



THE EMBODIMENT OF

Creativity

CREATOR CAMERON KOSTOPOULOS DESCRIBES HOW HIS 2024
PGA INNOVATION AWARD-WINNING PROJECT CAME TO BE.

WRITTEN BY WHITNEY FRIEDLANDER

Parents teach kids not to pick on their peers: "You don't know what it's like to walk in their shoes." But what if it is possible? Director and filmmaker Cameron Kostopoulos offers a way. His virtual reality project *Body of Mine* allows people to strap on a headset and be transported inside (at least visually) the body of VFX-generated humans to experience how people of different genders, races and shapes move and feel. It's an immersive experience that incorporates the user's own body and movements.

Kostopoulos' intent in creating *Body of Mine* was to look at the experiences of trans people. He recorded interviews of friends of his who are members of that community about what it feels like when they wear clothing that doesn't match their gender profile or when they see other people's reactions to them when they are out in public. These audio recordings play at key moments of *Body of Mine* as users touch various parts of their own bodies.

"People have that desire to experience being other people, whether that's the experience of being a celebrity or the president of the United States or just to understand your own child," Kostopoulos says.

This exercise in empathy is part of why *Body of Mine* was named winner of the 2024 PGA Innovation Award, which recognizes the production of a noteworthy, impactful emerging media program that significantly elevates the audience's viewing experience.

"Unlike traditional media, *Body of Mine* challenges perceptions and fosters empathy by allowing users to inhabit varied bodies and confront their own biases," says Chris Thomes, who cochaired the award jury with Joanna Popper and Eric Shamlin.

He calls *Body of Mine* "a standout example of storytelling innovation driven by creativity and ingenuity, rather than corporate backing.

"It defies conventional VR experiences by placing users in the body of a different gender and eliciting powerful insights into the experience of gender dysphoria through interviews with trans individuals," Thomes adds. "It combines an innovative approach with strong emotional impact embodying diverse identities. Both underscore the transformative potential of VR storytelling."

AN UNLIKELY CHANCE

Kostopoulos never expected to rise to the top as a nominee, much less win the award. He submitted on a whim. He thought his project, with its low budget and tiny crew, would never stand up against other 2024 nominated projects with better financing, like

the Kansas City Chiefs' virtual party *The World's Largest Tailgate*; or that were so vast in scope, like Felix & Paul Studios' simulated space travel VR experience *Space Explorers: Blue Marble Trilogy*.

The Innovation Award has been given out to experienced creators backed by large studios as well as indie creators, which Popper says "shows that best-in-class storytelling, innovation and audience engagement truly come from the creator's creativity and ingenuity."

In the end, the streamlined way that *Body of Mine* came together may be one of its greatest strengths. In a way, the newness and accessibility of VR leveled the playing field.

"Unlike physical film and production, where you have to have sets, costumes, and paid actors and people to hold the lights, what I've been enjoying about this new approach to cinema is that you can just be a bedroom artist," Kostopoulos says.

Kostopoulos developed the project while he was an undergraduate at the

University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, where he graduated summa cum laude with a degree in film and television production and future cinema in 2022. He thought about his own experiences coming out to his religious family in Texas, which resulted in his severing contact with them.

Kostopoulos wanted to use new forms of cinema and immersiveness to create a safe space for queer people when a safe space in the real world is hard to find.

Kostopoulos worked with the skills he'd studied, such as the proper way to hold a camera and frame a shot, while also learning how to code and use video game graphics engines like Unreal to build what would become a prototype of *Body of Mine* as his thesis project.

"Coming from film production, I'd always thought in terms of a frame and a composition," he says. "With VR, you lose that, but you gain this sense of agency of being able to look around." Kostopoulos elected not to go the route of many VR games in which a player feels compelled

to move around or use controllers.

Body of Mine's design is inspired by the hauntingly dark palettes and gothic world-building of Kostopoulos' favorite filmmaker, Guillermo del Toro. All users begin *Body of Mine* in the same body cavity, almost as if they are one molecule inside a giant red lung.

