THE EP121: A LOOK BACK, A LOOK FORWARD...

With Computex 2013 at an end, I decided to write this article to commemorate the three-year anniversary of the unveiling of the EP121. I, like many others on this forum, have used, fought with, and ultimately come to love this machine.

However, in writing this tribute, I realized a more important purpose—to give a wakeup call to ASUS. Why a wakeup call? Quite simply, because ASUS’ current Tablet PC strategy lacks the focus and design vision that made the EP121 a success. This trend is made especially frustrating because ASUS, in fact, has all the ingredients to create a killer Tablet PC.

How so? Please read on.

DEVELOPMENT

When ASUS first debuted the EP121 at Computex in June, 2010, the company had shown remarkable clarity of vision for not producing yet another iPad-like device. With the world smitten with Apple’s latest gadget, this period marked the explosion of mobile OS tablets that would soon saturate the market. Bucking the trend, ASUS stayed true to its design vision of marrying the computing power of a laptop, with the portability of a tablet.
Even in its prototype stage, the EP121 displayed the hallmarks of a premium device: excellent build quality; simple, yet functional accessories; and powerful specifications in a sleek form factor. That the machine pictured above does not strike us as ‘old’ or obsolete in any way, is a testament to ASUS’ design foresight: it was the first device to implement the Ultrabook concept in the modern tablet form factor.

More than in design, ASUS would break new ground by marketing beyond the casual home user:
This emphasis on tablet productivity was reinforced during the EP121’s product launch at CES 2011, where ASUS performed a rare type of demo: Photoshop batch processing with simultaneous 1080p playback, followed by TIP inking and PowerPoint markup. Clearly, the EP121 was being targeted at mobile professionals who needed full notebook computing power with pen input capability—the tablet consumers who seemed all but forgotten in the post-iPad craze.

RECEPTION

An unfortunate result of the post-iPad craze was that all future slate devices, regardless of internal hardware, would immediately be compared to mobile OS tablets. For the EP121, this meant that despite sporting an active digitizer and high-end subnotebook specifications, press reviews[^2][^3] would often start by criticizing its cost, heft, and battery life in comparison to the iPad.
While the disadvantages were made clear, these reviews were vague at best, in explaining the EP121’s key strengths over mobile tablets: one, that its **Core i5 processor** enabled practical usage of enterprise software as well as industry-standard CAD programs[^2^,^3^,^4^]; and two, that its Wacom digitizer offered far more fluid and precise stylus control, necessary for digital signage and detailed graphic design.

Moreover, these reviews made no comparisons to the EP121’s direct competition—**Core-based**, pen-enabled Tablet PCs. The EP121 was quite revolutionary in this regard, being at least 33% lighter and thinner than contemporary convertible tablets, while being about 33% faster than previous Core 2 Duo[^1^[^2^] slates, like the **Motion LE1700** and the **Fujitsu ST6012**. In addition, the EP121’s optically-bonded, AFFS+ screen provided markedly richer colors and clearer outdoor use than typical TN panels. Amazingly, this jump in hardware quality—generously accompanied with accessories[^2^]—came at only half the cost of traditional $2000+ slate PCs!

Suffice it to say, the limited perspective of mainstream reviews was not representative of the wider Tablet PC audience of students, business users, artists, photographers, and animators. For this group, the EP121’s rare combination of processing power, stylus control, and screen quality created the ideal productivity companion, akin to a **portable Cintiq[^2^[^3^].**
This contrast in reception was fundamentally rooted in the understanding of the slate PC, not as a tool for touch-based content consumption, but for pen-enabled content creation:

While the EP121 certainly could have been used like a mobile tablet for media viewing, gaming, and e-reading, the core experience lay in the rich diversity of creative application: from inking and document markup; to graphic design and illustration; and even 3D sculpting, modeling, and rendering; the EP121’s unique blend of laptop and tablet hardware delivered a best-in-class experience in all these areas.

This is not to imply, however, that the EP121 was seen as a ‘perfect’ device; there were frequent complaints about constant fan noise, excessive processor throttling, lack of pressure sensitivity, system lockups, and backlight disconnection. But in each case, the solution was well documented by the Tablet PC community, preventing these hardware issues from overshadowing the overall user experience. Indeed, even after two years of such market scrutiny, the EP121 managed an impressive majority five-star rating on Amazon.

With user feedback so positive, it is no surprise that the EP121 remained at low to no stock for all of its short run in 2011.
countless forum posts\textsuperscript{[2,3,4,5,6]} were filled with user struggles at obtaining the device. In the early months, this demand drove the price far higher than its MSRP\textsuperscript{[2]}, and even today, it hold its value well at $600-700.

