

A1: NEEDFINDING

Avey Etaghene, Candace Cang, Siya Goel, Tyler Abernethy

Team Members



Siya Goel

she/her

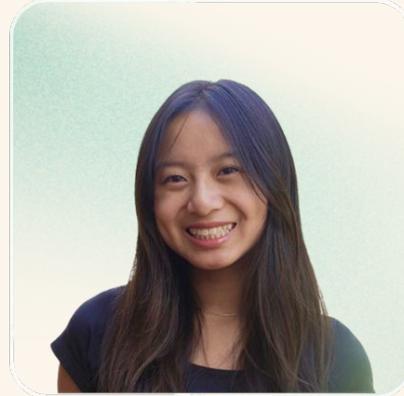
CS (AI) + Econ '26
CS (HCI) '27



Avey Etaghene

she/her

Symsys '27
CS (HCI) '27



Candace Cang

she/her

Design '26
CS (HCI) '27



Tyler Abernethy

they/them

Symsys '26
CS (HCI) '27

Domain Selection

In our initial brainstorm, we asked

“who uses creative tools?”



Developers

- Need to storytell
- Don't know much about design tools
- Independent contractors don't have many resources



Non-Profit Leads

- Need to do marketing
- Don't have much support on teams
- Many different types to explore and learn about



Independent Learners

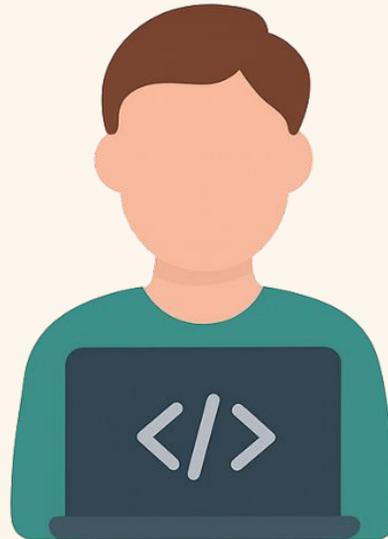
- Need to craft curricula and lesson plans
- Includes a broad pool of people (students, engineers, nonprofits)

We then asked

“who uses creative tools?” →

“what is the difference between these two major types of developers?”

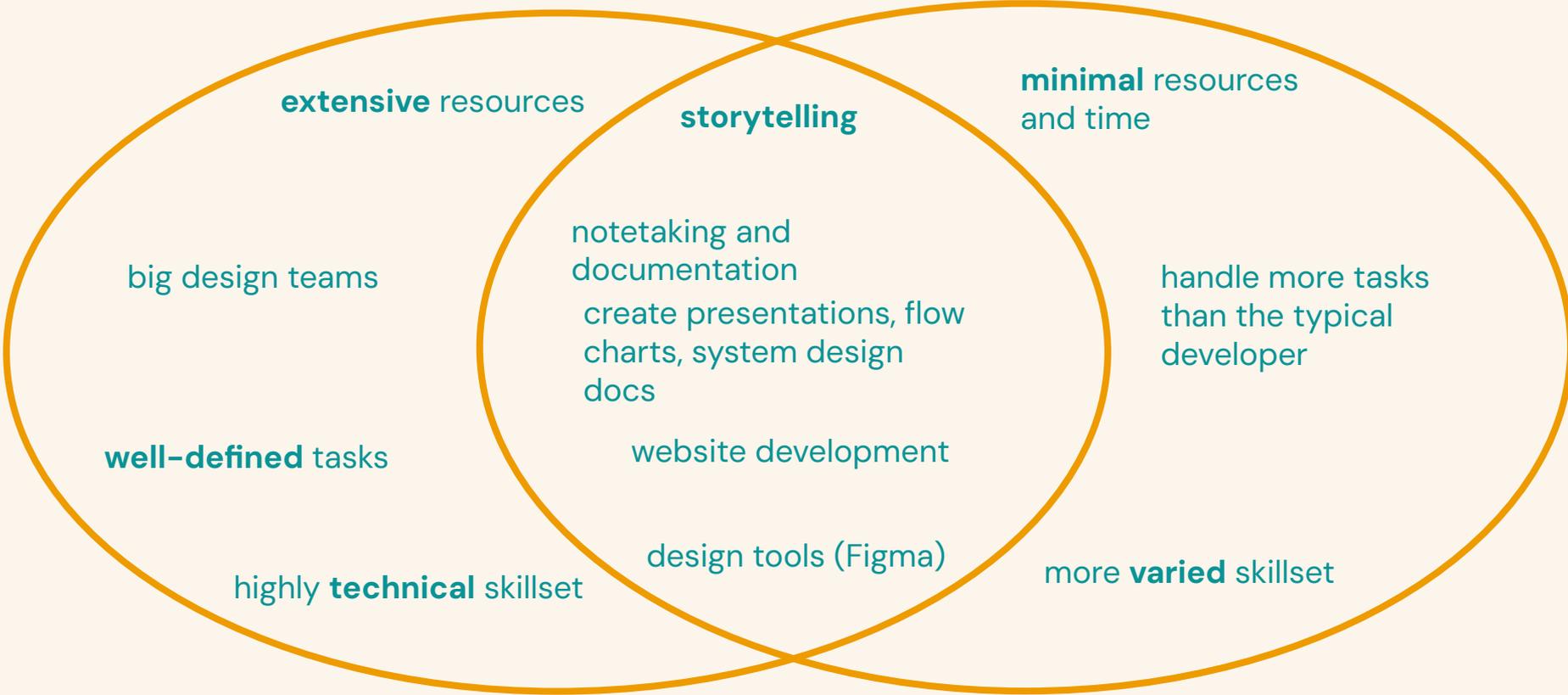
software
engineers



startup
founders

Software Engineers

Startup Founders



extensive resources

big design teams

well-defined tasks

highly **technical** skillset

storytelling

notetaking and documentation
create presentations, flow charts, system design docs

website development

design tools (Figma)

