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Jay Sasserath's
mentor taught him the
importance of following
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TWO DOLLARS



KATHLEEN CARBLE

At Allegro's offices, employee Christie Sicilianouses uses the Piano Wizard program to learn the basics of piano playing.

Alliance with a toy company sounds sweet for piano tool

BY MICHAEL HINMAN
STAFF WRITER

SEFFNER—Electronic Arts Inc. is practically synonymous with electronic gaming, especially the EA Sports division with its titles like "NBA Live" and "Madden NFL."

Now an upstart software company based in Seffner wants to be to the music world what EA (Nasdaq: ERTS) has done with sports.

Allegro Multimedia Inc. has launched its first major title, "Piano Wizard," an educational game that teaches users not only how to play the piano but also music theory and music notation. It's the brainchild of Chris Salter, a former Tampa resident who now lives in Boulder, Colo., who felt that 21st century tools were needed to help introduce people to music.

"We don't get resistance (from the market) because everyone loves music," said Salter, who has an educational background in both music and linguistics. "The non-violent aspect of it was just natural for me because I've got young kids. To me, it has just resonated across the board."

Starting out with just \$20,000 in October 2001, Salter began to develop the prototype for "Piano Wizard," where the joy of actually playing music would come first, and then later through game play, the fundamental aspects of music would be learned.

Trying to get established in the software industry was difficult, and it was especially so when technology wasn't exactly an investor's dream during the dot-com crash. But Salter believed in his product and continued to push for venture capital funding, finally raising \$4.5 million to help complete and launch "Piano Wizard."

COMPETITION REQUIRES LOTS OF CASH

In order to compete in a highly competitive software gaming market, having millions of dollars available is key, said Rick Hall, director of production at the Florida Interactive Entertainment Academy at Orlando's University of Central Florida.

"The big challenge that you have out there is that the big guns — like the Sonys, the Microsofts, the Electronic Arts — they

can outspend you," Hall said. "It's not cheap to make a good game, costing you anywhere between \$4 (million) and \$7 million. EA can go in there and put in that kind of money without even thinking about it."

Getting attention from the educational side can be just as difficult.

"For many people, you have no credibility as a publisher of educational games," Hall said. "You get into the educational community, and there you're not a teacher, you just make games. But when you do get educational people involved, they may not be interested in making a good game, just something educational. So you have to strike the balance of having something educational and entertaining, and having it accepted by the educational community."

FORMING A TEAM

Finding the right partner can make a difference, and Salter believes he has done just that with Mattel's (NYSE: MAT) Fisher-Price subsidiary. Allegro and Fisher-Price have put together a "Piano Wizard" toy geared toward younger children that could provide an early introduction to music.

"It's a huge breakthrough for us," Salter said. "All of the other companies are now taking us seriously. This company is going to basically teach a generation of kids on our method."

It also will contribute to a very rich marketplace as well. Sales of learning toys and such jumped 8 percent from 2004 to 2005, bringing in nearly \$1.2 billion, said Anita Frazier, an industry analyst with NPD Group Inc. But just because a company has produced a product doesn't necessarily guarantee big returns.

"Certainly the educational software market has faced its challenges, but that has been largely in the traditional packaged PC software area," Frazier said. "Educational toys, like that from VTech, Fisher-Price and Leapfrog, (have) certainly been a bright spot in the toy industry in the last few years. Certainly (Allegro) partnering with a strong player in this space is a huge advantage as opposed to trying it alone."

mhinman@bizjournals.com | 813.342.2477



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