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Your Next Pet Could Be a Glowing Rabbit

Biohacker Josie Zayner's new company, the Los Angeles Project, is using gene-editing to create a new generation of pets.



Cathy Tie (left) and Josie Zayner (right), cofounders of the Los Angeles Project. PHOTOGRAPH: LOS ANGELES PROJECT



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HUMANS HAVE BEEN selectively breeding cats and dogs for thousands of years to make more desirable pets. A new startup called the Los Angeles Project aims to speed up that process with genetic engineering to make glow-in-the-dark rabbits, hypoallergenic cats and dogs, and possibly, one day, actual unicorns.

The Los Angeles Project is the brainchild of biohacker Josie Zayner, who in 2017 publicly injected herself with the gene-editing tool [Crispr](#) during a conference in San Francisco and livestreamed it. “I want to help humans genetically modify themselves,” [she said at the time](#). She’s also given herself a [fecal transplant](#) and a [DIY Covid vaccine](#) and is the founder and CEO of The Odin, a company that sells home genetic-engineering kits.

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Cofounded with biotech entrepreneur Cathy Tie, a former Thiel Fellow, the Los Angeles Project is all about making animals that are “more complex and interesting and beautiful and unique” than ones that currently exist, Zayner says. The Austin-based company’s name is a nod to another controversial effort—the Manhattan Project, which developed the first atomic bomb during WWII.



PHOTOGRAPH: LOS ANGELES PROJECT

For the past year, the Los Angeles Project has been operating in stealth mode while its five-person team has been experimenting on embryos from frogs, fish, hamsters, and rabbits. They’ve used Crispr to delete genes and insert new ones—the latter being more technically difficult to achieve. They’re also testing out a lesser-known technique known as restriction enzyme mediated integration, or REMI, for integrating new DNA into embryos. Making these modifications at the embryo level changes the genetic makeup of the resulting animal.

The team has used Crispr to add a gene to rabbit embryos so they produce green fluorescent protein, or GFP. Zayner says they’re aiming to transfer the engineered

They won't be the first glowing animals ever created. GFP is commonly used by scientists to visually track and monitor gene activity or cellular processes within an organism, often to study diseases. Researchers have previously made fluorescent rodents, monkeys, dogs, cats, and rabbits, but none of these animals were created for commercial purposes. But the Los Angeles Project is designing glowing bunnies and other animals to sell to consumers. "I think the pet space is huge and totally undervalued," Zayner says.

Fish genetically engineered to have the GFP protein are sold in pet stores across the country. Called GloFish, they were made with an older technique called recombinant DNA technology. The company that developed the fish, Yorktown Technologies, sold the brand for \$50 million in 2017.

The Los Angeles Project is starting with the GFP edit because it's relatively simple. It's also observable in embryos when they're exposed to blue or ultraviolet light, showing that the gene editing worked. After fluorescent bunnies, the company has its sights on making cats that lack the Fel d1 protein, the primary allergen that cats produce, but also jackalopes, dragons, and unicorns. But more complex editing will be needed to achieve those more ambitious creations.

"As we continue, our goal is to really look at multiple genes at the same time, really understand the multiple genes that contribute towards a very complex trait, and then be able to transfer those changes from one species to another," Tie says. One company, eGenesis, has made pigs with 69 gene edits to make their organs more compatible for human transplants.

"I'm personally really interested in the unicorn," Tie says. It's a tall order that would require understanding the genetics behind the narwhal's twisted horn, then figuring out how to transfer it into a small animal first before engineering it into a horse. "Big ideas take a long time to achieve, and as a company, you have to evolve to meet the needs of the market but also really understand the long-term vision of the technology that you're building," she says.



Crispr is microinjected into embryos to modify an organism's genes. PHOTOGRAPH: LOS ANGELES PROJECT

The idea of making gene-edited pets is sure to raise eyebrows. In fact, bioethicists warned about such “frivolous” uses of CRISPR a decade ago when the technology was in its infancy. The company’s glowing rabbits will be an initial test to see how consumers respond.

“I think most people are going to think it’s crazy and will dismiss it as crazy,” says Andy Weissman of Union Square Ventures, who has personally invested in the Los Angeles Project. “You’re trying to convince people to come into a reality that doesn’t yet exist.”

He sees the company as part business, part art project. “We’ll find out if they can accomplish both, or just one or the other.”

Plus, no one really knows how many edits can be made to an animal's genome without causing harm.