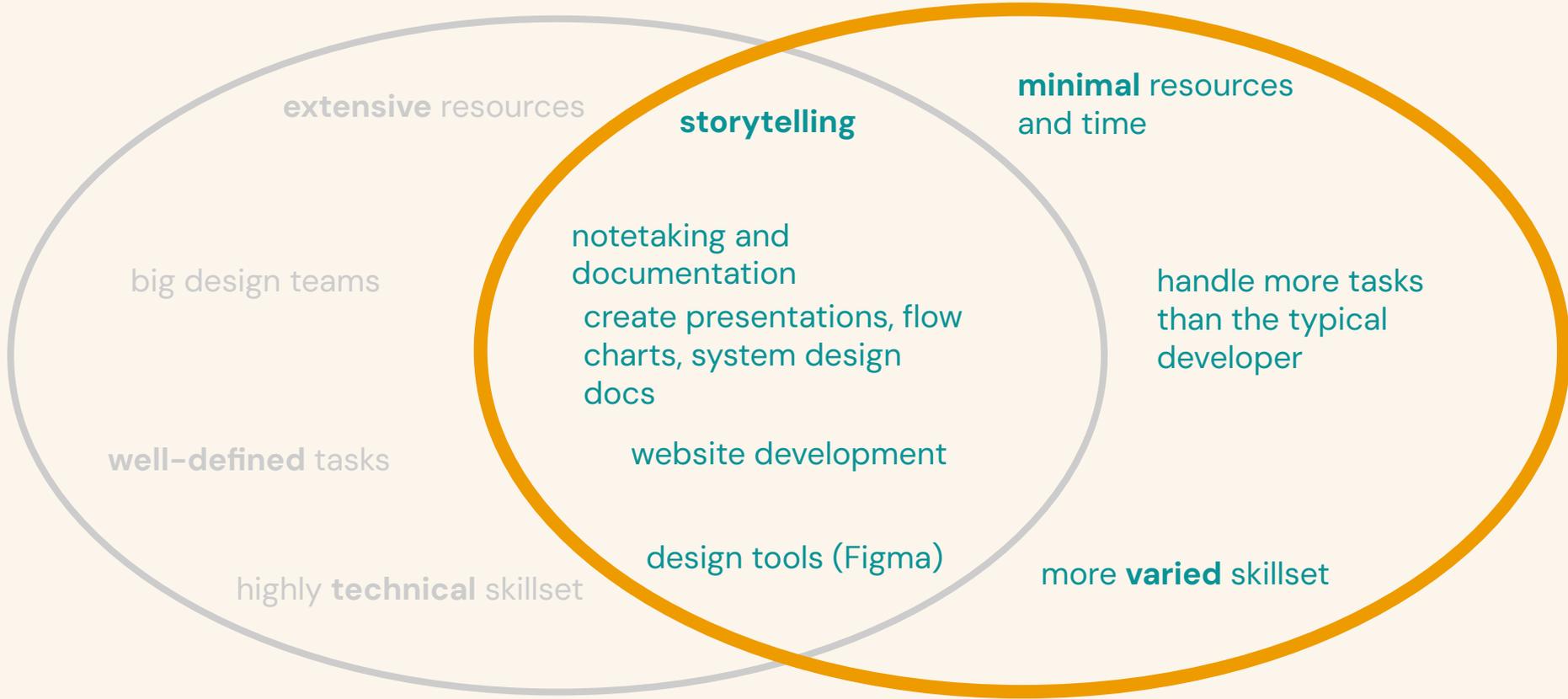
minimal resources and time

handle more tasks than the typical developer

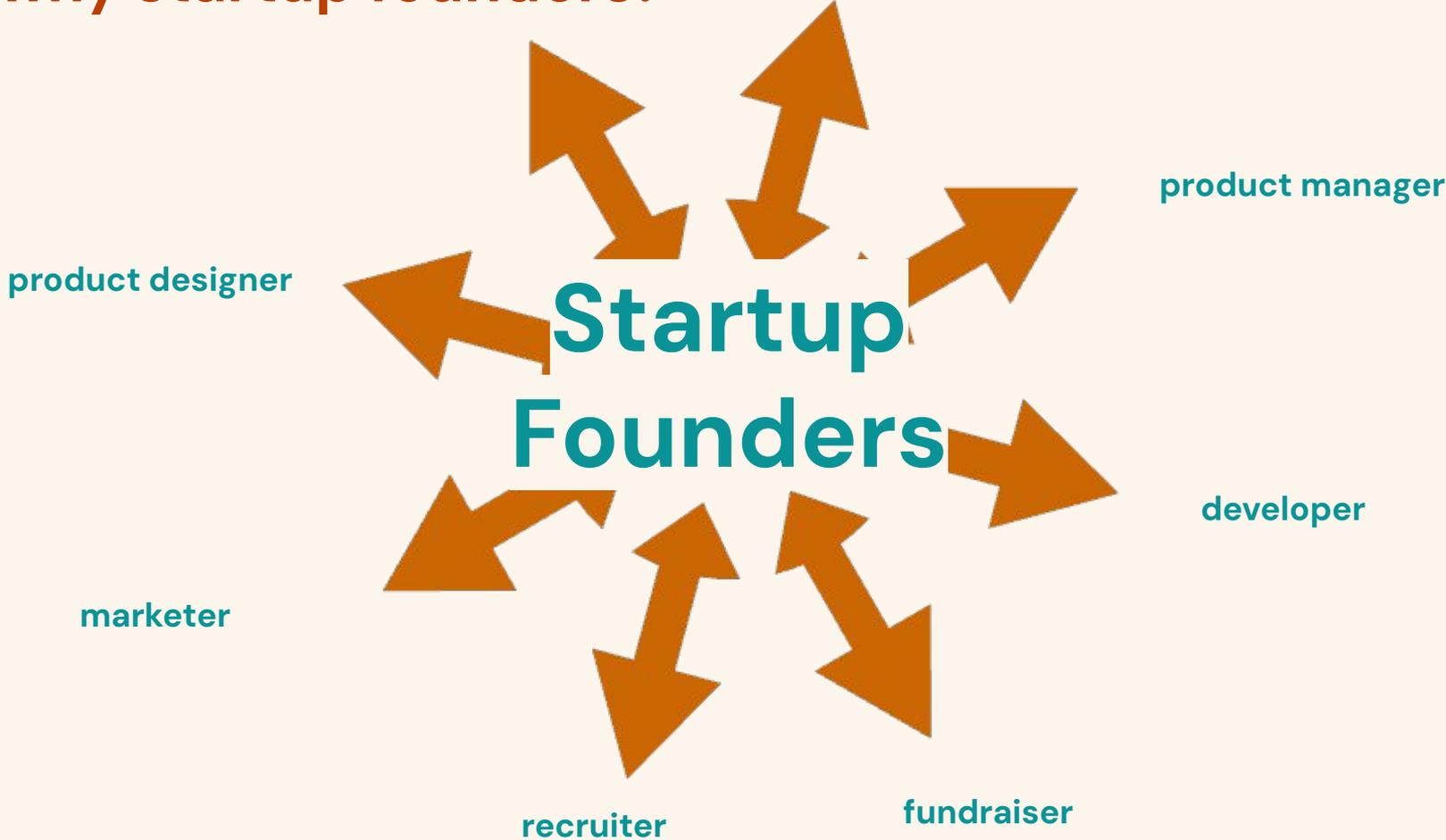
more **varied** skillset

Software Engineers

Startup Founders



So why startup founders?



