

Bar codes without barriers – is this the web's next big thing?

Level 2 • Intermediate

1 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

convergence

embed

ceramics

bar code

geek

tag

grant

Oxfam

preserve

collaborator

1. A _____ is someone who is boring, especially because they seem to be interested only in computers. (para 2)
2. If you _____ something, you fix an electronic identification number to it so that you can follow it and know where it is. (para 2)
3. _____ is a large charity that helps poor people all over the world. (para 2)
4. _____ is a situation in which people or things gradually become the same or very similar. (para 3)
5. A _____ is a set of printed lines on a product's label that tells a computer information about it such as its price. (para 3)
6. If you _____ something like an idea or a memory, you keep it from changing or being lost. (para 4)
7. If you _____ something, you fix it firmly in a surface or object. (para 4)
8. _____ is the process of making objects from clay by baking it at a very high temperature so that it becomes hard. (para 4)
9. A _____ is an amount of money that the government or an organization gives you for a specific purpose and does not ask you to pay back. (para 5)
10. A _____ is someone you work with in order to produce something. (para 6)

2 Find the information

Look in the text and find the information as quickly as possible.

1. What do the letters UCL stand for?
2. What two technologies have converged to make this idea possible?
3. What is the name of the researchers' website?
4. What would be used to tag objects initially?
5. What three social networking sites are mentioned in the article?
6. What three smartphones are mentioned?

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Victor Keegan
15 April, 2010

- 1 If you found an old book in your bookshelf, would you like to know what your great-grandfather thought about it? If the answer to this is 'No', then read no further. If the answer is 'Yes', then welcome to the next revolutionary thing on the web: the 'geography of things'.
- 2 In theory, every object in the world could hold memories of its own history and even 'talk' to other objects. How is this possible? For years geeks have been talking about the "internet of things" in which products such as a light bulb could have their own unique web address and more recently the phrase "geography of things" has been discussed. But somehow these ideas have never got anywhere near real-life experiences. Until now. A group centred on University College London (UCL) has started a website called tales of things (<http://talesofthings.com/>) where they hope to turn ideas into reality. One of their first plans is to tag every object in an Oxfam shop to see what happens to them and to deposit a number of tagged books in public places. But that's only the beginning.
- 3 All this is possible because of the convergence of two technologies – the mobile phone and the new generation of 2D bar codes. Last year I wrote about the revolutionary prospects for the bar code but I didn't expect it to happen so quickly. Smartphones such as the iPhone, Google's Android range and Nokia can now scan a bar code automatically. You don't have to press a button; you just point the phone at a bar code and it takes you to a website giving details about the product.
- 4 So, if you wanted to, you could attach photographs from your Flickr account to a wine glass to remind you of a pleasant evening or tag your car so your memories of the car are preserved for you and could, if you wanted, be left there for future owners. Initially objects would be tagged with stickers but later they could be embedded inside the object using ceramics.
- 5 Dr Andrew Hudson-Smith, senior research fellow at UCL's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, told a conference at UCL that he first got the idea when he was at an event where one of the artists kept banging on a bowl. This was annoying for a lot of people and someone said, "Wouldn't it be nice if the bowl could talk?" Why not, he thought. They got a grant and he and a team of colleagues have been working hard on the project ever since.
- 6 When I talked to delegates afterwards, they had mixed feelings ranging from strong support to a feeling it was all a bit crazy and people wondered why they got a grant for doing this sort of thing. My reaction was rather different. I thought I was looking at something that could – repeat: *could* – be really big. If it was happening at a university in the US, researchers would already be thinking about how they could turn it into the 'Facebook of things'. For heaven's sake, why shouldn't something big grow from UCL and its collaborators? It isn't a new invention, it is simply – as so often happens – that they have put something together in an interesting way. Which means they have to act quickly before someone else steals their idea.
- 7 Unlike the early days of Facebook and Twitter, there are obvious ways to make money from the project. Insurance companies, not to mention auctioneers, would love to have all this data tagged and, once objects are recorded in this way, it would be easy to link to a website if you wanted to buy something. Theft might increase (because burglars might know where things are) or it might be reduced, if objects had embedded tags that were difficult to remove. But then, that's us (the British) all over: we always look for a reason not to do something rather than leaping at the opportunity.

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3 Comprehension check

Are the statements true (T) or false (F) according to the text?

1. The ‘geography of things’ means that products will have memories of their own history.
2. Smartphones read and display the contents of bar codes.
3. Dr Hudson-Smith developed the idea together with an artist.
4. Delegates at the conference all thought the idea was a bit crazy.
5. US researchers are working on a similar project.
6. Theft might increase because burglars would know where things are.

4 Find the word

Look in the text and find the words and expressions.

1. a verb meaning *to put or leave something somewhere* (para 2)
2. an adverb meaning *at first* (para 4)
3. a verb meaning *to hit something hard, making a loud noise* (para 5)
4. an adjective meaning *making you feel slightly angry or impatient* (para 5)
5. a three-word expression used to show that you are annoyed or impatient with someone (para 6)
6. a noun meaning *someone whose job it is to sell things at a public occasion where things are sold to the people who offer the most money for them* (para 7)
7. a four-word expression used for saying that a type of behaviour is typical of someone (para 7)
8. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *to accept something quickly and in an enthusiastic way* (para 7)

5 Two-word expressions

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make two-word expressions from the text.

- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| 1. bar | a. address |
| 2. light | b. code |
| 3. real | c. feelings |
| 4. mixed | d. company |
| 5. insurance | e. bulb |
| 6. web | f. life |

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6 Word building

Match the endings to the words to make words from the text.

- | | |
|---------------|-----------|
| 1. auction | a. - ary |
| 2. revolution | b. - ion |
| 3. automatic | c. - ity |
| 4. research | d. - ally |
| 5. real | e. - eer |
| 6. invent | f. - er |

7 Discussion

What other things would you like your mobile phone to be able to do?

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KEY

1 Key words

1. geek
2. tag
3. Oxfam
4. convergence
5. bar code
6. preserve
7. embed
8. ceramics
9. grant
10. collaborator

2 Find the information

1. University College London
2. mobile phones and bar codes
3. tales of things
4. stickers
5. Flickr, Facebook and Twitter
6. iPhone, Google's Android range and Nokia

3 Comprehension check

1. T
2. F
3. F
4. F
5. F
6. T

4 Find the word

1. deposit
2. initially
3. bang
4. annoying
5. for heaven's sake
6. auctioneer
7. that's us all over (Note: *us* can be replaced with other pronouns or noun phrases)
8. leap at

5 Two-word expressions

1. b
2. e
3. f
4. c
5. d
6. a

6 Word building

1. e
2. a
3. d
4. f
5. c
6. b