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Dive Into TheBlu, A Social Ocean Experience with a Cause

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TheBlu, an online social experience in a digital ocean, is now available for download.

The queen angelfish moves swiftly in an endless pool of pure, blue ocean. The creature's magenta body passes gracefully over gardens of lush thong weed, bursts of yellow cluster anemone, and fierce spouts of pinkish-colored black coral in a vibrant Caribbean reef. Her caudal fin sways with the current as a colossal striped marlin rushes by. And, in the distance, a pair of black ocellaris clownfish dive past a monstrous barracuda. While witnessing these sights usually requires a plane ticket and scuba gear, with the new social media and graphic art app, theBlu [1], all you need is a computer.

Launched May 4, theBlu is a global art and entertainment social media application where users can explore miles of digitized ocean. Like the queen angelfish I've been following, every species in theBlu is an original work created by an international group of artists, animators, and developers—including Academy Award winners Andy Jones (*Avatar*) and Kevin Mack (*What Dreams May Come*). As if the breathtaking graphics weren't enough, theBlu is also dedicated to saving the same environments it depicts, collaborating with Mission Blue, Ocean

Elders, Oceanic Preservation Society, Scripps Institution of Oceanography and WildAid.

"TheBlu is different from other online apps in many dimensions," explains the app's co-founder, Neville Spiteri. He and Scott Yara, his co-founder, have been on a mission to create a global experience inspired by the ocean since they met in 2000. "The internet is a complex, interconnected system that surrounds our planet. The internet is a great platform to represent and celebrate our oceans," Spiteri says.

Unlike Zynga's FishVille or other online social apps, Wemo Media's theBlu is an ocean experience, not a game. In this sense, the app is a lot like the real ocean: you can't feed or name the fish. But there are lots of other interactions available. Users can click on any species and read about them. And soon, fish will know when you've been following them, Spiteri says.

(Photo courtesy of TheBlu)

"The richness of user interactions with species will continue to evolve. We are developing an ever increasingly complex AI system that drives the species behaviors," he explains.

Users can purchase credits to collect various species and access to other environments. Over 100 species and 8 ocean habitats are available now, but more will be added every month. The artificial creatures you purchase will end up in their native digital habitats. But be careful: The purchases will ultimately influence the environment.

"The choices you make as a user impact the ecosystem. For example, if you introduce more predators you will likely see more chasing behaviors," Spiteri says.

User purchases could also impact oceans in the real world. When users purchase species or habitats sponsored by the app's non-profit collaborators, 25 percent of the price will go directly towards that group's projects supporting their work with the ocean. The program is designed to also increase awareness of the collaborators' conservation efforts.

"It's a beautiful, novel concept and I think the social media aspect is really exciting because it's going to connect people with the oceans that get so little attention," Louie Psihoyos, executive director of the Oceanic Preservation Society, says in a press release.

But Spiteri adds this is just the beginning.

"As more people join the experience, the more theBlu becomes an experience of ocean life growing and swimming across the web," he explains. "There will be many more storytelling characteristics and more gamification elements that will be released to allow different users with different play styles to engage with the app."
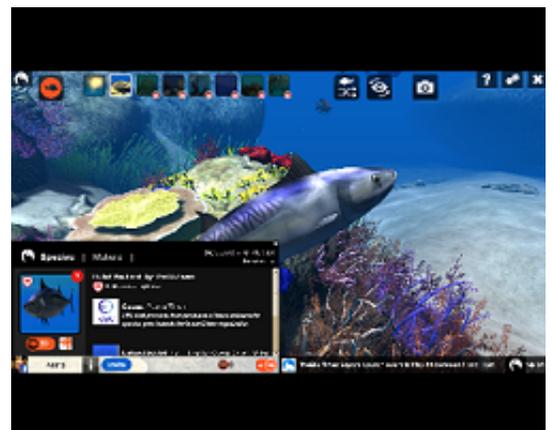
The user interface of theBlu. (Screenshot: theBlu)

On World Ocean Day, June 8, a big, blue whale will be released into the digital ocean, where she will roam the application's various habitats. Spiteri says they are thinking of making your own habitat—an empty ocean space where purchased species are found—customizable.

TheBlu is also being enabled to allow students and professionals to participate around the world.

"TheBlu is on a trajectory to enable a 'globally shared moment' where, like the Olympics, or the Soccer World Cup final or a U. S. presidential inauguration, hundreds of millions of people around the world are sharing an experience," Spiteri says. "Online apps today don't do that."

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Dive In: To use the app, simply click <u>here</u> [2] and the download should begin immediately. You can explore the first environment—the reef—as a guest or you can create a log in (with or without connecting to Facebook) to explore further. TheBlu is available now for PC and Mac, but will be offered on mobile and tablet devices in the future.

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type='text/javascript'%3E%3C/script%3E")); var pageTracker = _gat._getTracker("UA-
6149536-1"); pageTracker._trackPageview();
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