Who and Why?

product designer

product manager

**Early founders
wear many hats.**

developer

marketer

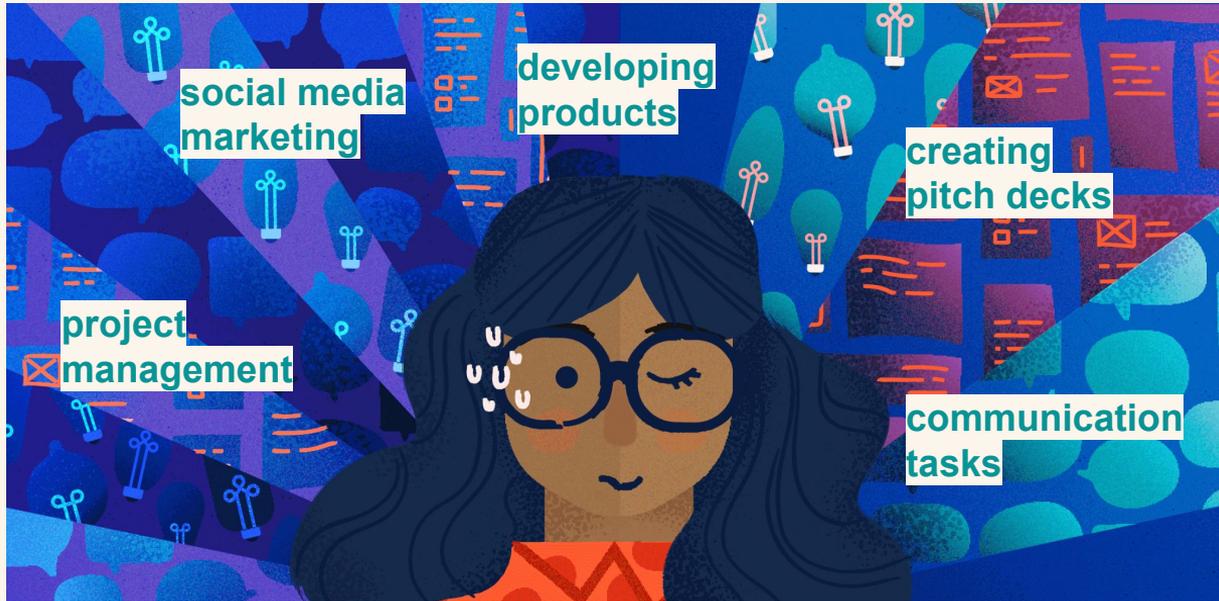
recruiter

fundraiser



Why?

Rapid Context Switching



small team → variety of work in quick, high pressure environments

Why?

Opportunity

Preseed and early startups are quite lean.

Thinking about AI as "co-founder" collaborators...

There was opportunity for AI to increase workflow

We wanted to understand the current workflows of founders and learn how AI tools can impact friction, efficiency, and confidence in their startup tasks.

Needfinding Methodology

Recruitment Strategies

Personal Network



Siya Goel  (She/Her) • 10:58 PM

Hi Greg! I am working on building a project that makes design tools easier for founders. I would love to meet with you and discuss your experience with these tools if possible!

Hi all! My name is Siya! I worked with sako on a project in the agi house a while back. ✓

I am working on a project related to making design tools easier for startup founders. I would love to interview some of you about your experiences! If you are in the bay, would love to meet in person to chat! Thanks so much

10:26 PM ✓

Targeted and Public Spaces



Selection Priorities

Range of Experiences



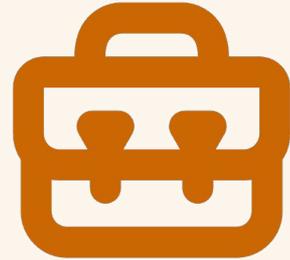
technical skill sets

technical vs
non-technical
backgrounds



industry/field

Consumer, Fintech,
Medtech, Dev Tools, etc.



work experience

just graduated, PhD,
industry experience, etc.

Selection Priorities

Diversity



gender



age



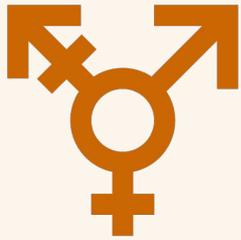
geographic
origin/location



VC support

Selection Priorities

Diversity



gender



age



geographic
origin/location



VC support

Challenges: ~12% founders are women, geographic constraints on in-person meetings

Recruitment Challenges and Barriers

Stanford
students not
permitted

busy season for
fundraising →
founders have less
time and
bandwidth

lack of
accessibility:
many founders
are in SF, quick
turnaround

Interviewees



Sam

Recent College Grad
Technical
Legal Tech + YC
Seed Startup



Alex

20+ years of engineering
Technical
Dev Tools
Pre Seed Startup



Mike

10 years of finance
Nontechnical
Consumer
Series A



Silus

8 years finance, consulting, and data science
Technical
Fintech + YC
Series A



Steven

2x Ex-Founder
Nontechnical
Consumer
Seed Startups



Samantha

PhD in Genetics + 2x Founder
Technical
Medtech
Seed Startups

Diversity in Experience and Startup Space

Interviewees



Extreme user: Youngest and most inexperienced founder

Sam

Recent College Grad
Technical
Legal Tech + YC
Seed Startup



Alex

20+ years of engineering
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Samantha

