

**Multiplatform Design Project: The Air Tag**

Annabelle Hardy

T00686440

Thompson Rivers University

CMNS 3800

November 19, 2024

What is something you wish your air tag could do as well as tracking? Or do you use it in a unique way? Whatever it may be we all have some sort of expectation for technology to do it all. The idea of an affordance, properties of a media object that suggests how it can be used, also comes in the form of imagined affordances. This paper will be exploring these ideas of affordances and imagined affordances within the air tag by looking at the work of authors Peter Nagy and Gina Neff from their piece “*Imagined Affordances: Reconstructing a Keyword for communication*”. Beginning with what Nagy and Neff might want to know about the air tag in relation to their work, what are some affordances they would be interested in exploring, and how the affordances of an air tag have changed over time. Ending on the idea of how the affordances of an air tag might be adapted into another piece of technology.

The Apple air tag is a small disc within a slick, plastic, white outer shell controlled via other Apple products such as the iPhone, iPad, and any MacBook through Bluetooth (Apple, n.d). Originally made to act as a key finder the air tags affordances have been used to the highest availability by attaching it to luggage in airports, inside vehicles, and inside wallets. To dig deeper into some of these affordances of the air tag we turn to the notions of Peter Nagy and Gina Neff. Nagy and Neff, a postdoctoral fellow at Central European Universities Center for data and an associate professor at the department of communications at the university of Washington, create a paper based on reconstructing the word “Affordance” for communication. In this text these authors begin by explaining that “affordance is a word adopted from ecological psychology and is widely used in tech studies” (Nagy & Neff, 2015). This immediately readers know that the term “affordance” is specifically used around media objects and as mentioned above it is the properties of a media object and how it might be used (Nagy & Neff, 2015). From this, Nagy and Neff brought in the connection to imagined affordances; “imagined affordances emerge between

users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers" (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Our ability to come up with or present imagined affordances is entirely based on our own, personal experiences with said piece of media technology. Because of our life observations, and what we want most from technology helps us discover what creates affordances and imagined affordances. To summarize our understanding of affordances we should remember this; "affordances are simultaneously waiting in an environment and simultaneously waiting to be recognized, especially by specific individuals" (Nagy & Neff, 2015). Affordances are always there, it just takes a specific point of view, or as Nagy and Neff mentioned, a specific person to find and or use them. Diving deeper, if Nagy and Neff were to analyze the air tag and its imagined or available affordances, they would be able to find some of the most important information regarding human use through customer and user reviews. One of the main questions that arose on Reddit, a social networking forum, is "Are apple air tags really worth it?" (u/Barayez, 2024). Essentially, will people gain the right affordances by buying an air tag? In response, another Reddit member replied with; "Effectiveness will depend on the density of Apple devices in your surroundings. But if you aren't completely rural, or somehow in an Apple free-zone, it should be very accurate" (u/Sylvurphlame, 2024). From this evidence, Nagy and Neff should consider that the affordance of an air tag can be reliant on the amount of other Apple products in the area or network. Thinking about what we now know about the air tag, affordances, imagined affordances and what might affect Nagy and Neff's research on this specific media object, let's examine 2 main affordances of the air tag that will help take Nagy and Neff's research further.

What the Apple air tag offers can be entirely reliant on the users, but the 2 main affordances that this media technology is known for is the ability to track something/someone and the comfort in knowing the privacy of only you are being able to track it/them. On Apple's air tag page there are specific outlines that highlight the perks and abilities or affordances the air tag offers while tracking is on, "If your air tag is nearby, your iPhone can lead you straight to it with Precision Finding. You'll see the distance to your air tag and the direction to head in- all thanks to Ultra-Wideband technology" (Apple, n.d). Apple air tags offer the affordance of easy to learn tracking systems, by simply hitting a few buttons on your phone an arrow will lead you directly to your air tag. Following that, the ease of knowing only you will find your lost bag at an airport. Apple states that "Only you can see where your air tag is. Your location, data and history are never stored on the air tag itself. Devices that relay the location of your air tag also stay anonymous, and that location data is encrypted every step of the way. So not even Apple knows the location of your air tag or the identity of the device that helps find it" (Apple, n.d). This gives users the affordance of built in privacy, it's not something that you will accidentally turn on or constantly worry that someone has hacked into as Apple themselves won't be able to help you find what's missing. Nagy and Neff should be completely aware of these affordances for research as they are what grab the attention of the buyer in the first place, before that buyer even gets into other imagined affordances. Looking back and forth between certain reviews like above on Reddit, Nagy and Neff might find that some of the affordances of air tags have changed over time. This includes the ability to add multiple people to share one air tag, meaning multiple people can track the same object (Apple, n.d). But due to this there have been issues on unwanted tracking around the use of air tags. Because of this Apple released a statement in 2022 on their newsroom page, informing those experiencing unwanted tracking, of Apples cooperation

