

Elon Musk: Will his Silicon Valley story have a Hollywood ending?

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Last week, just one day after he stood alongside Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the CEO of Toyota to announce plans for mass-producing his company's all-electric sedan at the NUMMI plant, Elon Musk turned his attention to preparing for the impending launch of his privately built space rocket — which he believes could pave the way to colonizing Mars.



Is it any wonder this guy was a role model for the title character in the "Iron Man" movies?

A wealthy industrialist. A brilliant, if prickly, engineer. A recurring subject of tech blog gossip. The 38-year-old CEO of Palo Alto's Tesla Motors is all those things, with a back story that any screenwriter would love.

It's a classic Silicon Valley tale, too.

Musk is a South African native who read science fiction as a boy, wrote code as a teenager and worked his way through college after immigrating first to Canada and then the United States. He signed up for graduate studies in physics at Stanford but dropped out after two days to become an Internet entrepreneur.

Musk netted \$22 million from selling one startup, Zip2, and then banked \$160 million after co-founding and selling PayPal. Since then, he's poured most of his wealth and time into two companies: Tesla, which he funded as a startup in 2004 and the Southern California firm called Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX, that Musk founded in 2002 and where he's now also CEO. (He's also chairman of Solar City, an alternative-energy company, although he doesn't play an active role in management.)

Tesla and SpaceX each embody what most people would consider an audacious goal: One, if successful, could help revolutionize the auto industry. The other, already the first private company to put a liquid-fueled rocket into orbit, is preparing to launch a much bigger rocket from Florida's Cape Canaveral in the next few weeks, which Musk hopes will earn a NASA contract to carry cargo to the International Space Station.

His long-term goal is to lower the cost of space travel enough to make visits to other planets routine, Musk has said. Accomplishing that, he told the Mercury News in 2008, "is the thing that changes the destiny of humanity."

Musk wasn't available to comment for this report. But friends say he is intensely focused on his goals.

"He looks at the world from an engineering standpoint," said Adeo Ressi, a fellow entrepreneur who's known Musk since their undergraduate days at the University of Pennsylvania.

"He wants to build the best car made by man. He wants to build a vehicle that can take human beings into space," Ressi added. "He'll work on it until that's achieved."

Musk has shown little patience for critics.

"Joe Dyer ought to be ashamed of himself," Musk told The New York Times, after the chairman of NASA's Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel said that commercial space ventures, such as SpaceX, had not yet satisfied government safety standards.

And when a Times columnist criticized Tesla's application for federal loans, intended to spur development of fuel-efficient cars, Musk told Web interviewer Sarah Lacy that the offending columnist was "an idiot."

His sometimes rocky relationships have also landed Musk in court. Tesla co-founder Martin Eberhard sued Musk for slander after Musk helped oust Eberhard from his job as the company's first CEO. The dispute was settled out of court last year.

Musk's romantic life became tabloid fodder after his 2008 split from his wife, the fantasy novelist Justine Musk, who announced their divorce in her blog. The pair have twins and also triplets. Musk has since proposed to an English actress, Talulah Riley, 24, while he and his first wife remain tangled in a messy financial dispute.

His electric-car venture has also hit its share of bumps in the road. While the high-end Tesla Roadster has been an object of desire for wealthy executives and Hollywood stars, the company has been forced to announce layoffs and production delays in recent years.

But setbacks and adjustments are common with many startups, Ressi noted. Venture capitalist Ira Ehrenpreis, who sits on Tesla's board, praised Musk's leadership skills.

"Elon is able to attract some of the best and brightest to work with him," Ehrenpreis said by e-mail Friday. "His powerful vision and operational intensity and dedication combine to create game-changing companies."

Musk's ambitions and track record are part of what prompted film director Jon Favreau to meet with him as research for developing the character of Tony Stark, the "genius billionaire" and fictional alter ego to the superhero Iron Man.

"Elon is a paragon of enthusiasm, good humor and curiosity — a Renaissance man in an era that needs them," Favreau recently wrote in Time magazine. Along with Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, another Silicon Valley mogul, Musk makes a brief appearance as himself in "Iron Man 2."