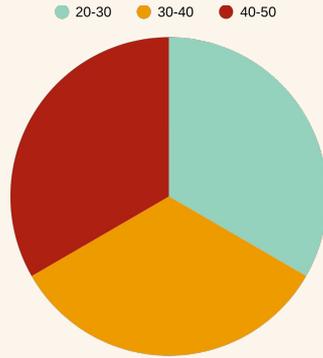
PhD in Genetics + 2x Founder
Technical
Medtech
Seed Startups

Diversity in Experience and Startup Space

Extreme user: Only woman, medical background, 2x Founder

Why these participants? Diversity

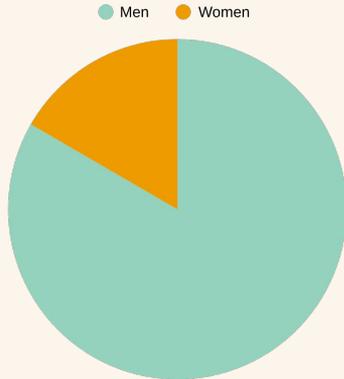
Age



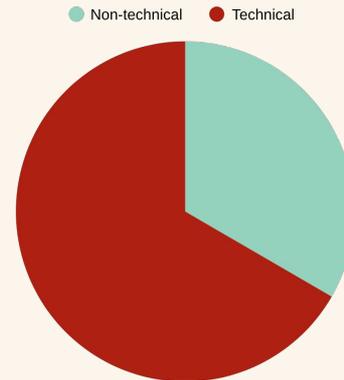
Geographic/ Ethnic background



Gender

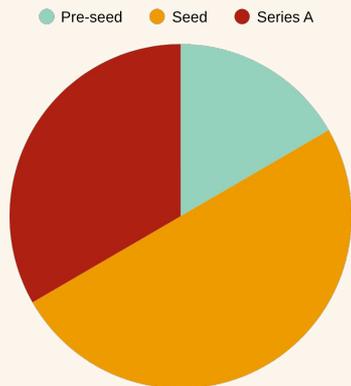


Technical Experience

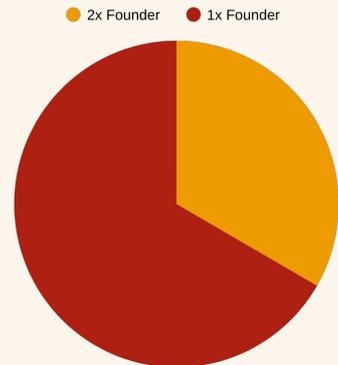


Why these participants? Diversity

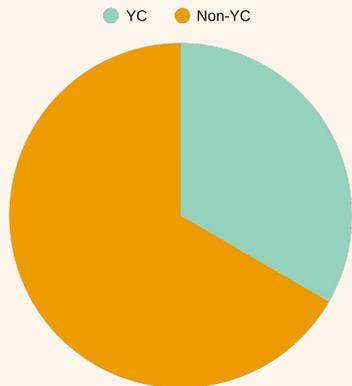
Startup Funding



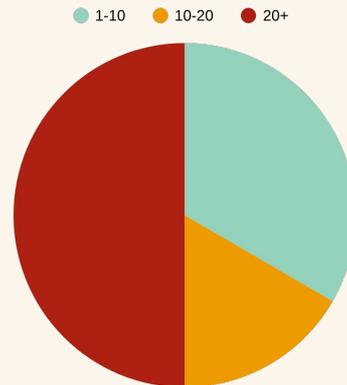
Founder Experience



YC Status



Team Size



Interview Plan and Logistics

Where



AGI House (2)



Cafe Reveille SF (1)

zoom

Video call (1)



Stanford campus (1)



Verve Palo Alto (1)

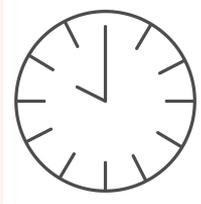
Interview Plan and Logistics

When

Scheduled the same week as outreach or approached in public

Length

30-50 minutes



Consent

All interviewees signed consent forms

Procedure

1 interviewer, 1-2 notetakers

Candace and Siya were usually interviewers

Avey and Tyler were usually notetakers

Tools



Ethics and Incentives

Respected their time & helped them gain access to Stanford

Interview Plan and Logistics

Example Incentive



Mikhil Raja  (He/Him) • 1:52 PM

Hey Siya, great to meet.

Keen to speak at Stanford as we are actively hiring!

I will amend our job description for juniors and send across



Siya Goel  (She/Her) • 3:06 PM

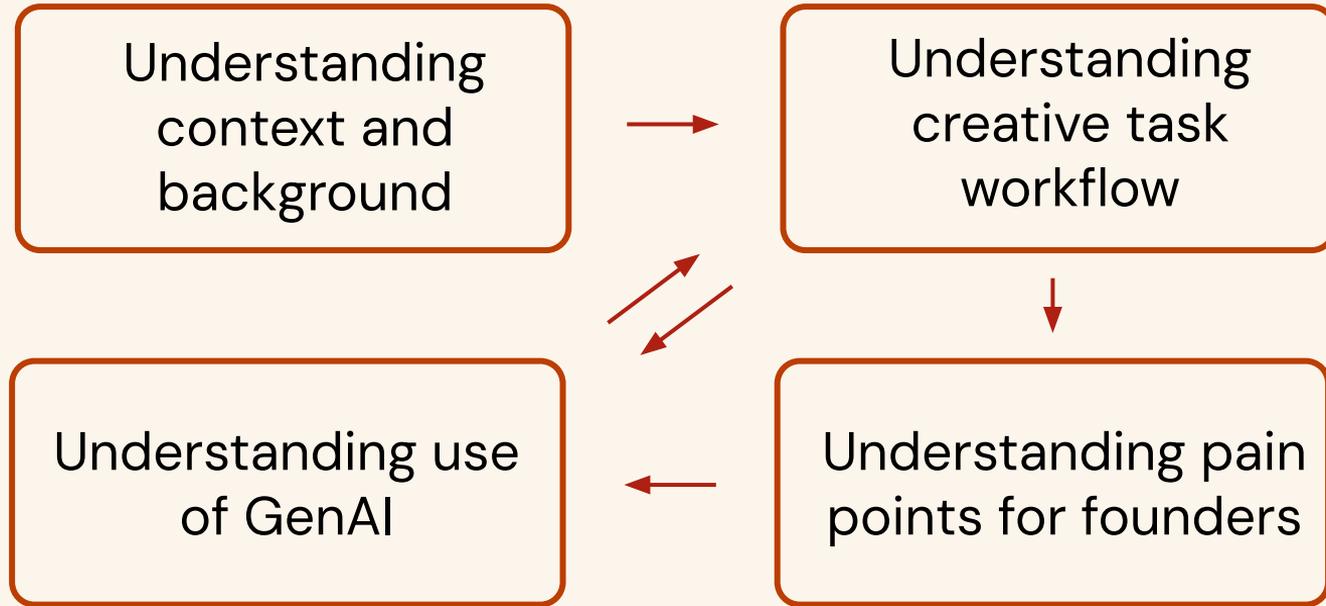
Great to meet as well Mikhil! Thanks for your time and interview.

