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Lab Rat: A visionary enterprise

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by Niall McKay



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This article is from the June 1, 2001, issue of Red Herring magazine.

Picture this: a tourist is on vacation, motoring down the Mall in London. To his left is St. James's Park; ahead is a large, stately building. He wonders what the building is, but he's too busy negotiating the perils of "wrong-way" driving to check his pocket guide of Britain.

Soon tourists won't have to risk a wreck to learn that building's name, because "augmented reality" (AR) headsets will be able to transform everyday street scenes into living guidebooks. AR headsets work with a visual-data display, like those projected inside the helmets of fighter pilots. One look at the stately London building would signal the headset to display a pointer and a label that reads "Buckingham Palace." A voice command would pull up another layer of data -- perhaps the fact that Buckingham is home to Queen

AR is a marriage of virtual reality and, well, reality. The notion was first popularized by William Gibson in his 1994 cyberpunk novel Virtual Light (Bantam Spectra). In the book, a bicycle messenger finds a pair of AR goggles and stumbles upon a plot by gangsters to completely remodel a futuristic San Francisco.

The real-life eyeglasses, first developed by **HRL Laboratories** in Malibu, California, during the mid-'90s, supplement the wearer's view of the physical world with a virtual data overlay. HRL Labs, now owned by Raytheon (NYSE: RTN.B), Boeing (NYSE: BA), and **General Motors** (NYSE: GM), came up with the concept for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's military applications. Recently, HRL Labs spun off a venture capital incubator called **X-Laboratories** to commercialize the AR headsets and other such technology.

An AR headset uses tiny displays embedded in its glass lenses. Images are sent from a handheld computer -- say, a Palm -- by means of a radio frequency or a short-range wireless-networking protocol, like Bluetooth. The AR system also includes a global positioning system chip so the headset knows where it is, and a

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