

Once Upon a Time There Was Blippar

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It might seem strange to think of an application that demonstrates a principle that is still under development as a thing of the past, but that's just what happened to what used to be one of my favorite apps.

Blippar (www.blippar.com) started out as an augmented reality company in 2011, creating "augmented" candy wrappers and the like for advertising. Over time, the company developed some serious visual recognition capabilities, and produced an app for both Android and iOS that could recognize objects and then crawl the web to tell you everything about whatever it was that you gave it to scan. But from an information specialist's point of view, even wilder and more exciting than the computer vision was that the Blippar app could give you an intelligent and useful ontology about the object, and you could drill through to other ontologies following your own path from idea to idea.

The accompanying video shows a live Blippar session on iPhone, extracted from an online course I do for the master's program at the University of Strasbourg, in France.

Sadly, they just couldn't seem to get their business model right, and after \$130 million in venture capital funding, they announced at the end of 2018 they were going into administration. Since then, one of their shareholders, Candy Ventures, bought up all their intellectual property, brought them out of administration, and you can now once again download a Blippar app – but it has nothing to do with the one in the video, it's back to augmented candy wrappers, alas.

All the same, it is worth taking a look at the app that was, because it demonstrates clear Information 4.0 principles:

- It uses molecules of information drawn from many places into a sort of mashup.
- It presents the information in a variety of forms, including ontologies, which give an *offer* of information, not a traditional delivery.
- Since it scans real objects in real time, it even has a contextual element (though that's not its strongest suit).
- Since it is gathering material in real time from the web, when it constructs its results, it always provides the latest updated versions – a kind of automatic dynamic delivery.

Blippar represents an unguided journey through the megaverse of information and data – but imagine if the technology were applied to providing *guided* journeys around specific domains? Imagine what that could mean for user experiences, education, informal and non-formal learning, etc.?

A Brief Exchange with Andy McDonald About Blippar

RG: Why do you think they never found a business model?

AM: I think they were too early, and they weren't investing enough money in the right place on the content. What we saw from Blippar was an imaginative way to get the content, mostly pulling from Wikipedia and from Google. But they had no idea that to go further, they needed an intermediate content model that helped people gain some value from it. And that's why I think they failed.

RG: So you're saying they should have had some way to do content creation with it.

AM: Or content curation.

RG: Because they did offer an SDK and they had a whole education model set up, but the idea was to help people develop more guided journeys, so I think they were going, somehow, in that direction. But for me it was also a problem that what they saw as their breakthrough technology was visual recognition, rather than the construction of ontologies.

AM: Absolutely, that's where they failed. Their technology definitely was about visual recognition, and they were good at it, and then they went into using Blippar as a marketing tool. They would have needed ten times the funding to develop the content model.

RG: Unless it was limited to certain specific domains.

AM: Yes