



HERALDING THE FUTURE

EXPERTS IN EMERGING MEDIA DISCUSS THE GUILD'S FOCUS ON INNOVATION AND THE PGA INNOVATION AWARD.

Producing has always been about innovation: finding, adapting to, and organizing ways and means to push media like television and film further with each generation.

In a dense and fast-paced landscape with new technological features and capabilities arriving daily, it's important to acknowledge the producers who succeed at innovation. Hence the PGA Innovation Award, which both champions producers for their work, but also exemplifies to other producers what is possible and available to them. Empowering members with opportunities to expand into new formats is a year-round commitment for the Guild. The annual Innovation Award is just one highly visible showcase of that commitment.

The Innovation Award was launched in 2019 to celebrate those who have made exceptional distinctiveness, inventiveness, and impacts in expanding the conventions of program format, content, audience interaction, production technique and delivery. The inaugural award went to the team behind *Vader Immortal: A Star Wars VR Series – Episode 1*. 2021 winner BRCvr was created for the Burning Man community to connect when the in-person event was canceled in 2020. 2022's honorees were the masterminds of the augmented reality app *For All Mankind: Time Capsule*. 2023 recipient *Stay Alive, My Son* excelled in creative storytelling.

"One of the beauties here is that truly independent creators are often up for and sometimes win this award," says Joanna Popper, an executive producer and the former chief metaverse officer at talent agency CAA.

Popper cochairs the 2024 Innovation Award jury with Chris Thomes, creative content officer for development at production company EYIdentity, and Eric Shamlin, executive vice president and global head of entertainment for the digital-first marketing and advertising company Media.Monks. The trio talked to *Produced By* about the meaning of innovation in media and how the Innovation Award has impact well beyond those who are nominated or win.

WHY DOES IT MATTER THAT THE PGA PRESENTS THIS AWARD?

Chris Thomes: With mass adoption of new technology and innovative technology and approaches, it is really important for the Guild to remain at the center of that conversation, to encourage the new frontier and ask, "What's next?"

Eric Shamlin: All three of us have worked with the TV academy. Then there's the Oscars and the Grammys and the various games guilds and organizations. What the PGA has is its cross media. The PGA's Innovation Award is where the edgier cases or the hybrid projects get to be showcased. With that, the boundaries on what can be considered innovative are thrown aside. We get to showcase things that don't really have a home anywhere else because, you know, square peg, round hole. There aren't many other high-profile awards or organizations showcasing and celebrating these kinds of projects.

WHAT QUALITIES SPEAK TO INNOVATION IN A PROJECT?

Joanna Popper: We want to keep it really open in terms of what constitutes innovation. If people feel that they're breaking new ground and charting new territories, we encourage them to jump in and submit. We're all very accessible throughout the year to have conversations, answer questions and help guide. We talk a lot about how things that were considered emerging or innovative 10 years ago may have moved more into a traditional category. So each year, new things can come into our category.

Shamlin: Innovation implies a bit of a time horizon, so you need to be vigilant about what's new and what's no longer new. Things mature, move on and become just part of the tool kit of media. That's part of the discussion we have in

the jury room: Is this still innovative or have we seen too much of this? Is this now just part of the producer's tool kit?

We generally look at overall production excellence—production value and quality—since these are largely interactive or immersive experiences. We talk about functionality and ease of use, enhancement to the audience, and the level of interactivity, immersion, or engagement that is unique or pushing some boundaries. Next, overall innovation, and that can be in a number of vectors. Is it technically innovative? Or is it more innovative on an industry scale?

There's also access. It has to be generally available. We like to shine a light on independent work or indie projects, but they still have to be made available through festivals or have an ability to tour so that a large portion of the public can see them.

THE TERM "CONTENT" IS VERY FAMILIAR TO US IN TRADITIONAL FILM AND TV FORMATS. HOW DOES IT CHANGE WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT MORE INNOVATIVE OR EXPERIENTIAL PIECES?

Popper: In some cases, what's innovative is how the creation happens. In some cases, what's innovative is how it's distributed. And in some cases, what's innovative is how the audience engages with the experience—when the role the audience plays within the story shifts. Some people call it story living instead of storytelling, because the audience lives inside that story. Again, since we have such different types of entries and such different types of projects, some of the innovation lives in those three buckets. That can shift and change the relationship of the audience to the experience.

Thomes: In this space, there's more flexibility. While a project can promote a larger intellectual property or a concept or a book, movie, or even

another video game, it has to have its own story arc or experience. It doesn't have to be scripted. It doesn't have to be nonscripted. It can be a unique format. But it has to have a beginning, middle, and end type of experience, even if it's not a traditional story arc—a feeling of completion so that when it's experienced, there's satisfaction in the viewer's eyes.

WHAT MYTHS ABOUT ACCESS NEED TO BE DISPELLED, WHETHER ONE IS EXPERIENCING OR CREATING THE EXPERIENCE? FOR EXAMPLE, THE BELIEF THAT SOMEONE CAN'T ACCESS INNOVATIVE CONTENT WITHOUT EXPENSIVE GADGETS, OR THAT IT'S TOO EXPENSIVE FOR A PRODUCER TO CREATE THIS TYPE OF EXPERIENCE.

Popper: If you look at the types of projects that have been awarded and others that have been finalists, it ranges from what we consider AAA productions with ILM and Meta and groups like that to very, very indie projects. I would even venture to say that more of the entries are on the indie side. As in other parts of independent film, there's creativity and ingenuity around how the projects are financed and how they're brought together, as well as what ends up in the storytelling.

