



Project

## Whale Wars: Blood and Water

Web

[blood-and-water.animalplanet.com](http://blood-and-water.animalplanet.com)

Agency

Discovery Agency

Web

[agency.discovery.com](http://agency.discovery.com)

Client

Animal Planet

Duration

3 months

People

8

involved

Total

1600

hours

# WHALE WARS

## BLOOD AND WATER

Find out how the interactive team at Discovery Agency trawled creative waters to deliver an interactive Animal Planet tie-in, exposing the big fishing trade to the net



**balancing the conservation of our planet with mankind's relentless commercial pursuit is a tension-strapped battle.** Whether it's the

destruction of our global rainforests, fracking, or the spectre of global-warming, there's always much to contemplate. Within this, of course, are anxieties surrounding Earth's animal population, with many species endangered in the wake of lucrative trades and, ultimately, human consumption. On these shores we have our own issues with the fishing industry and whether the stocks can last when aggressive methods are employed. Internationally we then see matters complicated by fisheries impacting on more exotic sea-dwellers, notably dolphins and whales.

Global awareness of such practices in regions such as Canada, Iceland and Japan is strong, although the matter remains tough to resolve. This friction between for and against arguments on whaling is the backdrop behind *Whale Wars: Blood and Water* - an interactive film commissioned by Animal Planet. The network, within the Discovery umbrella, wanted a site experience telling the story of passionate whaling opponent Paul Watson, chronicled beside a Japanese defence of what it sees as a cultural tradition, mixing in the complexities of international maritime law. The project would support a two-hour *Whale Wars* special going live before the 13 December TV premiere. Reeling in the talents of the in-house Discovery Agency, this 8-strong team would take just three months to complete the task out of its Washington DC studio.



**ZAIDA JOCSON**  
Senior Interactive Designer



**PJ CAMP MALIK**  
Interactive Project Manager



**MATT BROWN**  
QA



**GREG JOHNSON**  
Senior Interactive Art Director

## THE BRAINS BEHIND THE BUILD



**ROSS LEMENILLE**  
Web Developer



**JESSICA WOLFLEY**  
Director, Digital Strategy



**PAUL SMITH**  
Developer



**CORY KEY**  
Interactive Creative Director

**We decided to go for it. We didn't mind that it meant sacrificing some nights and weekends. Of course it was all worth it**

"We were looking for something new and challenging when Animal Planet approached us," admits Cory Key, interactive creative director. "It's hard to believe now, but we almost didn't do it. It was one of those pivotal moments you don't recognise when you're in the middle of it, but it was an incredible effort and learning experience for us all, and we're really proud of the way it's been received by our audience and peers in the industry."

In the initial stages this was a project that was in danger of not happening due to hesitancy over its scope. Approaches from the client were fairly informal discussions about ideas inspired by similar campaigns and an ambitious vision. The proposition was exciting, but was it viable for Discovery Agency to realise it given what they had at their disposal?

"When the clients first approached us, it was over coffee, and Cory and I left that meeting feeling the excitement from the network to do something they'd never done before" explains Jess Wolfley, director of digital strategy. "They loved Snowfall ([www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall](http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2012/snow-fall)), Firestorm ([tinyurl.com/hg1buk](http://tinyurl.com/hg1buk)) and these very cool, very immersive experiences launching on *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*. We loved them too, but we didn't think we had enough material or time to create something like that. We let the clients know and offered instead to help find another agency to do it."

As a result they reached out to freelancers and other agencies. The resulting conversations confirmed that the proposition was highly time-intensive and expensive, prompting notions about scaling things back.

"For a creative person at Discovery, every project is like candy," continues Key. "We have the opportunity to work on some really cool stuff. But we are a small team and sometimes, due to workload, we have to turn projects away. There were many late night texts between Jess and myself saying 'I think we can handle it, right?' and 'We have to figure out a way to work on this'. We knew in our gut this had the potential to be something spectacular. Knowing it was for such a respected and successful series made it all the more tempting. In the end we decided to go for it. We didn't mind that it meant sacrificing some late nights and weekends. Of course it was all completely worth it."

As part of an in-house ad agency, the 'clients' are fellow Discovery colleagues. The digital team is therefore a service group, still respectful of the client-agency relationship, but able to bring an inherent understanding of the Discovery brand. Communication style and project management can prove more flexible too, with this instance proving highly collaborative during every stage. When early status update meetings proved ineffective, the knowledge they yielded on identifying key stakeholders helped to break things down.

