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## **Couch potatoes armed with Viewcall can surf the Web through the tube**

Last week, you read here about breaking the PC mind-set to consider many new kinds of computers -- computers that are not Windows Pentium PCs. You read that there will be a wide variety of Internet computers that cannot be dismissed as nothing more than diskless PCs. You read that these Internet computers will do to the Wintel PC what the Wintel PC did to the VAX minicomputer, and before that what the VAX minicomputer did to the 370 mainframe.

This week, consider one kind of Internet computer I call the Internet television, or intervision for short.

During Comdex last month, I was invited to John Bentley's suite in the Luxor Hotel to get a demonstration of the Viewcall set-top box from Viewcall Europe Plc., in London. Bentley himself is from around Cambridge, England. Join me now in that room at the Luxor, sitting on a couch, watching a television set. On top of the television set is the usual cable converter with its red station number readout. On top of that is Viewcall's set-top box, looking much the same, but with no readout. The stack of TV, cable converter, and set-top box looks like it might easily fall over, but hey, it's a demonstration in a hotel room.

We pick up the TV remote control and click to Channel 3, where a dialog box asks us whether we want to connect to Viewcall. The second set-top box is connected to the TV through a UHF coaxial cable and to a telephone jack. So we pick up a second TV remote control and click Select, which starts the TV dialing. Soon we're using the second TV remote control to key in a personal identification number. Then, still sitting on the couch and watching Channel 3, we're using the Up, Down, Left, Right, and Select buttons of the second remote to browse through pages on the World Wide Web. The first pages to appear are in the Viewcall service, but eventually we get to click on hyperlinks out onto the Internet. We're seeing pages in Hypertext Markup Language -- fonts, colors, images, and all. We're watching our first intervision. According to Bentley, one of Viewcall's franchisees will offer the box and the Viewcall service for \$1 per week. The first Viewcall pilot of 1,000 subscribers is scheduled to begin in January in Glasgow, Scotland.

How can Viewcall be so inexpensive? Viewcall's intervision is not a Windows Pentium PC. It runs an Internet browser on an ARM 7500 RISC processor. It uses your TV set for display and your telephone for Internet access. View-call doesn't store all that much data, because what you want to see on your Internet TV is not static personal information but changing information about your community and from the Internet.

Here are some other questions and answers about Viewcall.

Can the Web be browsed using a TV? Viewcall says yes because of the "sophisticated anti-aliasing algorithms" it uses. The few pages I saw in the demonstration looked good to me.

Can the Internet be accessed from the intervision at 14.4Kbps? Viewcall says yes because of the "unique fractal image compression techniques that deliver quick-loading broadcast-quality pictures to a standard TV demonstrably faster than currently available PC-based Internet access systems."

Can the Web be surfed without a keyboard and mouse? Viewcall offers "a choice of remote controls, including the world's first remote QWERTY keyboard." I enjoyed Viewcall's simple TV remote, clicking Up, Down, Left, and Right among displayed hyperlinks until selecting the one I wanted. This worked fine inside the Viewcall pages, which were designed for browsing without a keyboard or pointing device.

Again, how can Viewcall be so inexpensive? What's this about a dollar per week? With a Viewcall set-top box, you dial in to the Viewcall service. There, before venturing out onto the Web, you enjoy local services, including shopping, local news and events, travel timetables, sports, public service information, home banking, retailing, and publishing. These services are to be financed in much the same way as local newspapers and shopping malls -- the advertisers and merchants will be only too happy to pay for you to have a Viewcall box.

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