*, the killergamingsetups community on *Instagram*, and the GamingRoom Setup and Layout group on *Facebook*), yet *YouTube* was selected due to its popularity among gamers (Hjorth & Richardson 2014, 148-149), its low technical barriers to participation and creative expression (Jenkins 2009, 12), and its focus on mundane, amateur, and do-it-yourself (DIY) content (Burgess 2013, 1-2, 5). To make up for the relative lack of extant literature on gaming setups generally, and their relationship to content creation practices specifically, the project drew on interdisciplinary research in the areas of platform studies (e.g., Apperley & Parikka

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2023

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2018), computer culture (e.g., Simon 2007), domestic media ecologies (e.g., Carter et al. 2014), the player-technology relationship (e.g., Luo & Johnson 2020), and *YouTube* (e.g., Stokel-Walker 2019) to form a comprehensive account of how gaming material culture functions in online and social contexts. Pierre Bourdieu's influential theory of capital (1986) was applied as a frame to explore how the interrelated forms of capital (cultural, social, and economic) occur via the symbolic exchanges of content producers (those who make gaming setup videos) and content consumers (those who view and comment on them).

The study found that *YouTubers* made extensive use of the platform's social and technical affordances to circulate highly specific information about their gaming setups and practices. Participants – who were often well-versed in tech-speak (Luo & Johnson 2020), and who engaged in extensive identity management (Marwick 2013; Senft 2013) – emphasised both functional (use) and aesthetic (design) aspects (Gibbs, Carter & Nansen 2017) of their setups. This included product details, specifications, price, worth, comfort, ergonomics, presentation, customisation, colour coordination, and lighting (RGB and LED). Players invested significant time, energy, and wealth into their setups; in doing so, they attained (and, in many cases, already had) significant capital (Bourdieu 1986). Content producers, for example, had to be familiar with the socio-cultural norms and conventions of what being a 'gamer' means in order to make successful and informative videos (cultural capital) about the topics at hand. Content creators with higher channel views and subscriber counts were also far more likely to receive video engagements (social capital) and monetary opportunities with various videogame companies and gaming hardware brands (economic capital). Although more work is needed to discern players' motivations for creating and engaging with such content, the data captured so far gives valuable insights into players' private and intimate – yet undeniably public and spectacular – gaming materialities and practices.

BIO

Dahlia Jovic is an Honours graduate and casual academic at the University of Sydney in the Department of Media and Communications. Her Honours thesis (the foundation for this abstract) explores player attitudes towards the functional and aesthetic aspects of gaming setups on *YouTube*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Dr Mark R Johnson, Dr Benedetta Brevini, and my family for their ongoing support and feedback during the writing of my Honours thesis.

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