EXPANSIVE BOUNDARIES

HOW THE NOMINEES FOR THE PGA'S 2026 INNOVATION AWARD HAVE REWRITTEN PRODUCTION RULES, USING CUTTING–EDGE TECHNOLOGY AND VISIONARY CREATIVITY TO GIVE AUDIENCES ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE EXPERIENCES.

WRITTEN BY EVE WESTON

What do war, wheelchair dancers, space travel, big-wave surfing and a bad dream all have in common? Each is the subject of a distinct, gripping and inventive project nominated for the 2026 Producers Guild Innovation Award.

"What stood out to the jury this year was how these teams turned ambitious ideas into impactful, repeatable practices that expand the boundaries of storytelling," says film and television producer Angela Russo-Otstot, colead of this year's awards jury and chief creative officer of AGBO.

The Innovation Award honors productions that go beyond conventions by taking new approaches to program format, content, audience interaction, production technique and delivery.

"Innovation shows up here not as a single breakthrough, but as the thoughtful integration of multiple technologies in service of story," shares jury colead Joanna Popper, executive producer of *Finding Pandora X*, *Breonna's Garden* and *Master of Light*.

Jury colead Maureen Fan, cofounder and CEO of Baobab Studios, adds, "Rather than just being novel, how much did this project create long-lasting impact to the way creatives create story? How much did it impact the audience? Will this innovation stand the test of time?"

Following are descriptions of the nominated productions and the ingenious efforts behind them that are giving audiences unprecedented access to previously unimaginable experiences. As Russo-Otstot says, "Innovation matters most when it opens new creative possibilities for audiences and can scale with integrity."

D-DAY: THE CAMERA SOLDIER
Produced by TARGO / TIME Studios

How do we make D-Day feel personal? For Jennifer Taylor, the main character in this documentary, it inherently is. Her father, Richard, filmed the only

live-action footage of the first waves of soldiers landing on Omaha Beach.

"Every time you've seen a video of the actual D-Day landings in Normandy, it's his footage that you're seeing," says Victor Agulhon, cofounder and CEO of TARGO.

Not that Richard spoke about it much.

In the mixed-reality experience that is *D-Day: The Camera Soldier*, the audience doesn't become Jennifer. They join her on her journey to better know her father—or rather, she joins the viewer—in their home.

The Apple Vision Pro immersive experience begins with the audience in their own space, enjoying a window into Jennifer's home, where they meet her in 3D video. As the viewer becomes acquainted with Jennifer and her story, the window expands, taking the audience on a journey with Jennifer to visit historic locations today through the magic of 180° video,

finally transporting the viewer to 1944 Normandy, painstakingly reconstructed and thoughtfully animated.

It's what TARGO calls "growing immersion." Along the way, viewer-participants have opportunities (not obligations) to engage with 3D recreations of the very objects and artifacts they've just seen Jennifer sorting through. One might call it extremely innovative journalism. Or magic.

The sleight-of-hand required to bring this illusion to life is far from slight. In fact, the team at TARGO built an entirely new media player inside their chosen development platform, the Unity game engine. No pipeline existed that could seamlessly integrate 2D footage, stereoscopic 3D video, 180° immersive video, and 180° interactive scenes. It does now, and has already won an innovation award from the Unity platform itself.

"All these technologies are islands. What we had to do was build the bridges and the networks that would connect all these islands to allow viewers to go from one island to the

other and to make it feel very seamless," Agulhon says. "The best thing for us is that people don't notice any of this, like this all happened in the background. It's an extremely complex scaffolding, but it's completely invisible to viewers."

The other bits of wizardry are the suite of Blackmagic cameras that TARGO custom-built to film for this experience. Their power is great, but their footprint is remarkably small. And the Vision Pro app that contains the documentary experience is bewitching as well—it secretly scans the viewer's room so that it can provide a custom overlay of historic film and video thumbnails on the space, creating a unique, themed viewing environment for each viewer.

But TARGO also recognizes the importance of sometimes showing what they have up their sleeve. They're admirably transparent about any use of AI and cite the Archival Producers Alliance's Generative AI guidelines as a useful resource. The film's credits refer viewers to a website where they can learn more about the documentary's use of AI.

Additionally, where TARGO has used

Cameraman Richard Taylor's combat footage is at the heart of *D-Day: The Camera Soldier*.