"For the first time, we were working side-by-side with a video production team", says Wolfley. "These guys were responsible for writing, scripting, editing all of the video footage. Video was the backbone to this experience and drove the narrative. They also had the job of researching and writing for the non-video parts of the site. Our teams came from different broadcast and web disciplines and neither had worked together so closely before. It was challenging bringing the styles together at first and getting our feet solid on the ground, but we eventually adopted a nice rhythm together."

Knowing they had a great story to tell, but one that was also fairly vast, the team decided to tackle things in chapters. This helped to dilute the early worries over scale and facilitated the production of storyboards, wireframes, key quotes and points of interest.

"At one point, we had a four walls of a room covered with paper, post-its, sketches and photographs," laughs Key. "Since the show has been around for five seasons, we knew we had a ton of great photography and footage to work with. Even better, we also had a photo team that was just as excited about the project as we were. For days we all gathered around computers agonising over the right shot for each section. Initial design and layout followed soon after. I don't think we had ever waited so long to crack open Photoshop on a project. I took that as a sign we were doing something right this time."

The photo-heavy nature of the site's design involved much consultation with the agency's photo team, choosing the right assets to set the tone. Working also with outside artist Tommaso Zennaro to create bespoke

# THE VOYAGE

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CHAPTER 1

## LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

HUMANS VS. NATURE

### Paul Watson: Prisoner at Sea

In 1972, the battle between Paul and the Japanese moved from the high seas to the court room. After years of enduring acid attacks and ship-ramming clashes, the Japanese retaliated with a crushing counterblow: an "Interpol Red Notice." This notice, only reserved for those who represent the most serious international threats, forced Paul into hiding. If he sets foot in over 100 Interpol-member countries, he could face extradition.



### WHALING AROUND THE WORLD

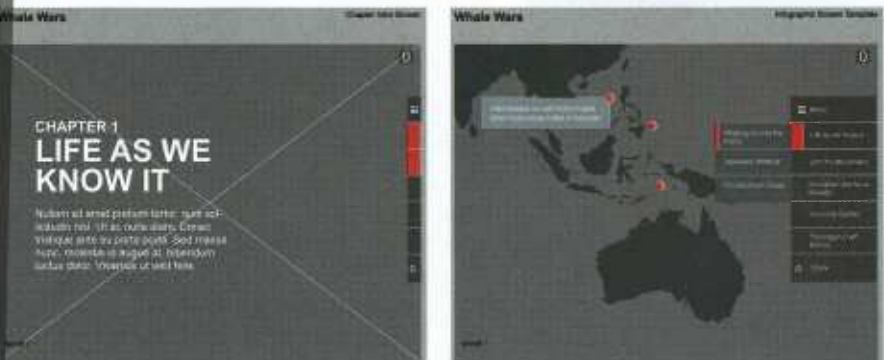
Nam tempor nisi rhoncus erat volutpat aliquam. Aliquam vel porttitor nunc, non porta nunc.

A MAJORITY OF JAPANESE ARE DIFFERENT TO WHALING. 89% SAY THEY HAVE NOT BOUGHT ANY WHALE MEAT IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS.

# A CREATIVE DISCOVERY

Whale Wars as a project is slightly unique in terms of its genesis and commissioning process. Where traditionally sites are built by standalone digital agencies, responding to an external client's brief - this one came about wholly differently. However, the very nature of the in-house arrangement within Discovery Communications arguably has been integral to the quality of the product. What's more, that same close commitment to such a respected brand has helped to propel a "small but mighty" interactive team from humble beginnings.

"I started at Discovery in 1999 as a print art director with a passion for digital," recalls Key. "In 2006, I saw an opportunity to create a team to support a growing demand at Discovery for interactive work. Those early days were modest, to say the least, but invaluable. We were excited to jump into any project, no matter the scale or complexity, cutting our teeth on numerous microsites, Flash games and a lot of corporate and B2B work. From the beginning we were dedicated to creativity and quality, even in our code! Project by project, our work gained attention within the company. The scale and visibility of our projects and client base increased dramatically over the years. Today we service many of Discovery's networks including Discovery Channel, Animal Planet, and TLC."



