Dressed for Success

By Simson Garfinkel

After putting on his clothes, Doug Platt starts most days by fastening the snaps of his hip pouch, hanging a few batteries from his belt, and strapping a keyboard around his waist. Last to go on is Platt's head-mounted "Private Eye"—a white, rectangular box the size of a gherkin that flips over one eye and gives Platt a crisp 25-line by 80-column display in vivid red glowing letters.

Platt, president of Select Tech, Inc., is the inventor of the HIP-PC, a four-pound DOS computer built into a hip pack that he claims is far more suited to the needs of people on-the-go than conventional laptop or palmtop machines. Combining a variety of off-the-shelf equipment, the HIP-PC can be used while sitting, standing, walking, or even driving, Platt says.

The biggest problem with today's portable PCs, Platt believes, is simple: screens and keyboards are too big. That's what got him interested in the Private Eye, a $795 device manufactured by Reflection Technology of Waltham, Massachusetts. The lightweight contraption consists of a set of tiny red lights, a vibrating mirror, and a lens. Looking into it, the wearer sees a full-size computer display.

Reflection Technology first started selling the Private Eye in 1989, says spokesperson Linda Whitney. Since then, nearly 2500 Private Eyes have been sold, mostly to experimenters like Platt "who think they want to make products with them." Nevertheless, "very few of [the projects] have seen the light of day."

The problem seems to be input. While head-mounted displays represent the ultimate in mobility, keyboards tie people down. "Ever try typing while standing up?" Platt asks.

Reflection Technology hopes to solve the problem with a new product that combines the Private Eye and a voice recognition system that has a 500-word vocabulary. Expected price: about $7500.

Platt is suspicious of voice. "There's no privacy" to use your computer in a crowded room, he says. Furthermore, voice can even be dangerous: "Somebody [standing near you] will be talking about deleting some files, and all of a sudden they will have deleted some of yours!"

A safer—and cheaper—solution, he says, is a relatively simple device called a chord keyboard. "The basic idea of a chord keyboard is that each finger belongs to one key," says Platt. Using a chord keyboard involves pressing combinations of keys to generate specific letters—much like a stenographer's typing machine. With Platt's computer, for example, entering the letter *a* requires pressing and releasing the thumb and index finger, the letter *e* uses the index and middle finger, the letter *i* uses the middle and ring finger, and so on.

Thus, in order to use a chord keyboard, a person must first memorize all of the chord combi-

nations. Unfortunately, that makes many people wary. "The real problem with chord keyboards is convincing people that they are easy to learn. There aren't any letters on the keys. That's very scary," admits Platt.

Nevertheless, Platt claims that most people find it easier to learn how to touch-type on a chord keyboard than a conventional one. To prove it, he is giving away a program for IBM-compatible computers that turns the regular keyboard into a chord keyboard. Not only does this let people try before they buy, it lets people chord on standard laptops—something that has an added advantage in tight spots. "In a restaurant you can have your laptop off to the side, because you are not centered by two points." With practice, most people can chord between 35 and 45 words per minute, he says.

"People think I'm nuts when I [talk about] using this in the car,"

says Platt. "The secret is you don't use the screen—you just type." Indeed, Platt says that he frequently types on long drives as a way of keeping himself awake. Since the chord keyboard needs only one hand, he's able to steer with the other. The only time he needs to look into the screen is when he needs to read a file on the computer—for example, directions to his destination.

If chord keyboards catch on, Platt imagines that they could be built into a car's steering wheel, taking up virtually no space at all.

Connected to the Private Eye and chord keyboard is Platt's computer, which packs up to four megabytes of RAM, a 60-megabyte hard drive, and batteries for four and a half hours of running time. Although Platt is currently using a 286 processor, once in production (scheduled to begin in a few months) he will also offer 386 and 486 versions—as well as the option of belt-mounted, ultra-shock-resistant hard drives.

Possibilities really open up when the HIP-PC is combined with a wireless modem, says Platt. Since both the chord keyboard and the Private Eye are private and quiet, two "wirelessly networked computer wearers" can engage in "Virtual Telepathy"—completely discreet communication unbeknownst to anybody standing next to them. Platt imagines SWAT teams using HIP-PCs as they close in on a suspect, communicating silently with each other and sharing maps and other tactical information. He envisions using a wireless modem to connect his computer with large data banks on CD-ROM, then mystifying people with his memory and command of current events. This summer, he hopes to set up a nationwide network of users, who could have a virtual rendezvous in cyberspace every day, no mat-

ter where they are or what they're doing.