with law enforcement and the advancements being made to the air tag; “We have been actively working with law enforcement on all air tag- related requests we’ve received” (Apple Newsroom, 2022). Some of these advancements included updated support documentation, display alert with sound, refining unwanted tracking alert logic, precision finding, and new privacy warnings during air tag setup (Apple Newsroom, 2022). With these affordances of the air tag and the changes that have been made in mind, let’s investigate whether Apple or any other technology company has implemented these affordances into any other media objects or technologies.

Both the affordance of tracking and the built in privacy of tracking have been adopted by multiple different technologies such as iPhones or Androids. But these specific affordances within these different devices look and work a lot differently compared to the air tag. There is a lot less privacy considering anyone who might have access to your phone has the ability to see the tracking as well as the ability to simply steal your phone which can only be tracked itself by others who are connected to your “Find My” app. The privacy of tracking is also limited as Apple is able to track your phones movements and cell phone plan carriers have the ability to trace calls from specific locations, whether you have an Apple product or Android.

In conclusion, as Nagy and Neff state “people shape their media environments, perceive them, and have agency within them because of imagined affordances” (Nagy & Neff, 2015). We have to ability to create our own unique experiences with media products based on our expectations of technology. These expectations allow us to expand our knowledge of media objects and create newfound imagined affordances unique to our own use. After exploration of the term affordances and imagined affordances from the work of Peter Nagy and Gina Neff and how this can be applied to the Apple air tag, we now know one of the best resources is by

reviewing user comments, reading through what affordances have worked the best or been the most beneficial for different users. The affordance of tracking and the affordance of built in privacy give users comfort and give Nagy and Neff an idea of the selling point that draws buyers into the product. We can also see these affordances being transferred into the world of iPhones and Androids as tracking becomes a necessity. Nagy and Neff help conclude by explaining that “we use imagined affordance to evoke the importance of imagination in affordances-expectations for technology that are not fully realized in conscious, rational knowledge” (Nagy & Neff, 2015). The imagined affordances highlight the importance of the affordances they originate from. To finish off Nagy and Neff leave us with one last impactful statement: “The communication field has used affordance to describe communication technologies as placing power in the hands of the users, rather than with the technologies or their designers” (Nagy & Neff, 2015).

## References

Apple. (n.d). *Air tag*. <https://www.apple.com/ca/airtag/>

Apple Newsroom. (2022). *An Update on AirTag and Unwanted Tracking*.

<https://www.apple.com/ca/newsroom/2022/02/an-update-on-airtag-and-unwanted-tracking/>

Nagy, P., Neff. G. (2015). *Imagined Affordances: Reconstructing a Keyword for Communication Theory*, 1-9. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2056305115603385>

u/Barayez. (2024). *Are Apple AirTags really worth it?* [Online forum post]. Reddit.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/iphone/comments/1d0jbbd/are\\_apple\\_airtags\\_really\\_worth\\_it/?rdt=51491](https://www.reddit.com/r/iphone/comments/1d0jbbd/are_apple_airtags_really_worth_it/?rdt=51491)

u/Sylvurphlame. (2024). Effectiveness will depend on the density of Apple devices in your surroundings. [Comment on the online forum post *Are Apple AirTags really worth it?*]. Reddit.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/iphone/comments/1d0jbbd/are\\_apple\\_airtags\\_really\\_worth\\_it/?rdt=514](https://www.reddit.com/r/iphone/comments/1d0jbbd/are_apple_airtags_really_worth_it/?rdt=514)