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Fancy meeting you

Paul Rubens on the friend radar - a new service that aims to bring people together

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Ever wondered how often you narrowly miss bumping into a friend in the street or whether anyone you know is in the same cinema, park or airport as you? Finding out could soon be as simple as looking at the screen of your mobile phone thanks to Socialight, a phone-based social networking service.

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Once you've downloaded a small program, Socialight turns your mobile phone into a "friend radar", alerting you whenever anyone on your Socialight buddy list is nearby. A central Socialight server tracks the whereabouts of each user using location data provided by mobile phone carriers or from a global positioning system (GPS) module in the phone, updating users' mobile phones every few seconds.

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Socialight uses social networking ideas pioneered by websites such as Friendster, which encourage users to build a network of online friends they can contact by email. But Socialight takes this a step further: it takes advantage of the fact that in large cities such as New York or London, you are unlikely ever to be far from at least one person you know, so rather than browsing your network of friends online, you can actually meet them, according to Dan Melinger, one of the founders of Socialight. "Most young people are urbanites," he says. "What's frustrating about living in a city is that we know we are near friends most of the time, but we simply don't know where they are. A friend radar will help bring people together."

Socialight also allows users to annotate space by leaving an invisible electronic message - called a sticky shadow - in a particular spot, either for a specific person or for a group of people. When someone walks through the spot, the message appears on their mobile phone screen. After a meal in a restaurant, for example, you could leave a sticky shadow saying "the food's great here but the coffee's foul, and watch out for the stropky waitress". "People are likely to trust these sorts of messages, as they come from someone within their social network, and by annotating a city in this way, it's possible to make it a far smaller and more intimate place for its inhabitants," Melinger says.

Crucially, you have to be part of a Socialight network in order to leave or receive sticky shadows. That's to prevent people littering busy shopping streets with hundreds of spam

messages containing special offers from local shops which would pop up on your phone screen as you pass by the store.

The service also includes a pair of unusual mobile phone communications tools: the "tap" and the "tickle". Mobile phones are great for communicating speech or text messages, but not for the sorts of non-verbal messages that are often conveyed by a raised eyebrow or a kick under the table, Melinger explains. By pressing a button on your phone, you can make someone else's phone vibrate once (a tap) or rhythmically (a tickle). Catch your partner flirting a little too outrageously at a party and you could send them a tap from the other side of the room just to let them know you've got your eye on them.

Socialight is being tested in New York, and should be launched commercially around the world in the next 12 months. When it does, Melinger warns, it may also be used to help avoid people. "You could use the service to make sure you don't bump into your boss around town when you are meant to be off sick. That's what we call 'anti-social networking'."

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