HOW **CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR** IS ACCELERATING **AUGMENTED REALITY**

Hollis approached the body. That wasn't there. But was. Alberto was following her with the laptop, careful of the cable.

This is the moment in William Gibson's 2007 novel, Spook Country, when the characters approach the body of actor, River Phoenix, lying on the L.A. street where he died. River Phoenix's death occurred some 14 years earlier, but Hollis and Alberto are seeing him as he was then, thanks to GPS-triggered augmented-reality (AR) headsets. Phoenix's death is the latest piece of 'locative art' appearing around the city, a trend which journalist, Hollis, has been asked to investigate.

Reading about augmented reality a decade ago in Gibson's novel was, at the time, eye opening. Although the fictional novel is set in 'present day' 2007, these technologies, of course, weren't widely available to the public then. In fact, the first ever iPhone was only released two months before the book. But Gibson is renowned for being on the ball with his predictions. Cyberspace is a word he coined in 1982 and in Pattern Recognition — a prequel to Spook Country published in 2003 — a series of video clips sent over the internet which gains a cult following perfectly described the imminent rise

> **"Things shifted rapidly, though, with the release of Pokémon Go in 2016, hunting for Pokémon via phone screens."**

of vlogging, itself facilitated by the launch of YouTube in 2005.

But while only a two-year gap existed between Pattern Recognition and YouTube, we've had to wait much longer for the proliferation of augmented reality technology outlined in Spook Country. Yes, some similar devices have existed for several years. Computer scientist Ivan Sutherland developed the first Head-Up Display (HUD) capable of overlaying graphics on real-world surroundings in 1968. And tech like this has been adopted in military, space and aeronautical scenarios since — the term 'augmented reality' was coined by a Boeing engineer in 1990. Like in

the novel, there's been AR art such as the 1994 theatre production, Dance in Cyberspace. Advertisers and some brands have got in on the act too, with various AR campaigns and product tie-ins (see time-line). Even the iPhone 3G, released in 2008, gave people access to ARToolKit software for the first time, but still, AR technology wasn't ubiquitous. It never became a part of consumer culture. Hope that Google would change that was dashed in 2015 when its Google Glass prototype was discontinued.

Things shifted rapidly, though, with the release of Pokémon Go in 2016. Before Niantic's AR mobile gaming app, which places players in their own

neighbourhoods hunting for Pokémon seen and 'caught' via phone screens, consumers had little awareness of the potential capabilities of AR. By the end of its first year, the app had been downloaded more than 500 million times. It seemed fancy headsets and glasses weren't required, and instead, the simple marrying up of AR with smart phones was the key to get markets moving, providing consumers with immersive experiences that resembled those in Spook Country, but without the laptop and cable – even better! Referring to Pokémon Go, Gibson himself tweeted: "I always wondered what a mainstream augmented reality hit product would look like. Now at last I know."

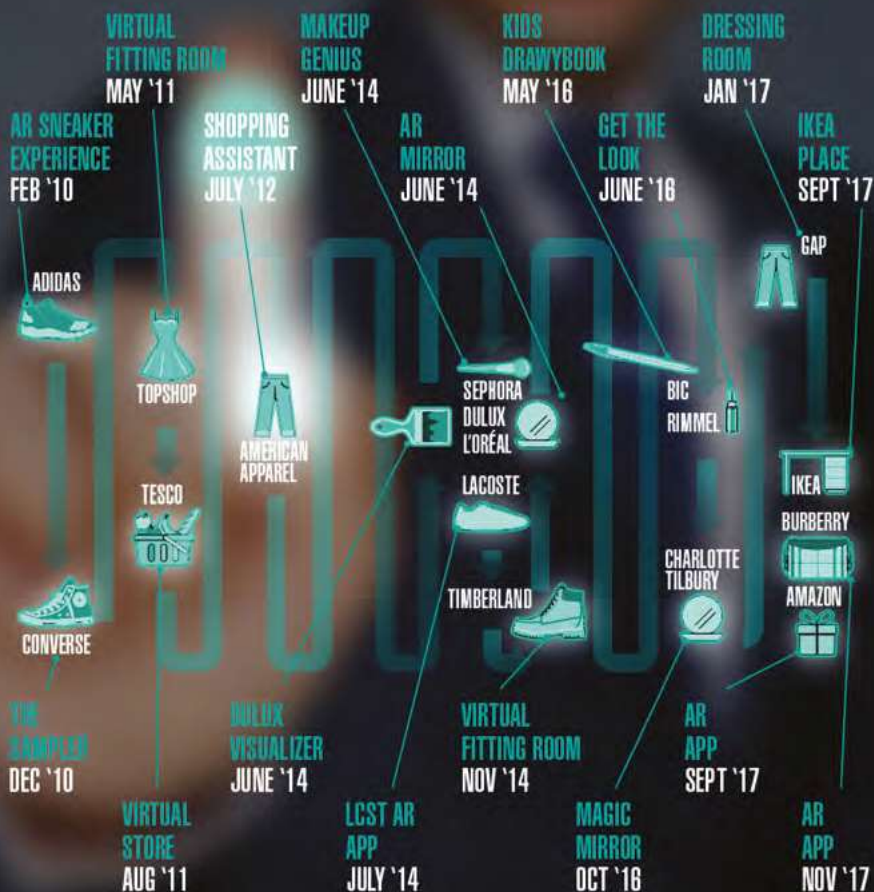Since 2016, more brands and retailers have begun making significant