Ethics and Incentives

Respected their time & helped them gain access to Stanford

Interview Script and Questions

Understanding “why” they were doing the “whats”



Interview Script and Questions

Understanding “why” they were doing the “whats”

Understanding
context and
background

“How big is your team right now, and what does everyone focus on?”

“Can you tell me a bit about your background and how you decided to start your venture?”

“Can you tell me a little bit about your startup and your role in it?”

Interview Script and Questions

Understanding “why” they were doing the “whats”

“What tools do you use for your creative workflow?”

Understanding
creative task
workflow

“What is the process of communicating with designers like?”

Interview Script and Questions

Understanding “why” they were doing the “whats”

“What challenges do you face in your creative workflows and why?”

“Why is it hard to get design tasks done?”

“Why is it hard communicating with designers?”

Understanding pain points for founders

Interview Script and Questions

Understanding “why” they were doing the “whats”

“What are some pain points of using GenAI tools in your creative workflow?”

Understanding use
of GenAI

“How do you wish GenAI was better for your use cases?”

Interview Results & Analysis

Empathy Map - Sam



Says

"It's much more valuable for us to outsource marketing and pay someone a good amount of money to write this and than for us to spend time on a design tool"

"Because we are only 2 people, our time is more valuable optimizing pipelines"

"There is a creativity that you get working with a designer that you just don't get when working with a design tool"

"We are backend engineers, and I pulled the shorts/straw and had to start learning React, front-end"

"Design tools are great if you know what you're doing with them. For us, we're time sensitive. We'd rather pay the difference to someone who is experienced to take our vision and translate it into a design"

"We tried to use Figma, but it was just so much work so now we write on a whiteboard."

"Because we are managing a company, we make very consequential decisions because there is only 2 of us and we make decisions all day. We would rather trust humans to make decisions for us."

"Having really aesthetic designs can be distracting for some people, like researchers"

Asks VC network: "Hey, has anyone here liked an actual designer and has enjoyed working with them?"

"We are not particularly great designers but it would be nice if we could have a tool that we can use to design things that we can't really design that well"

"We can write the code. We can't really design that well"

"We very quickly realized we had no idea what the hell we're doing in Figma"

Thinks

Think it is super helpful when AI tools gives them additional information that would improve their products beyond its initial request. Ex. When asked to improve a table UI, AI would improve it and provide additional suggestions.

He believes that "You're only as good as you communicate" because designers will not assume and you need to tell them exactly what you want and keep their attentions.

Thinks tools should not design for him, rather they should send him to different schools of designs or different design frameworks to help map things for him.

Thinks it would be helpful to have a tool that would help him prep with his calls with designers.

Thinks front end engineering is a lot easier to automate than backend engineering.

Thinks he is in the minority of people who would want AI tools to design for them on Figma through a chatbot, but strongly believes that if great designers can have AI tools to code for them, great developers should have AI tools to design for them.

Thinks finding a design firm to work with is often the biggest barrier, in addition to language barriers and communication frequencies.

Thinks that in an ideal world, design tools would have a tool calling functionality from an MCP server that would make adjustments to all of the small detail design adjustments.

Thinks that there is a lot of priority over certain work, and believes that they would rather recruit interns and pay people than figuring things out on their own despite being more than capable of doing so.

Thinks design tools are hard to use and that chatbots that would do designing for them and hand written white boarding are easier for design workflow.

Thinks dashboard design is the easiest to prompt engineer. The real difficult stuff is vite coding a landing page and thinks designers are crucial for this work.

Thinks it would be cool to have a tool that would help him evaluate ui decisions

Does

Users cursor, windsurf, github, gitlab for deployment, docker, lots of note taking apps. Uses signal for messaging, google slides, gmail, zoom

Easily shows up (interviewers) all of the websites that belonged to his competitors. Shows us what his website looks like.

For front end, he would go on component libraries and see things he likes and copy and paste (uses easy markdown copy button) and give it to cursor. When it wasn't to his standard, he would edit the meta prompting to get it to where he likes using context setting and providing details.

In his and his founders design process, they write on a whiteboard, take the whole front framework, give it to ChatGPT with description of what they want to make, chat tells them what they need to copy into a 2nd prompt for GPT, cursor, windsurf

When working with designers, he is sent a design book and he needs to come up with the ideas, inspiration, fonts, trends, and come up with the plan and design frameworks in order to collaborate effectively.

Uses design consulting firms where they can pay people to create a figma dashboard and upload it to Framer. Pays a hefty one time price for boutique design firms, but they meet every other day, which helps.

Aesthetics and designs vary significantly depending on the audience. If they just need to get their point across, they make very boring, generic slides and were told to do that by VC because of time restraints.

Spent money buying templates off of Figma and tried editing it, but very quickly realized they didn't know what they were doing on Figma.

In a meeting with designers:
1. They give a list of their competitors - what they like, dont, and websites that resonate
2. They are given a table where they rank 1-5 on things they want and don't want, like animations
3. Designers give them a portfolio of things they have done
4. Firm gives a roadmap

Feels

Feels cocky or naive that him and his cofounder went proposed to VC without a demo

Feels apologetic after answering questions, feeling unsure if he is answering the questions correctly or not. Feels forgetful of question being asked (often).

Leaning on human trust, something he likes is that his firm is very hands on and he likes that they can "hold their hand" through things like inspiration, making design decisions.

Feels content with all of the resources that ChatGPT and other AI tools does for them to get their design work done.

Feels like it is easier to take existing tools he is familiar with and prompt engineer it rather than learning new ecosystems and tools.

Feels surprised that these methods worked very well and smoothly.

Feels like there are greater priorities in their projects and work. For ex, reaching KPIs are more important than a website

Feels pressure and time sensitivity around funding, meeting deadlines, and working with stakeholders, so he doesn't have time for design tools.

