

# Grab a byte of augmented reality

Start-ups are getting their heads around the latest technology – and companies such as Eddie Rocket's are giving them a boost

As a father of young children, Eoin O'Reilly knows that the plastic toys handed out by fast-food restaurants do not get much use. "They play with them for 30 seconds and then they're thrown down the left in the car," he says.

O'Reilly, the marketing manager of Eddie Rocket's, reckoned an augmented reality (AR) alternative was a "no-brainer". Not only could it provide more entertainment, but it would not end up in landfill.

Last month the diner business launched AR collector cards for children. Users scan a QR code on a card to download an app, which allows them to view their phone at the card to see the characters on it come to life in 3D. The animations include a discourse running across the diners' tables and an eagle soaring above them.

O'Reilly hoped to hit 10,000 downloads in the first month, but within two weeks there were 17,500.

"We're the first restaurant in the country to use AR like this, and yet it is so cost-effective," he said. "We didn't spend a fraction of what we would on plastic toys, but it's a simple to use, it's more interactive and there's no waste."

Eddie Rocket's worked with Accorstar, a Co Kildare-based virtual technology start-up that specialises in AR. Most of Accorstar's work is in the construction sector, for which it has developed AR health and safety training for workers, who view it on their phones.

Accorstar founder Cathal Leonard says AR offers a more engaging way to deliver training, particularly for younger workers. "This way the instructor comes into the room, and participants on the course download an app and watch the modules come to life on their phone," he says.

Smartphones will soon come with built-in AR, according to Leonard. He highlights Xbox, during a recent visit to Dublin, Apple boss Tim Cook identified AR as the "core big thing" and predicted it would "pervade our entire lives".

UtilityAR is another start-up offering AR solutions. The firm was set up by Patrick Liddy, who, with business partner Activation Energy, developed energy efficiency software for the enterprise sector. Liddy sold it three years later to energy solutions company Enertrac. In a trade million-euro deal,

"That business required an on-site activation specialist and several people in industrial areas to go out and having to hire electricians and train them



Eoin O'Reilly and his daughter Amber are fans of the AR collector cards at Eddie Rocket's, which scanned up with Accorstar in Kildare to produce them

up to install the equipment," says Liddy. The work was costly and time-consuming. When he came across a presentation on augmented reality, his first thought was "My God, this is the solution to my problem."

"I'm of an age that means I missed the first web boom, and I regret that," he says, but adds that AR is an opportunity

to catch what will be an equally significant wave.

UtilityAR's solutions require users to wear AR glasses with digital sensors that allow others to see what the wearer sees, and provide input. Google unveiled its AR glasses eight years ago, but there is little consumer demand for such headsets.

"I'm a geek and not even I would wear them yet," says Liddy. "But it's like the early days of the mobile phone, when the only people who used them were business men and jerks. That is how it will be with AR. The glasses will become normal through their adoption by enterprise and their use by workers, who use them because their bosses can see the value."

Liddy has targeted the likely early adopters of AR technology. "Those who know this is transformative for their business and want to get in on the ground floor to get competitive advantage." He likens those holding out from exploring

AR to those who argued that it was not worth investing in a smartphone until the iPhone X appeared. "But just think how much value businesses can get from their Nokia touch on the stage."

AR is being understood in factories, though business owners can be slow here. "The real barrier to winning new customers is that Ireland is in a lull," says Liddy. "Everybody is extremely busy doing growth-related activities. Plus, you can absorb only so much innovation at any one time, and if you're a factory right now, you have to choose between investing in AR or things such as 3D printing or further automation and robotics."

When Jim Hunt, client services manager at environmental engineering company CDM Smith, wanted a better way of utilising expertise – he turned to AR.

The company, which employs 5,000 people worldwide, looks after water quality in Irish projects such as the moni-

toring of wells for the Environmental Protection Agency. Much of its work is in remote locations and, if an unusual issue arises, including its experts – especially those overseas – can be costly. "I found myself thinking if the Terminator so that, instead of just collecting data digitally, we could see all the information," says Hunt.

Liddy was contacted by Hunt after he heard him speak at a conference. Now, CDM Smith engineers use AR glasses to share visuals and data with colleagues, who can overlay it with additional information and guidance. "It has been a game-changer," says Hunt. "One pair of glasses is paid for by not having to bring one expert over for two days, and clients see the benefits in terms of cost increased efficiency. We're pushing the boundaries of what's possible with AR. It's only through use that you say, 'OK, we can now do this too.'"

**GTI** - The Group Travel Specialists

Discover the Beautiful

€1199