BlackBerry may soon capture your eye and identity

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Bringing back a bit of the sexiness of gadgets more suited to Ethan Hunt, James Bond or Captain Kirk, Research in Motion is making your BlackBerry an "eye-device," with information from your iris stored inside.

In partnership with Iris ID and HID Global, RIM has announced that it's supporting the use of a biometric template from Iris ID.

This means you could flash your Blackberry instead of an employee ID card to open doors at work. Embedded iCLASS technology would serve as a digital credential and allow NFC-enabled BlackBerry 7 smartphones to transmit your identity when held up to an iCAM7000 iris camera.

NFC, by the way, means near field communications, which enables devices to have contactless transactions or exchange data just by being in proximity of each other. In some ways, what BlackBerry 7 devices will be able to do is akin to paying for your latte with your smartphone, except it's your identity - not money - that's being transmitted when scanned.

In essence, it can take the place of a physical ID card.

"NFC enables smartphones to become even smarter mobile computing platforms, and this is another great example that demonstrates the potential that NFC on mobile devices brings to the physical access control space," said Andrew Bocking, vice president of handheld

software product management at RIM, in a press release.

This technology is often mistakenly called "iris-scanning," but there's no scanning involved in iris recognition. Instead, it's a bit like pattern-capturing in some of today's camcorders.

Here's what happens, according to the Iris ID site: A person is positioned about three inches to 14 inches from the iris camera, and a digital video is taken of her iris. Then, still images are captured from the video using a frame grabber, and an algorithm analyzes patterns in the iris that are visible between the pupil and white of the eye and converts them into a 512-byte digital template. That's what's stored in a database and transferred at areas where you have access privileges.

And, in about two seconds, you're identified - no PINs, passwords or access cards. And with this, no eyes needed, just your all-knowing BlackBerry.

Every iris, like snowflakes, is unique. In fact, your left and right iris are different from each other.

"It's probably fair to say that one iris template contains more data than is collected in creating templates for a finger, a face and a hand combined," according to the Iris ID site. And the iris offers a fairly stable data set. Voices change, hands and fingers grow, but, "barring trauma and certain ophthalmologic surgery, the patterns in the iris are constant from age 1 to death."

I don't know about you, but I inadvertently leave my BlackBerry far too often to feel comfortable knowing my eye print is in there. And, frankly, it's a lot easier to steal your BlackBerry than it is to take your eyes. (Think of all the trouble and pain it could have saved John Anderton in his ocular transformation to "Mr. Yakimoto" in "Minority Report.")

But the companies say not to worry about security. The digital credential, where the biometric information is loaded, resides in a secure area of the BlackBerry, Debra Spitler, vice president of mobile access solutions for HID Global, said in an email. If the device is lost or stolen, the information can be wiped, or de-provisioned - the way a physical access card is when it's misplaced.

HID Global expects that its embedded digital-credentialing technology will be available for the BlackBerry Bold 9900/9930 and BlackBerry Curve 9350/9360 smartphones later this year.