Thomes: Access to technology comes up as well. I think next year with Apple Vision Pro, we're going to see a lot of things in that category. We saw a lot of things with Oculus. What I've seen is companies pushing their product give funding to artists, and then those artists make content. So you'll see these waves that follow product releases in the marketplace, where the funding and the marketing dollars are going. These things aren't funded traditionally. They're not deficit-financed, and they're not put out by a studio, typically.

Like Joanna's saying, it's a lot of independent things, so you're going to see a lot of experimentation. And because of that, we have to be open-minded. We can't really block things and say, 'Well, not everybody has this headset, not everybody has access to Steam or uses Steam.' As long as it's publicly available, we make sure that we are broad and include as many things as we can.

Shamlin: It's a variety of submissions from VR to location-based experiences. The innovation is broad, the backgrounds of the submitters are quite broad, and so the judging criteria are necessarily broad. I think we've done well in recruiting juries, bringing broad backgrounds and diverse POVs to allow for really ripe discussion in the jury room.

HOW DO YOU TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE VARIED BACKGROUNDS EACH JUROR BRINGS TO THE TABLE WHILE ALSO ESTABLISHING A COMMON GROUND ABOUT WHAT INNOVATION MEANS?

Popper: This year, the jury includes emerging media pioneers, Oscar-winning filmmakers, distribution executives, top festival programmers, platform execs, and emerging tech and storytelling leaders. There's a very strong global and international presence as well, a very diverse and inclusive group of people from all corners of the globe, which is really important both for making sure that we're garnering the best entries from all around the globe and from many different disciplines, groups and backgrounds.

HOW DOES AN AWARD LIKE THIS OPEN DOORS FOR SEASONED PRODUCERS WHOSE EXPERIENCE IS ROOTED IN MORE TRADITIONAL FILM AND TV? WHAT SKILL SETS ARE UNIVERSAL FOR PRODUCERS

ACROSS BOTH TRADITIONAL AND EMERGING MEDIA?

Popper: Since the innovation and technology is new, everyone is kind of new in their career in this area, even if we are seasoned producers. So I wouldn't phrase it as a contrast between people who are junior in their careers and people who are senior in their careers. I would say that because of what's happening in the emerging or innovative side, there are more opportunities to jump in and leap forward because you're more a part of the foundational building blocks of creating what this media is. It affords more opportunities for people who are learning this (field) to impact, create and build an industry.

You're not talking about a medium that's over a hundred years old where people have been deep in it for 40 years or more. When a field is fast-growing, it provides opportunities for people who jump into it to grow fast with the field and to impact the direction of the field.

Shamlin: This award has become a fairly high-profile event at the intersection of a few different industries. We've seen it creating a cohort of innovators that have started to be recognized in the community. So that's where (the award) elevates you and gives you more opportunity. It creates a lot of conversation. And now, a few years in, we're seeing those careers evolve.

For someone who works at the intersection of these mediums, it's quite rewarding and fun to see some of these people that have now built careers that are very unconventional. They aren't your standard sort of TV or film producer careers. They live at that intersection, often doing TV or film, but also more interactive methods. Some of them go into games, some of them go into emerging tech. It's been fun to see how this (award) has been a force for good for building out careers or at least showcasing careers that many people weren't even aware of just a few short years ago.

Popper: I think the PGA does a great job of highlighting people who are doing great work in this field with programming throughout the year. Over the last two years I participated on panels that focused on really amazing work. This past year was with J. Miles Dale, who's Guillermo del Toro's producing partner, talking about the work they did for the Disney Animation Immersive Experience, which is similar to the immersive Van Gogh project. It's huge-scale and broad and brought young audiences into that immersive experience. The PGA is committed to year-round programming that helps people continue to build their skill set and be aware of what work is out there they can learn from, and then think about what types of jobs and training are available in these new and growing fields.

Thomes: I think community is really at the heart of it for anyone who is seasoned in a different format. Being open and encouraging is really important. It can be intimidating for somebody to have to learn Unreal Engine 5 if it's completely outside of their world. Again, it goes back to the benefit of the Guild—a group of professionals who are all there to improve their careers and to tell better stories. When people reach out us, we want to make sure we're really encouraging in how we talk about it so that they can learn from other producers, see the possibilities, and know they have access to resources.

If you see something that inspires you, the Guild provides the access and community to chase down how to do that and how to find people and ask for help so that you can pivot.

Shamlin: Being at the intersection of various communities or production industries—TV, film, interactive, games—what I've seen is that while there are a lot of new kids or people at the beginning of their career trying to figure it out, what I find very rewarding is people

who are in more established careers now being able to dabble. I've talked to numerous people who have been producing TV and line producing for years, sometimes decades. With the advent of this award, they're seeing that there are other careers that match their skill sets.

Producing is largely around logistics, planning, and orchestration of a project. And while Unreal Engine might be out of a producer's grasp, the basic tool kits of planning and budgets and crewing up are still part of these new media projects. It dispels myths and gets rid of some fears about adopting these new technologies. They don't need to be technology experts. They can still dabble—not just as a way to expand job opportunities, but to flex creative muscle. Maybe they love technology, but they've just never been in a career that deploys it. Then that opens up not just (different) project types, but employer types and whole new communities. Beyond the practical benefits of the award and the projects, I think that this sense of expanding their horizons is very real. ■

Nominees for the 2024 PGA Innovation Award had not been announced at press time. To read about the nominated productions, visit producersguild.org/2024-innovation-award. A deep dive into the winning production and its producing team will appear in the next issue of Produced By.

THE 2024 PGA INNOVATION AWARD JURY



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