DAVE ERICKSON, JOHN HILD: The First XyWriters

BY JOHN DICKINSON

When Dave Erickson bought an IBM PC for home use 2 years ago, he wasn't sure what he was going to do with it. However, he was sure that he didn't like the DOS EDLIN line editor. Then a systems programmer with ATEX, Inc. of Bedford, Mass. (a front-end composition service for computerized typesetting systems), Erickson set about writing a better, full-screen editor using IBM's Macro Assembler. "I had to put up with EDLIN just long enough to make my editor work. Then I junked it."

Erickson showed the product of his new found hobby to fellow ATEX employee John Hild, who starting thinking entrepreneurial thoughts. "There's always a place in the market for a good word processor," says Hild, and Erickson's editor was faster and more responsive than any he'd seen on a PC. They soon left ATEX to form the XyQuest Corporation, dubbed their new editor *XyWrite I*, and set out to further develop and market the product.

Speed and responsiveness were the key objectives for *XyWrite I* and its *XyWrite II* successor and they remain critical today. "Any end-user product has to be written in assembly language in order to be fast enough to satisfy today's demanding PC users," says Erickson. XyQuest went farther than many software developers by writing custom keyboard routines that process keystrokes faster than the PC's BIOS routines can.

But XyQuest's commitment doesn't end there; it goes right out to *XyWrite* users. "No fea-

ture request comes in that doesn't get evaluated for inclusion in the current or next version of *XyWrite*," according to Erickson. Still a small company, nearly half of XyQuest's employees are there to provide users with telephone support.

Occasionally a user will be surprised by a call from Erickson himself. When Richard Milewski was unhappy with *XyWrite* and wrote *PC Magazine* a letter about it, a response came from Erickson himself, who called and resolved his questions. More frequently, Erickson gets involved when a user has inadvertently trashed a

file. "We can usually save the file if the user hasn't switched the machine off by the time he calls."

XyWrite has been significantly upgraded in its 2-year life. There have been two major version releases and a seemingly endless stream of revisions. It's now called *XyWrite II-plus* and boasts a wealth of sophisticated word processing features including multiple indexes, automatic table of contents generation, on-page footnotes, mail merge, microspaced justification, and a unique fill-in-the-blank mode for typing on preprinted forms.

Going Vertical

XyWrite can be customized at almost any level and for almost any purpose, which has made it easy for value-added resellers

(VARs) to tailor the program for specialized vertical markets. Most important for the VARs is the *XyWrite* programming language for writing macros. "Most of the value-added resellers just have to add their own macros to customize the product," says Erickson.

XyQuest still aims for the speed and responsiveness of the original product, but the company's present priority is to develop higher levels of word processing sophistication to satisfy the growing demand for features. "We want *XyWrite* to be the word processor of choice, the top of the line," Hild says.

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"Ultimately," adds Erickson, "a word processor should be able to put anything on paper you want to have there."

"That means combining speed and power with ease of use, in a package that can do things no one else can do," says Hild.

Getting Going

XyWrite is known for its speed, but many people find its commands difficult to use. "That only goes for the first 2 hours or so, while you're learning to use a product," responds Hild. "After that, *XyWrite*'s commands are much easier and faster to use than a menu-oriented word processing system, and that's when your productivity really counts."

XyQuest's continued success

John Hild (left) and Dave Erickson (right).

with *XyWrite II* has inspired Hild and Erickson to work hard to bring a more sophisticated version, *XyWrite III*, out by the third quarter of this year. One of the new features will be proportional spacing with microspaced justification, which will allow mixing of font styles and sizes on a laser printer, multiple-column formatting, and predefined style definitions.

Major parts of *XyWrite* are being redone for the upcoming version to make it easier to use and even more flexible. Editing page headers, footers, and footnotes will be easier. A better on-line help facility and an on-screen tutorial are also in the works, along with entirely new documentation and packaging.

XyQuest's long-range plans for *XyWrite* are ambitious and call for improved database facilities, graphics merged with text in printed documents, spreadsheet-like calculations, and telecommunications directly to and from the word processing environment. In spite of these far-reaching plans, Hild and Erickson don't plan to convert *XyWrite* into an integrated product (like *Symphony* and *Framework*). Instead, they envision bringing their speedy word processer closer to Erickson's objective of a program that gets "anything you want on paper." ∎