In fact, the EP121’s popularity would reach such a high that it independently spawned three fan sites\textsuperscript{[2,3]}, a Facebook fan page, and not to mention, an extremely active dedicated forum. Of this community, one avid user would create a popular interface overlay\textsuperscript{[2]} that would be intensely customized\textsuperscript{[2,3]} in a desire to perfect the slate experience. This motivation even inspired another user to found a company to manufacture and distribute a custom case. With such overwhelming fan reaction, it is no exaggeration to say that the EP121 was one of the most beloved Windows devices ever created.

FOLLOWUP

Given the level of sales and user reception, ASUS has done astonishingly little to build upon on the EP121’s success: it received just one minor revision—the B121—which added only a TPM to otherwise identical specifications. This apathy towards the slate PC market was to result in a series of missed opportunities for ASUS—ones that its competitors happily exploited.

While many users were looking to ASUS\textsuperscript{[2]} to release a Sandy Bridge slate, it was Samsung that filled this market void in October of 2011, with the Series 7 Slate (S7S). Generally seen as a faster, longer lasting, and more portable version of the EP121\textsuperscript{[1,2,3]}, the S7S was the preferred alternative for the majority of slate PC users. However, the hardware gap between the two slates would cost ASUS much more than simple market share:
In 2011, Microsoft had used the EP121 as the poster child for the Windows tablet computing experience, but by 2012, it would switch to the newer S7S as the reference device for Windows 8 development. The result was that Samsung’s slate would be the one to feature heavily on popular tech sites as offering the ‘next-generation’ Windows experience—a huge PR victory for Samsung.

With the release of Windows 8 in September of 2012, Samsung again was the first to capitalize on the opportunity of a Wacom-enabled Ivy Bridge slate, with the ATIV Smart PC Pro. Going into 2013, the next major entrants into this category would be: Microsoft, with the much publicized[2] release of the Surface Pro; Lenovo, with the hotly anticipated ThinkPad Helix; and finally Toshiba, with the well-equipped Protégé Z10T.

Where is ASUS in all this? Disappointingly, its current lineup of tablets have—to the high-end slate PC user—entirely self-defeating hardware configurations:

In the VivoTab, the responsiveness of the Wacom digitizer is handicapped by the Atom processor, whose performance trails well behind even that of the EP121. The Taichi features a much faster Ivy Bridge processor, but does not offer the flexibility of a hybrid slate,
and worse, is paired with an underperforming N-trig digitizer. Finally, the Transformer Book seems to offer the best of both worlds, with the same fast processor in a hybrid slate form, but—in an ironic twist—does not feature an active digitizer at all!

In this confusion of tablets, ASUS seems to have entirely ignored its existing EP121 user base. With nowhere to turn but ASUS’ competitors, these users are left wondering: where has the clarity of design vision and fine balance hardware—once exemplified by the EP121—gone to?

The answer is: the Zenbook.

In particular, the UX32VD assembles the finest ultraportable hardware available at the $1200-1300 price range. It remains unrivaled by other Ultrabooks in its ability to pack discrete graphics into a chassis negligibly larger than the MacBook Air. Combined with its extensive upgradeability, this computing power has opened up a whole new dimension of desktop-like productivity and gaming into the Ultrabook sector. Equally unprecedented is its IPS matte display which boasts a professional-grade, 99% gamut coverage. Rounding
out this premium experience is the superior bass of ICEpower speakers and the quality material aesthetic that characterizes the Zenbook line.

With such first-class engineering at ASUS’ disposal, it seems an utter waste to confine it to the Ultrabook market; case in point: a Wacom-enabled, slate version of the UX32VD would not just compete with current Tablet PCs—it would crush them. Therefore, for the next Haswell tablet, rather than experiment with another exotic design, ASUS should keep it simple:

Produce one, singular product that brings together the Zenbook’s market-redefining features—discrete-class graphics, user upgradeability, and professional display quality—into slate PC form, in short, a true successor to the EP121.
CONCLUSION

When Jonney Shih stepped before the world at CES 2011, he held a machine ahead of its time: long before Intel coined the term “Ultrabook” and Microsoft promised “no compromise” tablet computing, ASUS had already realized both in the EP121. With its versatile balance of hardware, the EP121 set the standard for the modern Windows tablet and it remains one of the most used, beloved, and well-respected Tablet PCs of all time.

Over the past three years, ASUS has shown it has—the design vision, the customer following, and the engineering talent—all the ingredients to set a new bar in the Tablet PC market. Will ASUS rise to the challenge? Can ASUS produce a machine once again worthy of Mr. Shih’s famous tag-line: “the world’s most powerful tablet”?