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# Esber is playing a new tune



EXAMINER/KA

Ed Esber's new company, *Creative Insights*, plans a line of computer toys and musical instruments, like the *Miracle Piano*.

**ED** ESBER ISN'T LOOKING FORWARD TO yet another "Where is Ed Esber now?" story, and no wonder.

His controversial tenure as the moody boy genius CEO of software-maker Ashton-Tate in the 1980s is the stuff of Silicon Valley legend. It's been one retrospective after another ever since.

But Esber, now a considerably mellowed 42, says he's through looking back. Nine months after quietly ending his 11-month stint as chairman and chief operating officer of multimedia power-house Creative Labs in Milpitas; he is busy setting up shop in what is a real departure. His new business, Creative Insights in Cupertino, will be making kids' educational software, action games, computerized musical instruments and futuristic computerized toys. .

Sources say that Esber has some \$7.5 million in seed capital, scored in his exit from Creative Labs, and that he is seeking \$20 million to \$25 million more in institutional investments. Thanks to the money, he is already scoring some major wins.

For one thing, the company has been quietly signing up some of the top names in the game design, entertainment and toy businesses. And CI is in negotiations with Software Toolworks to buy the business and intellectual property rights for a downright innovative product, the Miracle Piano Teacher.

Over time CI plans to release a Miracle Sax, Miracle Guitar and Miracle Drum — "A whole miracle orchestra!" Esber says. That's just the beginning.

"What we want to do is create a whole new type of company, one that is guaranteed to enrich children's lives through innovative computer toys. We want to make the PC as important to kids at home as it for their parents at the office."

If you've ever seen the Miracle Piano Teacher, you know what he's talking about. It's a piano keyboard that, with software, connects to a PC to teach piano in a demonstratively fun and easy way. Within a few years, CI hopes to make inroads in other, even more futuristic computerized toys for kids that use flat-screen LCD panels, voice control and video images.

In the meantime, CI isn't ignoring today's lucrative computer game market. Its flashy upcoming action game, called Alien Legacy, will start shipping from partner Sierra Online within a few weeks.

The producer of that game, incidentally, is Joe Ybarra, one of the founding employees and the first executive producer for games at San Mateo's Electronic Arts.

Ybarra is only one of the biggies CI has snared. Another is Larry Belling, who produced Pink Floyd's "The Wall" album and composed the music for TV shows including Quantum Leap. He is CI's Hollywood connection.

As if that's not enough: CI has also signed Chuck Monte, a music technology inventor and the father of the Miracle Piano. He became well known a decade ago for customizing keyboards for famous musicians.

The company's also formed a relationship with inventor and Machina founder Ralph Osterhout. San Francisco's Machina makes innovative toys and electronics for shops like The Sharper Image.

"We've been trying to tie up some of the world's best talent in toys and music," Esber says, "and I think we've done it. Everyone complains about childrens' education, and how kids are so busy playing video games. But we're trying to figure out what a kid's

room should look like five, 10 or even 15 years from now, and how we can be the billion-dollar company that makes those dreams come true."

Certainly, Esber's dream is a grand one. As an example, he uses the virtual "holodeck" room the characters entertain themselves with in "Star Trek: The Next Generation."

"Our charter is to build a kid's holodeck — a family holodeck — a place that will enrich children's lives far beyond anything they've got today," he said.

All this talk of vision and dreams is having a somewhat enriching effect on Esber, too. The once antsy, Type A executive is visibly more relaxed. If you worked with him in the 1980s, you probably wouldn't even recognize him now.

"I haven't worked this hard or had this much fun in years. People say I look like I'm glowing."

The change comes from an altogether new way of thinking.

"What I've gained is a sense of perspective.... I've learned that the mission is more important than the ladder. And instead of letting my ego get big, I'm learning to listen to my team, to let ideas ferment."

He's also learned to turn the other way when it comes to anti-Esber commentary. Despite the fact that he managed some incredible growth at Creative Labs — the stock doubled and the company controls 44 percent of Esber's new firm — emotions still run deep on the Ashton-Tate subject. Many in the Valley still blame Esber for that company's downfall, though many consider him somewhat vindicated. A year ago it came out that, he was fired for proposing a merger with Borland, a deal that he says "would have returned to share-holders at least double" the \$400 million Borland bought it for only a year later.

"In this industry, they either love you or they think you're totally worthless — and I don't care anymore," he says now. "You can't let every bad comment get you down. If you wallow in the past, you let inaccurate, negative perceptions become your anchor. I just refuse to do that."

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*Gina Smith also writes the Help File, a computer advice column that appears every other Wednesday in The Examiner. She also will co-host a new personal computing television show to air on CNBC beginning in August, and co-hosts the nationally syndicated radio talk show, On Computers.*

San Francisco Examiner, July 17 1994