



iQ

"In Quotes"

Paul Bray

UWB: High, wide, & handsome?

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IT devices are a chatty bunch. Your mobile wants to talk to your laptop, which wants to natter to your PC, which wants to pass the time of day with your network, phone, printer, speakers and any other handy gadgets the salesperson managed to flog you.

Some of these rely on Bluetooth (neat but slow), others on Wi-Fi (faster but more vulnerable); some even still rely on nests of trip-me-up-when-I'm-not-looking cables.

Since the early 2000s, companies (well, technology companies anyway) have been waxing lyrical about a new wireless technology that's been promising to replace all these. It's called Ultra Wideband (aka UWB) and, as the name suggests, it uses a very wide radio spectrum to send big dollops of data in very short bursts.

This makes it fast enough to distribute graphics and video – about 500Mbps/sec now with multi-gigabit potential – but without causing major interference to other communications.

It has pretty watertight security, it's low-power so it won't drain the battery on your phone or your laptop, and it doesn't produce high levels of radiation that could addle your brain or mutate your kids. Bonus.

While UWB has been around for decades in military and security applications, until recently its use in home and office was restricted. Since last August, however, anyone in the UK has been free to use UWB, indoors at least. So should we all go out and buy some?

The range of UWB is limited, but the signal should travel at least 10 metres, which is enough for many offices and most homes. Also, after the inevitable standards battle, a winner now seems to have emerged – WiMedia – that is compatible with several common data transfer protocols including wireless USB, Bluetooth, TCP/IP and Firewire.

If you fancy one of UWB's much vaunted specialist applications – a super-accurate system for locating doctors in a hospital, perhaps, or a kind of 'stealth' radar that lets cops spy on robbers and other perps – then it looks to be just the ticket.

Enthusiasts are now predicting all manner of more general uses for UWB too; from fast wireless networking and high-definition video and home broadband hubs, to connectivity between almost any combination of PCs, laptops, printers, scanners, phones, cameras, camcorders, speakers, headphones, DVD players, digital music players, TVs and even humble keyboards and mice.

Others, including some mobile phone manufacturers, are rather more lukewarm about the technology however, and although UWB laptops and other devices are starting to appear, anyone with serious UWB ambitions would have to buy a kit and retro-fit it to their existing equipment – which is never an ideal solution, especially if you're already using something, like Bluetooth or Wi-Fi, that does the job quite adequately.

UWB certainly has potential and it's a space well worth watching.

But it isn't likely to feature on the 'must have' list of too many growing businesses just yet.

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WIFI?

BLIE
TOOTH!

DRAT!