Kostopoulos says this has a dual purpose.

"One, it creates a genderless space because we all have lungs. We all have a heart no matter who we are. It also takes this idea of being trapped inside your body to a visual and a metaphorical level. A lot of people who have had gender dysphoria will describe that as being trapped in your body, and so we wanted to recreate that feeling."

It also ends the same way for every user, with what Kostopoulos cheekily describes as the "Cameron-ification" of the process. "The whole rib cage that you're in blossoms into this flesh garden as this metaphor for growing into your skin and reclaiming your body and



The *Body of Mine* team accepting the SXSW 2023 XR Experience Special Jury Award. From left to right: Ethan Denning, Prateek Rajagopal, Cameron Kostopoulos, Evan Siegal, Taylor Woods, Ty Kostopoulos, Charles Anderson.

COURTESY OF CAMERON KOSTOPOULOS

allowing it to be something beautiful. The whole thing is a hands-free experience because the most important thing about my work is combining the tech with intimacy so it doesn't feel like tech."

Instead of aiming to impress with technological advances, he adds, "The way we approached it is very much like a production designer or a world-builder would, thinking about things from all angles and thinking about them spatially."

EMBODYING ANOTHER

Just as a cinematographer would do for a film or TV series, light helps shape the composition and directs users' gazes toward where they're supposed to look when experiencing *Body of Mine*.

"A filmmaker is guiding your view, but also gives you the freedom to explore," Kostopoulos says of this best-of-both-worlds scenario.

The response to the experience was overwhelmingly positive, and the team involved has long since expanded beyond one person's rudimentary knowledge of coding for his thesis project. *Body of Mine* team members also include fellow recent USC graduates Evan Siegal, who created the graphics using the 3D Unreal Engine, and Taylor Woods, who served as production designer.

Body of Mine is Kostopoulos' statement about the commonalities we share as humans. From an execution standpoint, he adds, "I am a filmmaker and a storyteller, and I want to show people that you can use technology in ways that are intimate and that are cinematic."

The psychology department at Germany's University of Tübingen, which has a lab that uses immersive technology to study body image, collected data submitted anonymously from 30 users at a public screening of *Body of Mine* in Frankfurt. The department found that people from a variety of backgrounds felt more accepting of their own bodies after experiencing *Body of Mine* because hearing other people talk about



the same things they experience normalizes that experience. These findings will soon be published in the open-access research journal *Media and Communication*.

In addition to the PGA Innovation Award, accolades for *Body of Mine* include a special jury award for VR experience at the 2023 SXSW Film & TV Festival and a 2023 BAFTA Student Award for Immersive.

Kostopoulos recently launched a company to create more immersive experiences like *Body of Mine*. He also sees a market where traditional filmmaking melds with immersive gaming to create "living experiences, or living stories, where they are these living, evolving things that cannot be experienced twice exactly the same way, but they have the authorship of human storytelling."

As he describes it, "Living experiences where you're surrounded by AI characters that fully respond to you, understand you, and engage with you so that you can experience a film or story a thousand times, each one unique. I definitely think that the future is where you have these experiences that have

elements of filmmaking and gaming but it's uniquely its own thing," he adds.

Body of Mine is currently available via exhibition, but a version of the experience will be available for Meta Quest VR personal headsets this summer. With the help of organizations like the National Center for Transgender Equality and GLSEN—an educational organization that works to end harassment and create safe spaces for LGBTQ students—*Body of Mine* will soon be available at GLSEN locations and other LGBTQ+ centers as part of an educational module for trans people and their families who might have follow-up questions about specifics like where to go for hormone treatments.

This ethos is carrying on to future projects—ones that are likely to gain legitimacy through recognitions like the Innovation Award.

"I think, traditionally, the studios and Hollywood see VR and immersive as fringe, even as big players like Apple are entering the space," Kostopoulos says. "I really want to show Hollywood that this is not fringe—this is actually where things are heading, and there's a huge opportunity here." ■