"It's the thing of the future," says Marvin Minsky, a professor of computer science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who's thinking of participating in the network experiment. The future will have to wait for at least a few months, however, since right now Platt's two HIP-PC prototypes are the only ones in existence.

But one day, in the not so distant future, you might be able to strap on Platt's contraption and head over to a HIP-PC Singles Night at a local club. If you're standing by the bar and spy someone who looks interesting, you could punch a few commands into your computer and tap in to a personal information file they've chosen to make publicly available. If their occupation, interests, likes, and dislikes seem compatible with yours, then you could send your file to them—and if they respond positively, buy them a smart drink and start talking. We've all heard about how computers are labor-saving devices, but who'd have thought they could cut down on hours of unproductive bar talk? ∎

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RoboEntrepreneur: Doug Platt and his HIP-PC

Rotten to the Core

By Mike Rubin

Hardcore TV

Oozing that late-night cable aroma of *eau de Times Square*, HBO's three-episode *Hardcore TV* (March 5, 12:30 a.m.; March 12 and 19, 11:30 p.m., plus encore dates, HBO) tries to push the satirical buttons of meta-television commentary, but forgets to man the laugh track. Billed as the mutated programming that emanates from the cathode nether zone between channels 36 and 37 (on Brooklyn cable, that's the dead-air domain of the two C-SPANs, and everybody knows there ain't nothing funny *there*), *Hardcore's* "comedy" "sketches" never get out of the box, their humor beginning and ending with their title conceits: "This Old Whore House," "Rastapiece Theater," "Bensonhurst 11210." These puns

might cut it as *Voice* headlines, but as punch lines doth not a witty series make.

The show's first episode opens with a *Wayne's World* parody, providing a quick hint to the deep wells of *Hardcore's* inspiration. The next 30 minutes feature more than their share of *Saturday Night Live*-style commercial parodies, as well as clunky nods to *SCTV*, *In Living Color*, and *Ren and Stimpy's* "Log."

In between skits (where the rimshots should be), an adenoidal host who looks like a descendant of Anson Williams wanders Serling-like across a set salvaged from *The Ron Reagan Show*, uttering banalities like, "You've probably come by this weird TV universe by accident"—no, Potsy, we're suffering through this crap *deliberately*. Worse, he tries to explain each sketch after it's been inflicted upon you, just in case you acci-

Bob Vila in hell

dentally found it funny the first time around: "Danny Bonaduce was an adorable child star ... " he rationalizes, trying to make some sense out of the former Partridge's cameo—which served only to provide a convenient excuse for a half-hour's worth of transvestite prostitute jokes.

Speaking of convenient excuses, time and again, *Hardcore* takes advantage of cable's freedom to cross that fine Standards and Practices line, delivering needlessly topless women, a liberal sprinkling of "fuck"s and "shit"s, and admonishments that processed-meat product Spamby "not [be] put in mouth or rectum." More *Benny Hill* than *Ben Stiller*, *Hard-*

core is the cubic zirconium in HBO's programming crown—even *Stalin* was funnier. On those rare occasions when a skit comes off as clever—like a Scorsese send-up called "Raging Bullwinkle"—the laughs are drowned out by the forced randiness (in this case, the boxing moose just gets to say "fuck" again and again—Jay Ward, R.I.P.).

In addition to the cast of deserved unknowns, *Hardcore* includes bizarre cameos from the Giants' Leonard Marshall and the Jets' Jeff Lageman, and features Anna Thomson, the disfigured prostitute in *Unforgiven*, playing a call-in sex-chat hostess—giving her the dubious distinction of appearing in the year's best film and biggest stinker. A more accurate title would have been *Softcore TV*: the leering, boobs-or-bust mentality makes the comedy seem as superfluous as the plot of a porn film, just a shaggy-dog means to a t&a end. *Hardcore TV* practically begs for a network censor's restraint. Do we really need 500 channels of this? ∎