CONGRATULATIONS TO XPLORE TECHNOLOGIES: 20 YEARS OF RUGGED TABLETS, AND ONLY RUGGED TABLETS

By Conrad H. Blickenstorfer

At the January 1997 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, I walked into the South Hall of the Las Vegas Convention Center on the lookout for something — anything — new and exciting in tablets or pen computers. Sure, Microsoft had announced Windows CE at the Fall Comdex in response to Apple's Newton Message Pad and the emerging "Palm Economy," and our bi-monthly *Pen Computing Magazine* was doing well. But, by and large, handhelds and tablets were very far removed from the booming world of desktop computers and laptops and printers and the latest of absolutely-must-have PC software.

But there, amidst all of the glitzy, glossy booths of mainstream computing was... an even glitzier and glossier booth by a company I had never heard of. They called themselves Xplore Technologies, and they were thinking big. There had, of course, been rugged computers before, but most were quite utilitarian and often looked a bit unfinished. Xplore's Genesys, on the other hand, looked like something right at home on the Starship Enterprise. Cool industrial design, bold lines, even bolder plans. Having seen my share of grand plans I admired the effort but wasn't convinced that these folks' vision was actually going to see the light of day, let alone become a success. However, between a persuasive VP of Marketing, the grand booth, and the look of the various models (there weren't any fully functional production units yet), I agreed to an interview with Xplore's boss and committed to coverage in our print magazine.

And so this is what we ran in *Pen Computing Magazine* Volume 4, Number 15, page 41, in early 1997:

Xplore Genesys
Pen technology "dream team" presents impressive new system

Every so often, individuals — or groups of individuals — get dissatisfied with the status quo and set out to create new solutions, new forms of government, new companies. or whatever it takes to make things right.

One such group of individuals found the general status of mobile and pen computing lacking and joined together to form Xplore Technologies Inc. Xplore has an impressive

roster of seasoned professionals from all areas of mobile computing, both on the vendor and customer sides. Founding members have earned their professional experience and reputations at companies such as GRiD, Telxon, Motorola, Intel, Fujitsu, Telular, and a number of vertical market industrial clients.

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First Look

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Fueled by a common vision of offering technologically advanced "whole product solutions," a firm belief in an annual pen computing market growth rate of over 30%, and financing by a small group of supportive investors, the Xplore team is conjuring up a compelling business strategy based on tactical partnerships with companies that provide products and services complementary to Xplore's technology offerings.

Believing that existing pen and mobile systems often fail because they are created by technology companies without real knowledge of their markets, Xplore not only recruited industry representatives into their

core staff, but also developed the specs of their "Genesys" product family in conjunction with customers from their targeted markets—utilities and public safety. The result is a very functional, very attractive design that's both technologically up-to-date and ready for future expansion, a necessity in markets where equipment is expected to have a life cycle of several years.

The Xplore Genesys pen computer, much like the TelePad 3, is based on a main "brain", or core, that houses the main logic board, power, memory, and screen, and X-pods that contain peripheral functionality, such as GPS systems, additional batteries, wireless communications, and various I/O options. The X-pod expansion bay is shaped so that it doubles up as an ergonomically shaped hand grip for the unit. Xplore calls both the core unit and the X-pods "environmentally indifferent", i.e. water resistant, with shock mounted components in a sealed composite (or optional aircraft aluminum) inner housing for the core, and equally impressive sealing of the pods. The unit is further protected with impact resistant exterior moldings, all combining to give a Genesys computer a good chance to survive a 4-foot drop onto concrete.

▶ Genesys P133: ruggedness, Pentium power, and TFT color in a 5 lbs unit

As should be expected from a brand-new, "clean slate" design, the Genesys includes thoroughly modern components, starting with a very-low-Volt Intel Pentium processor running at 133Mhz; two color, including a TFT High-Brite version, and one monochrome LCD screen options, all offering a large 10.4" diagonal viewing area and 800 x 600 SVGA resolution; 64-bit PCI bus architecture; an electrostatic pen interface with touch screen functionality; no less than three docking systems; and—of course—Windows 95. There is room for up to 64MB of RAM and up to 3.2GB of hard disk space.

Since Xplore projects a significant number of Genesys slates to be vehicle mounted, special care was given to an optimally designed vehicle dock. The airbag zone compliant dock has a separate breakout box for cable management and uses standard PC connectors. The desktop dock provides access to CD-ROMs, LANs, modems, keyboards, and external monitors, essentially turning the Genesys into a fully functional desktop computer. The office dock, finally, is a space-saving design with a LAN controller that allows mounting up to four tablets on the wall for easy access. All docks are based on the same mechanical docking head, and all offer fast charging capabilities and expanded intelligence through an I/O controller in the docking head.