👋 I don't think we had ever waited so long to crack open Photoshop on a project. I took that as a sign we were doing something right this time 🙌

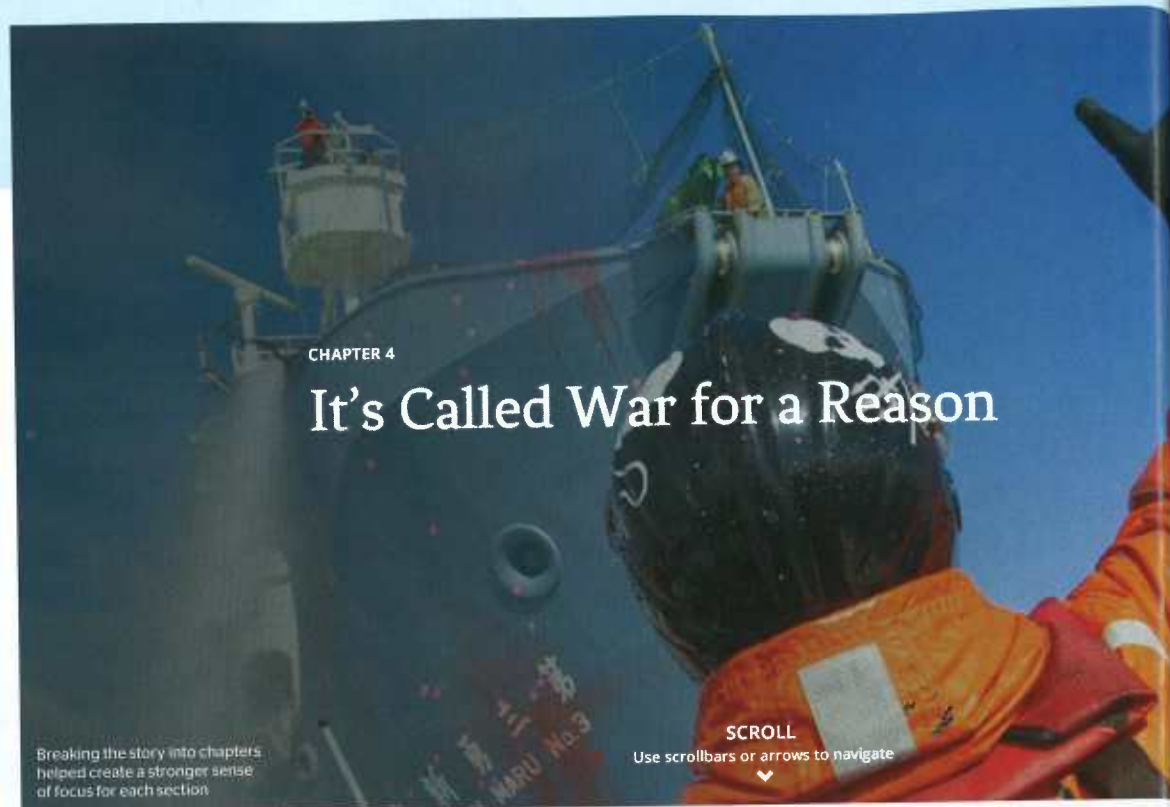
# COMMITMENT TO THE CAUSE

The projects Discovery Agency takes on are primarily promotional vehicles for the network. *Whale Wars* fits into that remit for expanding the programming brand, with the same team also assigned to maintain the site during the TV broadcast. So when a project is deemed finished how does that 'handover' process deviate from the normal routine?

"With our in-house agency model, we measure project completeness slightly differently," begins PJ Camp Malik, interactive project manager. "Instead of transferring ownership from one organisation to another, our in-house agency model allows us to shepherd projects from concept through to launch. For our group, a project is completed once code is pushed live to an end user and our team concludes a post-launch maintenance phase."

However, just as you might monitor and support the release of an endangered species into the wild, the concern goes on. For the *Whale Wars* team a period of around a month would cover formal maintenance service and even facilitate revisions impossible to address in the first site iteration.

"A benefit to our model of ownership through the project's lifecycle allowed us the opportunity to revisit some of the lower priority features after our initial release," continues Malik. "We were able to make post-launch changes successfully, while maintaining quality and enhancing the overall user experience of the site. For *Whale Wars*, we re-released the site a few days after the initial launch to include fit-and-finish features like the animation used on the initial loading screen. With regard to our commitment to post-launch maintenance, our team commits to be wholly responsible for the site for a pre-defined period of time, typically 30 days. Maintenance will continue if there are additional marketing campaigns surrounding the site or editorial updates required."



## 19th Century Whale Economy

By day, whale blubber and bones were processed into popular household products. But at night, the transformative value of the whale was realized as whale oil for streetlights, lighthouses and house lamps.

