





TECH

Snap looks to enhance augmented reality features with acquisition of British research lab Ariel AI

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Sam Shead
@SAM_L_SHEAD

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KEY POINTS

- Snap, the parent company of social media app Snapchat, has acquired a British artificial intelligence start-up called Ariel AI which focuses on augmented reality.
- Ariel AI was founded in London in 2018 by a group of former Google and Facebook research scientists including Chief Executive Iasonas Kokkinos and Chief Technology Officer George Papandreou.
- Snap told CNBC that Ariel AI's team joined its computer vision team in London at the end of 2020.



Evan Spiegel, co-founder and chief executive officer of Snap Inc., stands on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange during the company's initial public offering on Thursday, March 2, 2017.

Michael Nagle | Bloomberg | Getty Images

LONDON — [Snap](#), the parent company of social media app Snapchat, has acquired a British artificial intelligence start-up called Ariel AI which focuses on augmented reality.

Ariel AI was founded in London in 2018 by a group of former Google and Facebook research scientists including Chief Executive Iasonas Kokkinos and Chief Technology Officer George Papandreou. The news was first [reported by Business Insider](#) and confirmed to CNBC by Snap on Tuesday.

Prior to the Snap acquisition, Ariel AI had raised \$1.1 million in funding from investors, according to Crunchbase. Snap declined to comment on the price of the new deal, but it is likely in the single-digit millions.

Artificial intelligence can be defined as intelligence demonstrated by machines, while augmented reality is a technology that involves overlaying digital content and information onto the physical world.

Ariel AI has been focusing on an area of AI known as computer vision, which is used to build augmented reality features.

The start-up's website says that its software allows "3D human perception" in real time and that it can be used to power "the next generation of consumer experiences on mobile devices."

A YouTube demo video shows how the company's technology can render a 3D model of a person in real time. The model can then be used for virtual clothes try-ons and immersive gaming.

Snap told CNBC that Ariel AI's team joined its computer vision team in London at the end of 2020.

The start-up's 12 engineers have been tasked with making the Snapchat camera "smarter" and improving the augmented reality experiences that allow Snapchat users to engage with the real world.

Snap said their work will focus on understanding geometry, semantics and more of what is in the field of view of the camera.

Nathan Benaich, an AI investor at Air Street Capital and co-author of the annual State of AI report, told CNBC that he wasn't surprised Snap bought Ariel AI.

"That was my bet actually," he said, adding that Facebook, Samsung, and Pokemon Go maker Niantic were other contenders for him.

Benaich said he thinks Snap bought Ariel because it is "focused on on-device 3D mesh building in a snappy and battery efficient way with a use case in AR."

He also said Snap probably also bought the company for the talent that it has across its workforce.

Social media firms like TikTok and Facebook are battling it out to develop the most sophisticated AR experiences for their users. These range from dog ears that people can superimpose on top of their heads to other special effects.

U.S. tech firms have acquired several British AI start-ups in recent years. The best-known example is Google buying DeepMind for a reported \$600 million in 2014. Elsewhere, Twitter bought Magic Pony Technology for \$150 million, while Facebook bought Bloomsbury AI in a deal worth up to \$30 million.

Snap also bought a start-up called Voisey last November, which has developed an app that allows people to overlay their own voice on short music tracks.

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