Very confident and trusting of himself and his cofounder to write their own back-end codes.

Feels impatient and does not trust himself to be patient for dealing with LLMs in design spaces.

Feels like word of mouth is reliable. Ex: their design firm they recruited was word of mouth through startup world

Does not trust LLMs to make marketing content, promotional videos, and do design because authenticity and quality is not there. Does not think there is enough robustness/creativity and tool calling.

Really values quality and authenticity of content and what they produce.

Feels strong responsibility over the decisions he makes because he recognizes there are only 2 founders, so all decisions are consequential

Key Takeaways – Sam



Says

"It's much more valuable for us to outsource marketing and pay someone a good amount of money to write this and then for us to spend time on a design tool"

"We are backend engineers, and I pulled the short straw and had to start learning React, frontend"

"We tried to use Figma, but it was just so much work so now we write on a whiteboard."

Asks YC network:

"We are not particularly great designers but it is the job done for us"

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In his and his founders design process, they write on a whiteboard, take the whole front framework, give it to ChatGPT with description of what they want to make, chat tells them what they need to copy into a 2nd prompt for GPT, cursor, windsurf

When he had a roadblock with Figma, he relied on things he knew how to do (Typescript, React) to create pages and resources he needed.

Using context setting and providing details.

In his and his founders design process, they write on a whiteboard, take the whole front framework, give it to ChatGPT with description of what they want to make, chat tells them what they need to copy into a 2nd prompt for GPT, cursor, windsurf

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Uses design consulting firms where they can pay

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Feels like word of

Feels cocky or naive that him and his cofounder went proposed to YC without a demo

Feels pressure and time sensitivity around funding, meeting deadlines, and working with stakeholders, so he doesn't have time for design tools.

Feels like there are greater priorities in their projects and work. For ex, reaching KPIs are more important than a website

Feels strong responsibility over the decisions he makes because he recognizes there are only 2 founders, so ai decisions are consequential

Does not trust LLMs to make marketing content, promotional videos, and do design because authenticity and quality is not there. Does not think there is enough robustness/creativity and tool calling.

Really values quality and authenticity of content and what they produce.

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Analysis - Sam



Quote: "Design tools are great if you know what you are doing with them. For us, we are time sensitive."

Insight: People rely on quick and **easy** ways to make their **workflows** efficient because they have a greater sense of **urgency** for other priorities for their product and tools they are confident in. **Time is more valuable than money** because they feel **pressure and time sensitivity** to meet deadlines.

Need: A tool that would help him in terms of customization and help him prep with his calls with designers.

Empathy Map - Alex



Says

"I'm a systems engineer, I work on hypervisors and low-level GPU signals."

He explains that his core work is in low-level kernel engineering and hypervisors, and emphasizes that dashboards are necessary to surface signals for customers.

He notes that Figma is difficult for him to use.

"Figma is hard for me to use, I need the designer's help even for small changes like fonts"

"I don't know what the best visualization I need is, so I need the designer to help me figure it out."

He points out that communication with designers takes significant time and effort.

"This process takes a lot of time...A lot of time!"

He describes how communication usually happens through Slack messages with the designer. It involves a lot of reply messages and a long thread of slack messages about design

He stresses that he doesn't always know the best way to visualize the data, so he expects designers to guide him.

He admits that he relies on existing templates, like in Pitch.com, to speed up design work.

He doesn't trust AI for low level code...if it generates C code it doesn't work.

"AI doesn't work well for our low-level work, it just doesn't compile."

He notes that iteration with the designer can take days.

"She comes up with design, something I like or I don't like and she makes changes"

Thinks

He feels his time is wasted when he has to repeatedly explain complex systems.

"I'm wasting a lot of time explaining technical details to designers who don't understand systems."

He sees dashboards as critical, but feels disconnected from the best way to design them.

He assumes iteration is inevitable but still wishes it could be faster.

He thinks and wishes designers could intuitively understand the data and propose effective visualizations without heavy back-and-forth.

"I don't know what I need, I just have the data."

He thinks his feedback isn't always understood or acted on correctly, the first couple of times.

He wonders if customer confusion means the designs are flawed.

He thinks working with an experienced designer in security who had experience at crowd strike makes things easier.

He thinks he should be focusing on kernel engineering, not design.

He thinks the language gap between engineers and designers slows everything down, especially the iterative process

Does

He collects GPU telemetry signals such as temperature, crashes, and stack traces.

Delegates website and UI creation entirely to designers, focusing his own time on low-level engineering.

Iterates by sending multiple rounds of feedback.

Shakes his head when talking about how long the iterative process is

He communicates mainly one-on-one with the designer over through team meetings.

He constantly reviews Figma dashboards and provides feedback.

Shares raw technical data with the designer over Slack, often in detailed messages.

Iterates repeatedly on designs until something is workable

He experiments with coding copilots for small scripts but abandons them for kernel-level work.

Uses coding copilots occasionally, but mostly for high-level scripting.

Feels

He feels distrustful of AI because it produces unreliable or uncompileable code.

Frustrated when design tools like Figma feel unintuitive.

Annoyed when small changes in design break the layout.

avey

"It feels like speaking two different languages with designers, and it can be sometimes exhausting"

avey

Overwhelmed by the amount of iteration needed to reach a final dashboard.

avey

Hopeful that experienced designers can bridge the gap faster.

avey

He is stressed that he doesn't always know the best way to visualize the data, so he expects designers to guide him.

avey

Stressed when customer-facing designs are still unclear even after multiple iterations.

avey

He feels his feedback isn't always understood the first time.

avey

Sighs audibly when recalling wasted hours of explanation/design iteration.

avey

Analysis - Alex

Surprise: Alex's perspective was surprising because he didn't think that AI really helped him with his product involving low level code as well as design. This was surprising because many other founders relied a lot on AI to produce their product and design components.

Insight: Because technical founders deeply **trust their own engineering expertise but not their creative abilities**, they assume designers hold an opposite and create a mindset that **reinforces a large gap** between the way they think and slowing down collaboration. As a result, they think the **communicating with designers is complicated and time consuming**.

Need: Alex needs a tool to help him decrease the time and the amount of iteration it takes to talk to his designers and come up with the final product.



Empathy Map - Mike



Says

He admits his first logo "sucked" but was fine when no one knew the company.