AI to recreate something, they make sure to show the original source. For example, a black-and-white photo in an album accompanies a larger, restored and colorized 3D version of the image.

territory
Produced by Double Eye Studios and Kinetic Light

How can we give people of varying abilities equally rich cultural experiences? Kinetic Light, a disability dance company with a performance space in Brooklyn, New York—and an active touring schedule—wanted to reach more people. To do so, they enlisted Double Eye Studios, experienced in creating artistic entertainment in 360° and VR, and took inspiration (and the imagery of barbed wire) from one of Kinetic Light's existing shows to create something new—not just new for them, but for the world.
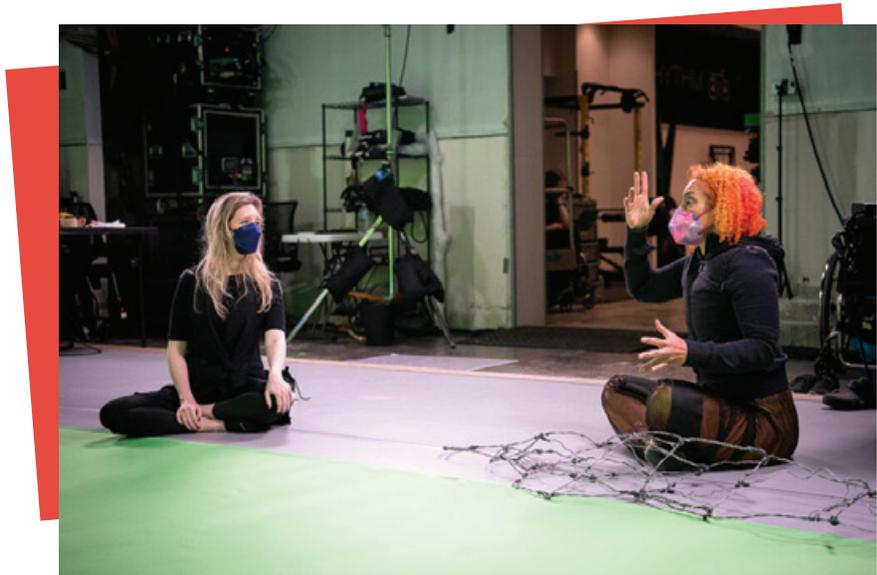
Given that Kinetic Light's show has aerial choreography (aka, "flying on wires"), the first question was how to translate flying wheelchairs to VR. The second was how to have three dancers play a thousand characters, which is no exaggeration.

Ultimately, it required a 20-foot green screen installed in-studio, which, explains Kiira Benz, executive creative director and founder of Double Eye Studios, meant that the color had to be keyed out for the dancers to be replicated into an army.

Double Eye Studios founder Kiira Benz (left) with dancer Alice Sheppard.

To do this, they needed to shoot in 2D, something rare and perhaps even ill-advised for traditional VR content, which this most certainly was not.

In an unconventional and creative move, Double Eye expanded rotoscoped 2D dancers into 3D, lit them, then imported them into the Unity game engine. Interestingly, this was a highly

Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson soar upside down in wheelchairs in front of a green screen, each holding onto a white barbed-wire prop, while Lauren Mendoza films from below.

Asteroid, a 14-minute short, transports audiences into outer space.

manual process. As LLMs have not been trained on a diverse population with diverse movement, the team couldn't lean on AI. They used only human work for the actual production.

Once these imported "video cards" were in Unity, they were able to layer them in the foreground, midground and background to create the depth that was essential to this piece and the most evocative of Kinetic Light's in-studio performances. But video playback has not historically been one of Unity's strengths, so playback of hundreds of videos required some serious innovation. As Benz recounts, "When our engineer talked to the CEO of Unity and that team, they were like, 'How have you done this?'"

Yet when you ask Benz about *territory*'s great innovations, she talks about accessibility. And she's not talking about the dancers—they're practically a red herring. While a barb by definition makes extraction difficult, this production—built on the imagery of barbed wire—has worked very

hard to do exactly the opposite. Their mission is for all potential audience members to be able to extract meaning and multisensory experience from this multifaceted show.

territory features first-of-its-kind spatialized closed captions. This means that words show up in the physical space that the sound comes from. They are also size-correlated (louder words are larger), color-coded by character or world (e.g., wind or whips), and have the option of music closed captions, which relate what's happening in the score. The audience member, whom the filmmakers have dubbed the "witness," can select to have closed captions on or off. They can also select from five different audio description tracks.

Since *territory* is the first PC VR experience built with Meta's haptics studio, the witness also has the option to experience tactile feedback, either through the VR controllers or a haptic sculpture hanging from the ceiling in the viewing area that ran the score from wires. People in the headset could hold

the controllers to feel feedback, or they could choose to put their body into it and feel the score by leaning into the wires around the sculpture.

territory also has a screen reader; everyone starts with it on and it can be turned off by choice. (For reference, PC VR means a VR experience that runs off a desktop or laptop computer powerful enough to run demanding games and applications, unlike standalone VR headsets that operate independently.)

