



Talking “Belonging” – Realm Bender Eric Bear’s New Cutting Edge Miniseries

by Rachel Galvin



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When he began his career in the film industry on the set of the classic Woody Allen film "Annie Hall," Eric Bear could have never known the direction his life would take. Originally involved in theater and dance, he went on to work in film and TV, including in a recurring role in the show "1883." He also has delved

into working in tech and creating interactive media utilized by the industry. He has over 100 patents on hardware and software related to digital media creation.

His latest venture was to work with talented filmmakers and animators, as well as other actors, to create a unique world on film, one that is part animation and part live action. This new project is a miniseries called "Belonging," and within it, he plays many characters but as different metahumans. There are 25 metahumans all together. Metahumans are basically digital humans that were created using a program called Unreal Engine. "Belonging" includes 10 short four to six minute character-driven episodes, each vividly detailed. Ten different directors pitched in to direct them. Most were written by Bear or adapted.

Asked what gave him the idea to produce "Belonging," he said, "When the pandemic hit, we had to find new ways to collaborate. For actors, it was especially tough because our work is so interpersonal. And that's how I got into motion capture. Today's performance capture tools let us teleport anywhere using relatively inexpensive hardware and software. An actor in Austin, Texas can — in real time — work with a writer in LA, a director in Vancouver, and a face capture team in Australia. It's amazing. When Epic Games released "Meta Humans" for Unreal Engine — these beautifully photo-realistic manipulable avatars

— it was a natural fit."

Having the technology is one thing, but using these metahumans to create a believable character, putting them in a lifelike setting and getting their storyline to not only be plausible, but to evoke emotion is another, and that became their mission and query while working on this. They wondered if virtual people could effectively express authentic emotions and could audiences be moved by their performances in the same way as if they were not manufactured?

Also, again, due to the pandemic, the work on these films had to be done socially distanced. So they wondered if multiple artists could direct, shoot and produce high-quality episodes from their home studios. In the end, it came together well and the result is a product that is not only unique and high-tech, but also serves up some engaging and moving stories.

Originally meant to be a test only, the project was first called "MetaHuman MoCap Monologues." He started with some scripts from plays he already knew. But his entrepreneurial quality kicked in and they ended up creating unique stories.

Bear said, "I was in the middle of filming the first five episodes of



"Night"

"1883," the "Yellowstone" prequel with Taylor Sheridan and Sam Elliot, when we recorded our first pass of the 10 'Belonging' episodes. I couldn't shave my immigrant pioneer scruff, so that screwed with the facial capture data. Turned out to be a good thing, because we discovered that the pre-visualization results were incredibly beautiful and compelling. It was no longer just a test, and we decided that the series really deserved to land on a streaming platform to reach widest audiences."

He continued, "Some of the script adaptations had no licensing restrictions, like those by Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. But others, we weren't able to negotiate rights. So, with previs complete — meaning we had already built our environments, props, wardrobe, lighting, cameras and MetaHuman models — the challenge was writing brand new scripts that flowed in line with what was already in the works. Ha! Nikki Levy and I mapped out the emotional ride of each vignette and then crafted new characters, new situations, new scripts and all to fit with the work already completed. It was a crazy cool puzzle."

They made sure to employ a variety of emotions and characters to utilize diversity and different points of view, in addition to employing different dialects and accents. Getting a wide array of directors to tell the stories also added to the mix of viewpoints.



A peek BTS: Eric Bear in action on set

He advertised on Facebook communities, including the Motion Capture Society and Virtual Production group to get directors. "Everyone wanted to play; and we had to match directorial styles and individual interests with episodic goals, and make sure we ended up with reasonable representation. In season one of 'Belonging,' we have two women directors, two black directors, two Latinx directors,



"Here"

two queer producers, and a disproportionate number of bald white guys. Not perfect, but it's a start. And you can really feel the power of that diversity across the 10 episodes. It's a cool matrix of emotional characteristics, genres, dialects and directorial approaches."

When it comes to the technical aspect of production, he said, "Demian Gordon helped me get up and running during the pandemic. He introduced me to XSENS, who makes the full-body capture suits we use; MANUS, who makes gloves for tracking finger articulation; Babak Beheshti, who designed some of the industry's lightest and most comfortable face capture helmets; and FACEWARE, who also manufactures high-end helmets and robust facial recognition software. He also introduced me to Terry Notary, who's known for choreographing creature movement for major motion pictures like 'Planet of the Apes.'"