"I made our first logo, but it sucked."

He notes that Lovable makes iteration a bit easier than Figma.

He stresses that as the company grows, scale demands professional design.

"It's easier to buy a car than it is to apply for a job."

He says investor decks change focus dramatically at each stage of fundraising.

He stresses that converting design into working code is always the toughest step.

"Converting design to code is always the hardest part."

He describes Figma as their main tool, but also mentions Photoshop, Lovable, and Gamma.

He points out that some designers are better at "the eye" than others.

He explains Sonic Jobs as a system of record for job applications, started in 2019.

Thinks

He thinks design iteration could be faster and smoother.

He believes some people naturally visualize better than others.

He assumes collaboration inefficiency is slowing the team's output.

He thinks he underuses Figma features, but isn't sure if that's the real problem.

"I want to play around with design, but it's hard to experiment."

He thinks better "prompting" is part of the solution, but harder for design than text.

He suspects tools either aren't being used well or aren't built well enough.

"Maybe the tools exist, but I'm not using them well, or they're just too complicated."

He doubts design can ever be fully automated.

"I don't want someone else choosing my clothes."

He believes collaboration inefficiency slows product development.

He assumes professional designers will always be needed for polish.

Does

Experiments with color and font preferences but defers to designer for "the eye."

Joins calls with cofounder and head of product to direct design tasks.

Switches between in-house and third-party designers depending on needs.

Shrugs when admitting he hasn't tried interactive Figma features.

Escalates Slack feedback to calls when small issues require clarification.

Uses analogies (pizza, clothes, white T-shirts) to explain his views on design autonomy.

Laughs when describing his first logo as "sucking."

Pulls up conversations and designs during the interview to illustrate points.

Works with slides continuously, tweaking small elements over time.

Iterates on decks with many tweaks to fonts, wording, and visuals.

Feels

Frustrated by how long login redesigns take.

Proud of Sonic Jobs growth and user base.

Smiles when describing Lovable as easier for iteration.

Overwhelmed by back-and-forth over small design tweaks.

Sighs when admitting he should know Figma better but doesn't.

Grateful for having cofounders and designers who can balance his limits.

Distrustful of the idea that design can be "fully automated."

Curious about whether prompting and better workflows could bridge the gap.

Relieved when tools like Lovable and Gamma let him test ideas quickly.

Confident that with funding and scale, they can afford better design processes.

Key Takeaways – Mike



Says

“It’s easier to buy a car than it is to apply for a job.”

He explains that job applications fail because systems don’t talk to each other.

He admits his first logo “sucked” but was fine when no one knew the...
He notes that Lovable makes iteration a bit easier than Figma.
He says investor decks change focus dramatically at each stage of fundraising.
He describes Figma as their main tool, but also mentions Photoshop, Lovable, and Gamma.
He explains that job applications fail because systems don’t talk to each other.

Thinks

He thinks design iteration could be faster and smoother.

He suspects tools either aren’t being used well or aren’t built well enough.

“Maybe the tools exist, but I’m not using them well, or they’re just too complicated.”

He thinks design iteration...
He thinks he underuses...
He suspects...
He thinks design iteration could be faster and smoother.
He suspects tools either aren’t being used well or aren’t built well enough.
“Maybe the tools exist, but I’m not using them well, or they’re just too complicated.”

Does

Switches between in-house and third-party designers depending on needs.

Shrugs when admitting he hasn’t tried interactive Figma features.

Experiments with color and font preferences but...
Joins calls with cofounder and head of product to direct design tasks.
Escalates Slack feedback to calls when small issues require clarification.
Pulls up conversations and designs during the interview to illustrate...
Switches between in-house and third-party designers depending on needs.
Shrugs when admitting he hasn’t tried interactive Figma features.
Laughs when discussing his first logo as “sucking”...
many tweaks to fonts, wording, and visuals.

Feels

Distrustful of the idea that design can be “fully automated.”

Sighs when admitting he should know Figma better but doesn’t.

Distrustful of the idea that design can be “fully automated.”
Sighs when admitting he should know Figma better but doesn’t.
Curious about whether prompting and better workflows could bridge the...
design can be “fully automated.”
funding and scale, they can afford better design processes.

Analysis - Mike



Quote: “Maybe the tools exist, but I’m not using them well, or they’re just too complicated.”

Insight: Founders are willing to engage with design tools but often underuse advanced features, leading to **feeling stuck when there’s momentum of ideas**. Feeling like they have so much to do, learning new tools is time consuming, but they still **want autonomy and control over their work instead of relying on designers for everything**.

Need: He needs design tools that make iteration smoother and collaboration easier without requiring deep technical expertise in features like interactive prototyping

Empathy Map – Silus



Says

"For collaborative tasks, GPT is not super good"

"AI hasn't really figured out collaboration"

"Let me scratch the designer itch in me" with gen AI tools

"There is hardly a normal day. Some days I work on product strategy and others I have meetings with investors"

"Photoshop will be replaced by Figma"

"AI doesn't take me from 0 to 1, but it helps me go from 1 to 10"

"Google docs is super collaborative; Gemini is good but not collaborative"

"Slides are only necessary if further clarification or justification on a particular point is needed"

"Ice breakers in large meetings have become easier as we can now generate them using AI"

"For more long term projects we hire specialized designers that send detailed mockups"

"I don't like using AI to write my content but often write content and ask AI to critique it"

"If high level goals are not well communicated to designers in initial meetings then the resulting work is not good"

"Having the right slide can be very powerful"

"AI can sometimes help me generate good visuals and graphs for slide decks"

"All videos and some interactive video elements are made externally"

Thinks

AI is useful for limericks and quips

Lack of collaborative features on gen AI tools is inefficient

Slide decks can only accomplish so much; longer conversations require different communication mediums

Some AI can demonstrate levels of empathy (at levels close to humans) especially if examples and data is given

Communication process with designers takes a long time

There's no shortcut to brainstorming process (with AI tools)

Better to communicate with designers verbally than through writing or visual tools

Creative hooks improve LinkedIn posts; custom visuals improve presentations

AI has limiting factors as it can not generate interesting content and is very regimented

Waste of time for internal members who have no experience with video creation to pick up the skills

AI tools create uninteresting outputs without context

Outputs from designers tend to be good after 2-3 iterations

AI does a good job at editing and refining creative content

Current AI tools have not figured out collaboration and it is hard to collaborate with designers using these tools