Between all of these affordances, there are 256 ways to experience *territory*, providing high repeatability and leveraging the choose-your-own-attention approach.

ASTEROID
Produced by 30 Ninjas and 100 Zeros

What if the audience could have a real-time conversation with the lead character in a movie?

This 180° film, written and directed by Doug Liman of *Swingers* and *The*

The Wizard of Oz at the Sphere immerses audiences into the classic film, from Kansas to the Yellow Brick Road.

Bourne Identity, is, as he tells it, "a short science fiction film about a group of unlikely—don't even call them astronauts—attempting to get to an asteroid that's passing near Earth so that they can mine it. They're using an old Soyuz rocket, and it doesn't go well. Only one of the five returns."

"Movies always transport an audience to a new place. *Swingers* transports an audience to a new place. *Bourne Identity* transports you in a more immersive way. *Edge of Tomorrow*, in an even more immersive way," Liman adds. "With this technology, I wanted to send an audience into outer space and give them that experience."

Asteroid also gives an audience the experience of talking with NFL star and actor DK Metcalf, who plays a fictionalized version of himself in the 14-minute short, which was built in Unreal Engine, even though the app that plays the movie is a Unity app. The team trained Gemini, the Google LLM that powers the character, on nearly 1,000 pages of narrative content, which includes sample dialog, rules, triggers and research—for example, who DK's character is.

"From an innovation point of view, it's one of the hardest things we've ever done," explains Jed Weintrob, president and partner at 30 Ninjas immersive content studio. "We were working on a brand new platform,

Android XR, that didn't exist yet, on a new piece of hardware—the Samsung Galaxy XR headset—that also didn't exist yet, with a connection to Unity that was still in development, trying to tell a story and move a game experience through that platform."

The *Asteroid* team also worked with Convai, the avatar studio that built the nonplayer character front end for the animated AI-character of DK Metcalf, who will never say the same thing twice.

During the short film's credits, the audience has the opportunity to engage in real-time conversation with DK via a game scenario where they help rescue him from a virtual asteroid.

To help illustrate this experience, Weintrob provides a captivating analogy: "After watching *Star Wars*, if you could go back onto the *Millennium Falcon* with C-3PO at the same fidelity and resolution that you saw in the movie, that would be pretty interesting."

THE WIZARD OF OZ AT SPHERE
Produced by Sphere Entertainment Co.

What if you could take the audience beyond the frame of a classic cinematic film? The team at Sphere, with some key partners, has done just that. They've extended *The Wizard of Oz* from its original 4:3 aspect ratio to fill 160,000 square feet, which, to put it mildly, is a lot of additional yellow bricks to lay. The magic takes place at the Las Vegas Sphere, the massive spherical entertainment venue.

Much like the characters in the film wishing, "If I only had a brain/heart/courage," the production team was hoping to find a wizard to give them what they were missing: super resolution, character limbs (not organs) and nonexistent performances. So who were they off to see? Google.

The team—which also included Magnopus and Warner Bros. Discovery—

used AI technology across the board. First they broke down every single shot in the original *Wizard of Oz* film, not just adding more pixels for pixels' sake, but making sure that the nuance and detail were there. They used LLMs trained on material and references from the actual film.

Producer Jane Rosenthal likens some of the work to an archeological dig. The team was able to find a Technicolor workbook from a Technicolor cameraman who had worked on *Gone with the Wind*, a movie that used the same camera package as *The Wizard of Oz*. That allowed the team to figure out, for example, what lens a scene was shot with and use that to inform the look of the new bits.

It wasn't just the digging that mirrored archeology—the team was also tied to a location in scorching weather conditions. "You have to really be in the Sphere while you're mixing, looking at every frame," says Rosenthal, who spent months in Las Vegas over the summer. "We can look at it in our test facility in Burbank, but you can only really see and feel it (at Sphere) because we have all these 4D effects, like when you're in the tornado. You've got the wind, the haptics and the sound, and it all has to be conducted and mixed together."

And perhaps like archeologists imagining the world of a find, the team used AI to "outpaint" the rest of the characters who, in the original, were cut off by the frame. Finally, because the audience in the Sphere can see so much more of any given set or location, the team used AI to generate performances for characters who may have been off-screen but are now in-scene—with the audience, in a way.

"You think of the art of storytelling, and how it transcends," Rosenthal says. "It transfers from one person to another over the years. What we've been able to do is to take these technical advances and, working with hundreds of VFX artists, create something in the Sphere that has never been done before. It's taking this extraordinary film and putting an audience in it."