“We don’t want to harm animals,” Tie says. Both she and Zayner say they take the treatment of animals seriously. The company has not killed any animals for its experiments and doesn’t plan to. They create the embryos by mixing eggs and sperm sourced from ovaries and testes they get from veterinarians and a local butcher.

And GloFish offer a cautionary tale. In Brazil, the fluorescent fish have escaped fish farms and are multiplying in creeks in the Atlantic Forest, raising concerns about whether they pose a threat to native species. Zayner says the animals they create would be spayed and neutered so they wouldn’t be able to reproduce and pass on the genetic changes to offspring.

The company has been in touch with the US Food and Drug Administration about its plans, but it’s unclear how the agency would regulate them. Back in 2003, the FDA determined that the sale of transgenic GloFish were not subject to regulation, based on evidence that the fish do not pose a risk to public health or the environment.

Zayner’s new venture will no doubt test the bounds of gene-editing regulation, as her self-experimentation and DIY genetic engineering kits have in the past. But the Los Angeles Project may also spark much-needed societal conversations around what humans can—and should—do with genetic engineering.

“The crazy thing is, this technology is so advanced, and nobody’s doing shit with it,” Zayner says. “That’s kind of our motto: Let’s do stuff with it.”

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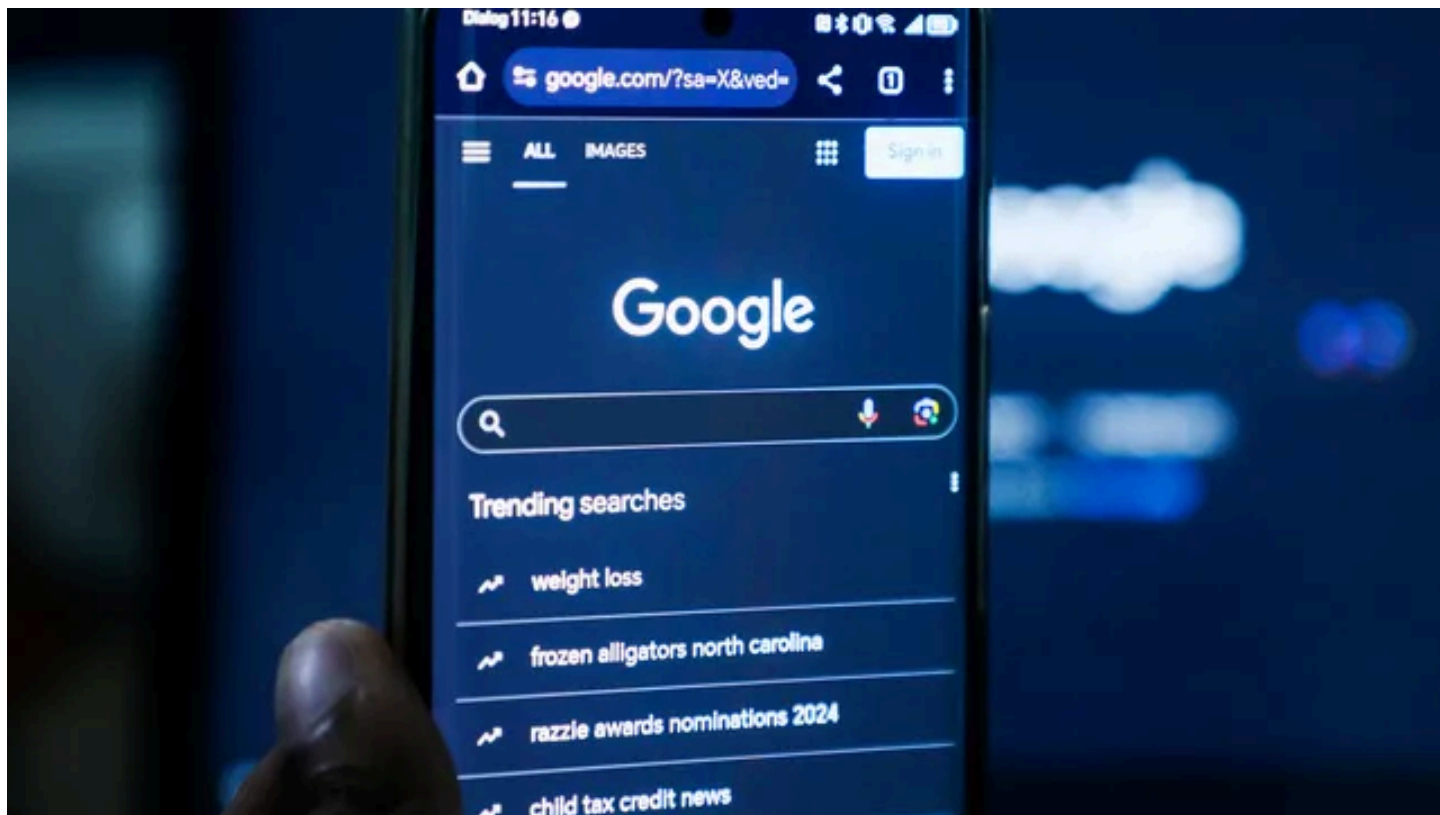
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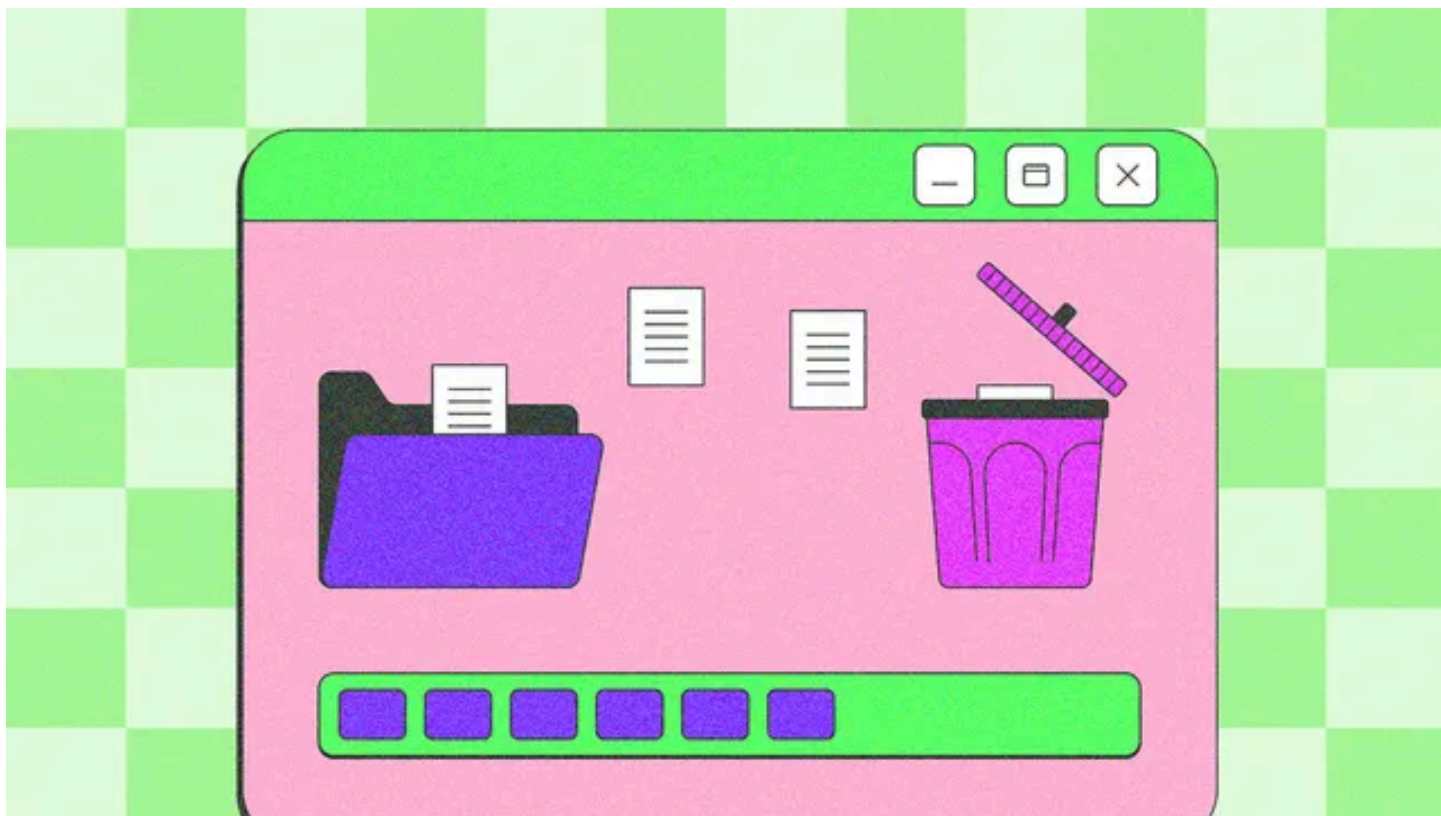
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