As of this writing, Xplore was in the process of assembling final Beta units for testing with a limited number of customers in February 1997. According to Xplore, production is scheduled to begin in late March. Our impression? What we have here is a high powered group of very qualified people developing and marketing what they believe is the very best product for the pen computing and mobile market. This is good news for pen technology in general, and for companies seeking a state-of-the-art mobile solution in particular.

Contact Xplore at 1-888-449-7567, or email Rich Perley, Xplore's VP of Marketing at <rperley@xploretech.com>.

– C. H. Blickenstorfer

XPLORE GENESYS P133 AT A GLANCE	
Processor	Intel Pentium 133 Mhz (2.9 Volt)
OS	Windows 95, Windows 3.1, MSDOS
Memory	8-64MB RAM
Screen	10.4" mono or TFT Hi-Brite color LCD, 640x480 VGA or 800x600 SVGA
Digitizer	Touch + Electrostatic digitizer
Disk	540MB to 3.2GB HD
Size	12.0 x 9.0 x 1.5 inches
Weight	5.0 to 5.8 lbs depending on configuration
Power	NiMH, AC/DC (optional Li-Ion)
Interface	X-pod: S/P, floppy, kybd, mouse, USB
Options	Heated screen, CD-ROM, kybd, floppy, case, docks, wireless, PC Card
Price	TBA
Availability	March 1997
Contact	Xplore Technologies, Inc. 1-888-44Xplore (1-888-449-7567) 512-257 9634 (Austin, Texas, USA)

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It's hard to believe that it's been almost 20 years since I wrote that article. And pretty much exactly 20 years since Xplore began making rugged tablets. Back then, Xplore's competition included Teklogix, Dauphin, DES, Epson, Granite, Husky, IBM, Itronix, Kalidor,

Microslate, Mitsubishi, Norand, PGI Data, Telepad, Telxon, Texas Micro, WalkAbout and others. All gone, absorbed, or no longer in the rugged tablet business. Xplore, however, is not only still here, but expects fiscal 2017 revenue of between US$85 million and US$95 million. And Xplore is #2 in global rugged tablet marketshare. Quite impressive.

It hasn't been an easy ride for Xplore. There was customers' general reluctance to embrace the tablet form factor. There were the special demands of tablets that always seemed a year or two ahead of available technology. Despite Microsoft Windows for Pen Computing and then the Tablet PC Edition of Windows XP, Windows never was a natural for tablets. So business was hard, even after the iPad opened the floodgates for tablets.

Yet here Xplore is, now with the complementary product line of fellow tablet pioneer Motion, stronger than ever. It's ironic that while once it was lack of acceptance of tablets that was Xplore's biggest problem, now it's the very success of tablets that's a challenge — with tablets so cheap, many potential customers just buy consumer tablets and stick them in a case.

So after 20 years of making tablets and nothing but tablets, questions remain. On the far end, how rugged is rugged enough? What degree of ruggedness is compelling enough to sway possible markets, and at what price point? How can one profitably grow while remaining under the radar of consumer electronics giants (so they won't start an "active" or "outdoor" or "adventure" version of one of their products)? None of these questions are easy to answer. Or the answers easy to implement.

But having been around for 20 years and having the benefit of all that experience, few are in a better position to succeed than Xplore Technologies. Here's to the next 20, Xplore!

Pen Computing EDITOR's CHOICE
Best rugged Tablet PC slate

Xplore Technologies iX 104C²
List price: inquire
Contact: www.xploretech.com

A veteran of the rugged mobile computer industry, Xplore Technologies has plenty of experience with pen slates. Sporting exemplary industrial design, the flagship iX104C² Tablet PC is extremely tough, technologically completely up-to-date, yet also has an attractive industrial design with each detail well thought out. Its "AllVue" display is superior to anything else we've seen. A magnesium housing/chassis and plenty of sealing and damping materials result in toughness and an IP67 rating despite the fact that the device has more onboard ports and connectors than other rugged slates. Xplore also offers innovative "snap-on" expansion modules, several display options, and there is ample room for internal expansion. The machine can be ordered with a combined active/touch screen digitizer system and a variety of specialized docking systems.

Specifications	
Form-factor	Rugged Slate
Processor	Intel Pentium M 733
CPU Speed	1.1 GHz
Chipset	NA
Standard/Max RAM	256MB/1,024MB
Disk/drive	40 GB
Card slots	1 PC Card II
Display type	Transmissive or All-Vue TFT
Display size/res	10.4-inch/1024x768
Color depth	16.7 million
Digitizer/pens	Wacom/1
Keyboard/scale	Opt. external
Ruggedness	IP67, -4-140F
Housing	Magnesium
Dimensions	8.25 x 11.2 x 1.6
Weight	5.1 lbs.
Power	Li-Ion, 56 WHr
Interface	3 USB (2x2.0, 1x1.1), RJ45
Interface	video, audio, expansion contacts
Options	Office and vehicle docks, radio modules
Options	Bluetooth, fingerprint scanner, camera