> **"AR has revealed to shoppers that they too can enjoy a greater interaction and personalised experiences with brands, products and retailers."**

investments in AR technologies to capitalise on what Euromonitor labelled a 'Top 10 Global Consumer trend.' Its report focused on the ability for AR to offer 'try before you buy online shopping experiences' that would bring 'the benefits of in-store shopping into the home.' This, Euromonitor reveals, will lead to better online conversion — specifically of those consumers buying big ticket items like furniture, as well as clothes and footwear often lost at the point of sale because investment in these items requires a degree of visual confirmation that the products look

right on the body or in the home.

The rise of AR also comes at a time when there's a heightened rejection of 'intrusive' and 'manipulative' marketing techniques. Like how Pokémon Go puts players 'into' the game, the vehicle of AR has revealed to shoppers that they too can enjoy a greater interaction and personalised experiences with brands, products and retailers — in and outside of the store — rather than being subjected to traditional 'one way' messaging. Indeed, personalisation is one of the 51 ecommerce trends for 2018 identified by Growcode, and AR also fits well with other key developments such as Live Video Streaming, Guided Selling and Visual Search also acknowledged as things brands and stores need to start doing to re-engage consumers frustrated by old advertising techniques. Collectively, these tools create opportunities for companies to launch 'experiential marketing' campaigns which seek to position consumers as active participants in the buying journey — the perfect stage for AR to shine.

Those brands and retailers that have entered the AR game seem wise to do so, with various reports indicating a high demand for AR technologies to become embedded in purchasing journeys. As referenced by Euromonitor, in 2017 management consultancy LEK found 80% of consumers were interested in using AR to visualise products in their home. Furthermore, Retail Perceptions — a global consultancy specialising in the retail industry — discovered that 40% of shoppers will pay more for a product if they could first experience it via AR. In its 2016 survey, 61% of respondents also indicated they would prefer to shop in stores that offered AR experiences.

VIRTUAL FITTING ROOM MAY '11 — TOPSHOP

MAKEUP GENIUS JUNE '14

KIDS DRAWYBOOK MAY '16

DRESSING ROOM JAN '17

AR SNEAKER EXPERIENCE FEB '10 — ADIDAS

SHOPPING ASSISTANT JULY '12 — AMERICAN APPAREL

AR MIRROR JUNE '14 — SEPHORA DULUX L'ORÉAL / LACOSTE

GET THE LOOK JUNE '16 — BIC RIMMEL / CHARLOTTE TILBURY

IKEA PLACE SEPT '17 — GAP / IKEA / BURBERRY / AMAZON

TESCO / CONVERSE

THE SAMPLER DEC '10

DULUX VISUALIZER JUNE '14

VIRTUAL FITTING ROOM NOV '14 — TIMBERLAND

AR APP SEPT '17

VIRTUAL STORE AUG '11

LCST AR APP JULY '14

MAGIC MIRROR OCT '16

AR APP NOV '17

Demand is so high, in fact, that UK tech firm Digital Bridge found that 87% of shoppers expected brands and retailers to have developed an AR tool by the end of 2018, for use across 900 million AR-enabled smartphones.

According to Euromonitor, two key pieces of innovation are helping brands and retailers realise their AR potential. Apple's AR development platform for iOS, ARKit, released in September 2017, has enabled developers to build high-detail AR experiences using Apple devices, as well as improve earlier releases of apps on older platforms and offer them to a wider range of smart phone users. Then,

in March 2018, the Android equivalent, ARCore, appeared which has also become the operating platform for several AR apps.

Analysts have confirmed the AR market will be worth $11.14 billion in 2018, yet those companies utilising the technology are still in the minority and primarily 'big firms' — Deloitte revealed around 90% of companies with revenues between $100 million and $1 billion are now utilising AR. With the market now truly scalable and expected to grow to $60.55 billion by 2023, we should expect AR to become an integral part of the shopping experience over the next few years.

NIGEL WRIGHT