NEWS

Nokia's ultra-low-power Wibree joins Bluetooth

Will enable wireless connections among smaller devices

By John Blau

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Ultralow power is being added to the features of short-range Bluetooth technology.

The ultra-low-power **Wibree technology** developed by Nokia Corp. will become part of the Bluetooth specification under an agreement reached by the Wibree Forum and the Bluetooth Special Interest Group (SIG), the Finnish mobile phone maker said today.

Bluetooth has been used mostly to connect larger devices such as headsets, keyboards and mice to stereos and PCs. With the help of Wibree, the technology will be able to connect smaller button-cell battery-powered devices, such as watches or sensors attached to a user's body. Wibree uses the same 2.4-GHz frequency as Bluetooth.

"We look at this as an addition to the Bluetooth family of specifications, enabling a new class of devices that Bluetooth isn't really suitable for today," said Michael Foley, executive director of Bluetooth SIG.

In October, Nokia's research arm announced the development of Wibree and the establishment of an industry forum, whose members include Broadcom Corp. and STMicroelectronics NV, to define a specification.

But after forming the forum, the companies -- many of them members of Bluetooth SIG -- decided they favored having ultra-low-power devices supported in Bluetooth, according to Harri Tulimaa, head of Nokia Technology Out-Licensing. "They didn't want to complete an entirely new technology," he said.

The goal is to develop specifications for two types of ultra-low-cost implementations: a single-mode implementation for watches, sensors and other tiny devices to communicate with each other, and a dual-mode implementation to communicate with both single-mode and traditional Bluetooth devices.

The core specification for ultra-low-power technology is already well advanced, according to Tulimaa. "We've started prototype interoperability testing between three companies and have transmitted packets over the air."

Ultra-low-power Bluetooth will have a range up to 10 meters, similar to the Bluetooth Class 2 specification, which requires more energy. A button-cell battery-powered device, equipped with ultra-low-power Bluetooth technology, will be designed to have an average operating life of one year, according to Tulimaa. It can transmit data at a speed up to 1Mbit/sec.

High-power Bluetooth Class 3 has a range up to 100 meters.

Foley doesn't view low-power Bluetooth as a competitor to Near Field Communications, another short-range wireless technology. NFC is designed primarily to help people make **contactless transactions**, he said.

Bluetooth SIG expects to finalize ultra-low-power Bluetooth specifications in the first half of 2008, with the first products, most likely single-mode devices, to hit the market in the second half of the year.

Blau is a reporter for the IDG News Service.

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