He added, "It was a long-standing dream of mine to embody primates on stage and in film. But to do that, you sometimes need prosthetics to help you get the right body proportions for moving around comfortably. Terry's workshop built me custom arm extensions that, in combination with all the other hardware and software, allowed me to access the world of realm bending into beings that aren't even human. But nobody had ever used this indie filmmaker tech for quadruped locomotion, so had to figure it out on my own. And that's where it helps to be simultaneously technically adept, physically fit and emotionally accessible. I got known in the motion capture society as the indie primate guy and that probably helped with recruiting

directors to dive into 'Belonging' with me."

Mirrors give us visual information that tricks us into thinking that's who we are. Unreal Engine is exactly the same. When we look out through our eyes, we don't see ourselves. We feel our bodies and identify those sensations as ourselves from the inside out. But if you see your avatar on a computer screen moving in response to your own movement, then it really feels like you *are* that form. It's amazing. And it makes what we see in a glass mirror less real, in a way, because we aren't actually our bodies anyway. So, living in virtual skins is a great lesson in non-attachment, and one that helps invite kindness and compassion. Perfect for a series like 'Belonging.'"

Asked what it was like specifically to work on adapting Shakespeare, he said, "When shooting a live action or even green screen film or TV show, actors generally have a clear sense of camera framing. We know that in wide shots, we can move our bodies more; while in super tight shots, we don't even move our heads much at all. But in performance capture, the camera can be anywhere. In open-world video games, it has to be completely flexible because the camera is based on where the player happens to be. That's where performance capture is like Shakespeare. Much of Shakespeare is performed with the audience all around, or at least on three sides. During performance, we need to be clued into that variable viewing angle ... and then forget about all that technical stuff and just be a person in a situation dealing with the feelings and circumstances that arise."

Not everything is completely fabricated in his virtual world, they do need to include props on set to get the right effect. He explained. "In



"Water"



"Trust"

performance capture, we actually need to have props and basic set structures that match what will be there in final production. I'm not saying we had to build a burning castle or a city street. But, we need doorknobs where there are doors, desks and counters at the exact right height, and a handgun, for example, of matching proportions, to the one in the show. The actors need to be able to move naturally and have those movements translate directly into the alternate universe properly. We built a car dashboard with a steering wheel, pedals and gear shift. We built a boat structure that the crew could sway and cause the our bodies to react naturally, as if on water. We built a horse contraption that the motion capture director rocked in sync with a YouTube video of a walking horse to cause the actor's body to rock organically, as if riding an actual horse.

"Beyond those physical artifacts, there wasn't much in the motion capture volume to go on. It's just a big white space with lots of lights. Like a blank canvas. As a realm bender, we phase shift out of one reality into another reality, so the world of the scene exists in our experience like an imaginary projected overlay. If the motion capture director puts a piece of tape on the wall and the director tells me that's where I should see the tower burning, then when I settle into my body riding home on my horse I don't see the tape anymore. Instead, I see the burning castle ... and I smell the ash ... and my eyes burn. My nostrils flare automatically and all the emotion of despair and concern and fear arises in the body and I'm there."

Bear found it very interesting to play multiple characters and

often not have someone to interact with physically in a scene. He said, "It's always best to be able to make eye contact with your scene partners. So much non-verbal engagement happens when we let in other's presence. But I'll tell you that in a couple of episodes, I had to play against myself. Because of the way the project evolved, we were focused on maximizing facial animation automation using a very small data set — a limited number of actor faces. If we create spin-offs or a second season, we'll definitely be using a more diverse cast.

"Anyway, in a couple of episodes, I play both father and son. And that was pretty wild. Not only was it technically challenging, but it cracked my heart open from multiple dimensions and catalyzed a kind of empathy that we rarely get to swim in."

Right now, Bear has been working on promoting "Belonging" and expanding their social media presence while still working on some indie films as an actor and auditioning regularly.

"Belonging is currently on the film festival circuit internationally and is winning awards along the way. They will be talking to various streaming providers to get the episodes available to the public. *To find out more about the series and its progress, visit <https://hyperwatt.com> and follow @hyperwatt on social.*



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