PRODUCTS MADE FROM WHALE OIL

PRODUCTS MADE FROM WHALEBONE

Whale oil comes from the blubber of a whale. Sperm whale oil, or spermaceti, is a bright, smokeless, long-lasting oil that quickly became the most popular.



New Bedford, MA, the center of whaling was the

**RICHEST CITY**  
per capita in the U.S. — if not the world.

Whale oil was the primary fuel source for

**LIGHTING**  
the industrializing world.

Outside artist Tommaso Zennaro was drafted in to create bespoke illustrations for the project

## Our goal was to bring the story to life online, expand our technical capabilities, and experiment in user experience

whale and ship illustrations was a natural fit given his own love for the show. On the flipside was the sound design and adding an extra sensory dimension here.

"We were looking for sounds that would really enhance the experience and not distract, as well as complement the visuals we had chosen," explains Zaida Jocson, senior interactive designer. "We also realised the experience had an ebb and flow, so Chapter 1 began with more graceful ocean sounds to introduce users to the Southern Ocean, whereas the climax of Chapter 4 used dramatic helicopter and ship radio transmissions during the heat of a battle to heighten the intensity of the moment. With our key visual and sound design assets sourced, as a team we then brainstormed the key interactions on the site. In terms of graphical work to create the front-end, we did not rely heavily on Photoshop during most of the project. We did use it to present ideas to clients for some of the key screens, but we primarily designed the interactions in code."

With the final *Whale Wars* experience proving so visual, the development work hinged on powering the frontend. The coding would ultimately dictate flow and narrative for a story told with the assets, reacting to how the audience would navigate and interact. This involved asking lots of hypothetical questions about how a user might move through - would it be via individual pages or long vertical scrolls? How interactive might the infographics be and how would that work?

"Before any real design or story had come together, we'd already done a fair bit of prototyping and research, and had a good idea of what libraries, tools and methods we liked and didn't like," developer Paul Smith describes. "In the meantime, writers and video producers were coming up with a story outline and combing through lots of

existing media from the show. But it felt like the two teams were struggling to make substantive progress working in isolation. To solve that, we built tools to help us quickly get our sketches and experiments in front of the storytelling team. With a limited timeline, it really helped that we were able to, for example, quickly knock up a demo showing the difference between cover (with clipping) and contain (with letterboxing) for full-screen video."

The finished 'interactive episode' launched just days before the network TV premiere, with the clients coordinating promotion plans alongside. Campaigns across affiliated websites, Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts were pivotal in generating interest. The marketing team then placed on-air graphics during the show to highlight the URL, while Paul Watson and his Sea Shepherd Society shared among followers.

"Typical measures of success like traffic and ad revenue don't particularly apply to *Blood and Water*", Jess Wolfley concludes. "Indeed, that wasn't really the goal. Our goal was to bring the *Whale Wars* story to life online, expand our technical capabilities, and experiment in user experience. It was a really special chance to try something outside of conventional requirements, which can sometimes limit taking creative risks. Social media, however, has allowed us the opportunity to receive direct feedback from our audiences. To date, we have seen an overwhelmingly supportive response from fans of *Whale Wars* and the emerging field of interactive documentaries. We've heard great feedback from folks in the documentary film world, web designers from other agencies and critics in the industry. For our team, this is a great measure of success. Overall, if we have inspired passion for the show and interest in whale conservation, we've done our jobs."

## THE BIG QUESTION...

Whales are graceful and peaceful creatures, so we asked the team: if you could communicate with them, what would you tell them about the human race?



“Humans are the greatest paradox on the planet, capable of both cruelty and kindness in extremes”

**ZAIDA JOCSON,**  
SENIOR INTERACTIVE DESIGNER



“Whales are a fascinating species. If I could communicate with them, I'd prefer to know more about them than tell them about humans. Humans are complex and sometimes very confusing creatures”

**PJ CAMP MALIK,**  
INTERACTIVE PROJECT MANAGER



“There are good people and there are bad people. Some of us want to help but others want to harm. Unfortunately you cannot tell which is which. If possible, avoid all of us”

**MATT BROWN, QA**



“I'd tell them its probably best to avoid humans, there are some bad eggs among us”

**GREG JOHNSON,**  
SENIOR INTERACTIVE ART DIRECTOR



“Humans are often a misunderstood species, and while you may see the extreme, there are those who fight to preserve. Just keep on swimming”

**ROSS LEMENILLE,**  
WEB DEVELOPER