BIG WAVE: NO ROOM FOR ERROR
Produced by Cosm

What is it like to be in the ocean and see the world's biggest waves coming at you? Heimiti Fierro, the Tahitian surfer followed by the film *Big Wave: No Room for Error*, knows well. As you may guess, it involves some crashing.

Fittingly, *Big Wave* only exists because director Bo Bridges dared to do some crashing of his own: at Dwayne Wade's NBA party at the University of Utah. That's where Bridges first saw the prototype for Cosm and realized that this was the question he wanted to answer for audiences that would ultimately flock to the then-forthcoming, now-extant, dome theater concept.

"I wanted to let people know how exhilarating and fun and wild it is, but I also wanted to bring the nonsurfer into a scenario where they could feel and breathe what it's like to be around the ocean," Bridges says. "The ocean's my happy place, and I can't get enough of it. I just wanted people to get into this space."

This is no casual want—it's the kind of urge that requires a deep dive, figuratively and literally. Bridges would free-dive to film footage, holding his breath one to three minutes at a time.

Hearing firsthand about the production experience, one can't help but think that maybe no one else in the world could have pulled this off. Producing and directing the film required not only a deep understanding of the inner workings of extreme sports like surfing, but also the training, ability and stamina to actually get in the water and, to a degree, "do the thing."

In addition, *Big Wave* required a technical understanding of which cameras to use and how to modify them for this first-of-its-kind task. For example, Bridges took a Sea Bob, a 4-foot-long underwater scooter, and built a custom apparatus to mount a big-water housing to the front of it to hold the camera.

The production also required a strong network in the international surfing scene, the cultural knowledge to be able to appropriately and respectfully immerse oneself—and one's crew—into a local surf scene, the weather literacy to monitor the globe for just the right kind of storm, and the producorial skills to pull together a crew in Tahiti on one day's notice. It doesn't feel far-fetched to say that it's a miracle this film exists. The hope might be that, after watching it, the audience feels the same way about the ocean. ◼

Special thanks to the 2026 Innovation Award jurors: Victoria Bousis, Albert Cheng, Nonny de la Pena, Maureen Fan, John Gaeta, Lisa Gregorian, Blake Kammerdiener, Jess Lee, Stephanie Mehta, Miles Perkins, Joanna Popper, Liz Rosenthal, Angela Russo-Otstot, Fidji Simo, George Strompolos, and Shicong Zhu.
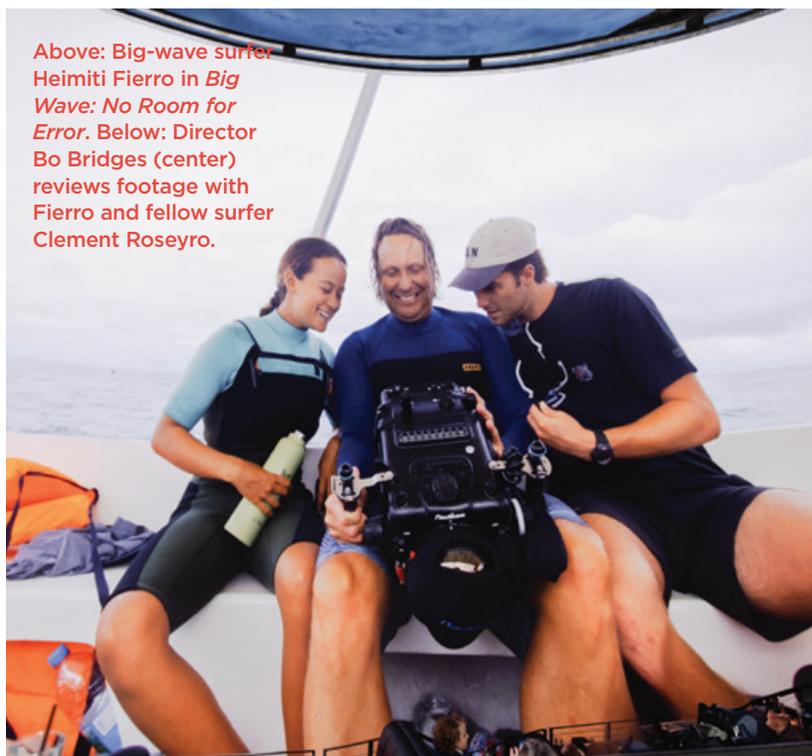
Above: Big-wave surfer Heimiti Fierro in *Big Wave: No Room for Error*. Below: Director Bo Bridges (center) reviews footage with Fierro and fellow surfer Clement Roseyro.