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New chip promises to track kids from miles away

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A technology originally developed to help the military track operatives in the field may in the next few years be used by parents to find kids in an amusement park.

Gentag will try to commercialize what it calls a Radar Response Tag, which effectively acts as an accurate homing beacon. In field tests, the tag can track someone more than 12 miles away and pinpoint their location within 3 feet, said Gentag founder John Peeters in an interview.

Twelve miles far exceeds the capabilities of conventional radio frequency ID (RFID) chips. The signal range of those chips is measured in feet. The longer-range global positioning system reaches farther, but the radar response system can track people through walls and other environmental obstacles.

"GPS is extremely accurate, but it doesn't work inside buildings," Peeters said. "You can think of this (radar response) as sort of super RFID."

Gentag will market the system as a way to keep track of kids or elderly relatives. It will also be pitched at hikers and campers. The system can piggyback on existing wireless infrastructures, Peeters added.

The technology is the outgrowth of a military project kicked off in 1990. The military wanted a better way to track soldiers without getting interference from leaves or buildings, so it commissioned Sandia National Laboratories to develop a solution. Seven years later, Sandia came up with the radar response system. The system works at the 430 megahertz frequency, Peeters added.

"The military uses it for friendly-fire avoidance," he said.

Sandia has now licensed its interest in the technology to Gentag. Mike Lovejoy, who helped develop the tag at Sandia, will work with Gentag to commercialize the technology.

Because the military has been using the technology for years, much of the field testing is already accomplished. Gentag now hopes to fine-tune the consumer product and come out with credit-card-size devices that would exchange signals between each other. Ultimately, Gentag would like to cut deals with phone makers to incorporate the chips into cell phones.

Employing chips to track the locations of individuals has generated controversy in recent years. Many have objected to the plans of some companies to implant RFID chips into individuals. On the other hand, one of the hot consumer items in Japan is a portable GPS device with an emergency button. Push it, and private security firms track down the recipient. Parents buy it for their kids.

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