

The Spike Video Game Awards Are Dead, Long Live the Game Awards: Reconsidering Awards Shows as the Struggle for a Field of Cultural Production

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INTRODUCTION

As videogames have become one of the central cultural fields of the 21st century, their exclusion from legacy media-focused canons of prestige and taste continues to be a vexing issue for makers, critics and scholars. Although awards shows, in general, and game awards shows, in particular, continue to be proportionately understudied, there has been growing attention to their function and structure in recent years (Švelch, 2023; Zanesco, 2024, 2025, Forthcoming). In particular, attention has been fixed on the increasingly dominant *Game Awards* (TGAs) produced by Geoff Keighley, which broke 118 million views for 2023 (The Game Awards, 2023) and are on track to break records for this year (Ingram, 2024). TGAs have been branded as the Oscars of gaming, however that moniker is somewhat misleading as their function is not that of a guild award, like DICE (for games) or the Oscars (for film), but rather like the star-driven Golden Globes, which are a press association award (Zanesco, 2024).

There are fundamental misrepresentations in the popular press as to what the show actually is, which can be challenged by looking back to their precursor show, the *Spike Video Game Awards* (VGAs, VGX for final installment) which ran from 2003 to 2013. In part, this is because the current TGAs have been constructed by Keighley in response to the perceived failures, tone and degradation of cultural capital of games as art (NoClip, 2019). Keighley himself has been involved with videogame awards since the first televised awards show, *Cybermania '94*, providing a *longue durée* view of the whole affair tied into broader extracommercial mainstreaming processes (Nieborg & Foxman, 2023; Zanesco, 2024). In this light, the Spike VGAs present a unique experiment with the boundaries of what game awards should be, in terms of tone, structure of the awards categories, and the increasing formalization of the awards show itself. Most notably, the increasing focus on Hollywood personalities over game developers (Caldwell, 2008), aside from studio executives and a handful of recognized auteurs, like Hideo Kojima, is indicative of privileging filmic prestige in order to legitimate the game industry of the mid-2000s to early 2010s (English, 2005), and a

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general lack of acknowledgement of technical roles found in other Hollywood awards (Acland, 2022).

I argue that the VGAs are best understood, over their decade-long procession, as the regulation and subsequent regularization of a specific set of normative judgements (Bourdieu, 1977) through conquests and coronations (Dayan and Katz, 1992). In other words, whereas *Cybermania 94'* represents an early attempt at game awards production, the Spike VGAs are rather an involved conflict of values and positions between game industry practitioners, understood here in their global multiplicity (Keogh, 2023), and the Spike TV anonymous advisory board (Myers, 2024a). Further, the VGAs iteration, with respect to awards themselves, offers a unique level of specificity between consoles and between genres that would reify divisions within the field of cultural production occupied by games. Lastly, the disastrous reception of 2013's VGX show bookends the awards ceremony and its core tonal commitments, which Geoff Keighley would position TGAs against.

This presentation features a structural discussion of the awards show from a structural perspective that attends to the awards categories, recipients, interstitial segments, hosts, the presenters and onstage speakers as larger parts of the combined whole (Bogost, 2006) that sits at the juncture of at least two cultural production fields (Bourdieu, 1993). in the specific juncture of the 2000s and 2010s (Grossberg, 2019). Concretely, I present a full breakdown of the awards homogenization through all eleven shows by discussing which categories emerged and were pruned throughout the show's history. I then discuss the consistent platforming of Hollywood celebrities over game developers as a form of media ritual (Haastrup, 2016; Couldry, 2003) that draws in cultural capital from locales of perceived superior standing (Bourdieu, 1993), by considering the frequency and placement of actors and directors. Lastly, I discuss the incremental formation of a "game of the year" produced by the habitus of the show and games criticism, as the perceived "'optimal" shape of a game of the year, which still radiates outwards to other categories as an imposed center of what games should look like and how they should play, in order to achieve high levels of formal recognition or consecration (Bourdieu, 1977; Myers, 2024b; Gach, 2024). Locating the Spike VGAs in their production context as a Spike program intended for male audiences (Lotz, 2018) will allow scholars to understand the reterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of a certain kind of game, produced by a certain kind of studio, in ways that are amenable to the imperial core of media production they participate in, along with their legacy media analogues.

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