Number of slides and extra slides depends on if people will ask further questions about a specific topic

Does

Uses Asana and Slack for workflow management

Heavily relies on AI to create visuals

Makes graphs and processes data by hand instead of using AI

Communicates with designers on calls (synchronously and verbally)

Works with customers from 9 am - 2 pm to identify how to improve their product and needs

Uses ChatGPT and Gemini for visual design

Shares brief meeting recording snippets for context setting

Makes initial pitch deck skeleton before handing off to a designer to complete

Works with 1 internal designer

Does not usually draw by hand and doodle

Uses whiteboarding strategies in meetings (physical if in-person, otherwise online whiteboarding tools)

Meets with investors and plans product market strategy

Uses yellow legal pad for brainstorming

Outsources video creation to expert contractors/freelancers

Makes LinkedIn posts for hiring and experiences about being a founder

Feels

Feels somewhat inexperienced and uncomfortable with design work

Has more agency to make creative components than before accessibility of gen AI tools

Feels like he can not doodle and draw out ideas well and other founders are better than him at these tasks.

Confident with graph generation using Tableau and SQL queries

Current tools allows him to leave small comments about designs but does not allow for communication regarding major changes

ChatGPT's writing style is not compatible with his own

Doesn't feel like there is a "magic wand" to fix communication problems with designers

Feels like the process of note taking and brainstorming is time consuming but doesn't know what to do to improve it

Designers do not have context to the team's work. He has to be really specific when describing what needs to be done

Gap in mindset between designers and engineers has improved because AI can refine ideas and make iteration faster

Frustration when there is misalignment between him and designers

Prefers to work with expert freelancers for complicated tasks than ask designers on the team to master new domains

AI can generate content more quickly and efficiently than he can

His major role when making slides is context setting, road mapping, and story telling

Slide design does not take too much time as it only takes a day or two

Key Takeaways – Silus



Says

“Let me scratch the designer itch in me” with gen AI tools

“AI doesn’t take me from 0 to 1, but it helps me go from 1 to 10”

“For collaborative tasks, GPT is not super good”

“AI hasn’t really figured out collaboration”

“Let me scratch the designer itch in me” with gen AI tools

“There is hardly a normal day. Some days I work on product strategy and others I have”

“Photoshop will be replaced by Figma”

“I don’t like using AI to write my content but often write content and ask AI to critique it”

communicated to designers in initial meetings then the resulting work is not good”

“Having the right slide can be very powerful”

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“All videos and some interactive video elements are made externally”

“AI doesn’t take me from 0 to 1, but it helps me go from 1 to 10”

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Tyler

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Lack of collaborative features on gen AI tools is inefficient

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Tyler

Analysis - Silus

Surprise: Silus is very traditional in terms of brainstorming and uses a notepad to brainstorm. However, he uses GenAI for creative use cases like creating limericks for LinkedIn posts and visuals for slideshow presentations.

Insight: Founders trust AI to add depth and automate detail-oriented parts of product development. But because they strongly trust their own judgment, they **resist letting AI drive the earliest vision or the final decision-making.**

Need: A tool that experiments with different creative designs and helps him communicate with designers as someone who does not know much about design.



Empathy Map - Steven



Says

"I am moving on the technical side from the nontechnical side and am actually building nontechnical solutions"

"LLM model preferences should be part of people's personalization workflows"

Tediousness of retrieving API documentation and rules for Cursor is a "luxury problem"

"I didn't go to university here, I didn't work at big tech companies here"

"I have to make do with pitch decks I don't really love or pay people a lot of money to make decks for me"

"We got great feedback and was a success in terms of product but there was a lack of adoption"

Re trying to getting traction for a new product without connections/networks: "If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears, did it really fall?"

Without good designers, it is hard to articulate what one is looking for as a founder

"Why do we need to pull up api documentations and put them in cursor rules?"

"It would be great if design tools could incorporate generative models that create new iterations and incorporate feedback from multiple users"

"People say there's 10x engineers, there's 10x designers too"

It's hard to polish designs, but it's also hard to define what polished is

"Aesthetic to me is everything: colors, fonts, spacing, distribution of white space, etc."

Thinks

The job market is moving towards more technical, AI skillsets

One of his previous startups was ahead of its time and that his target industry (travel) died because of COVID

Engineers can also be visual thinker

Both engineers and designers are visual thinkers. They just think about things differently.

"In a post AI world I have not used Figma much. However, due to the AI advances in Figma, I think it will replace photoshop."

One of his previous startups failed because of the crowded space of the startup and how far apart the team was geographically

VO makes boring and generic looking UI, although this has recently improved

"Design always has subjective elements"

If you are given options and choose with aesthetic you want, AI can adopt your desired aesthetic

There is subjectivity regarding how much people want their UI to look minimalist and like a terminal

Financial struggles made him quit bootstrapping his startup

No good way to translate concepts into visuals in slide decks

VO should include a preferences quiz

Messy to aggregate feedback from mock designs and send it to designers

Does

Uses many tools like cursor and Vercel (VO)

Takes long pauses when thinking of what to say

Conceptualizes frontend before building out backend with vibecoding tools

Uses API documents to generate a lot of frontend and backend code

Creates very structured and detailed prompts to get AI to do what he wants in terms of design

Worked on many different projects and founded 2 startups in the past"

Experimented with different prototypes

Designs based on asking a set of questions about user goals

Sets up meetings with designers to deliver feedback

Uses lots of metaphors to describes what he means when describing what he does and pain points

Worked at many fintech companies but had a break due to immigration rules

Deep research sessions for cross-domain projects

Copies frontend design to Cursor in order to combine frontend and backend.

Pays a lot of money for good designers for important aspects like website development

Feels

Feels he always wanted to go into tech as it will allow him to test ideas faster

His teams were small but had pride in big name customers like some large fashion and travel agencies as customers

Excited about psychology and potential applications with LLMs

His problems regarding learning how to use AI are "luxury problems" and AI tools are pretty good

Everyone will have one AI model (like Claude, ChatGPT, or Gemini) they use just like how people today choose between Apple and Microsoft

Somewhat inexperienced in technical work

Like a bit of an outsider in the tech/startup space (didn't go to a big name US school or work in big tech)

Sometimes he has to use pitch decks that he doesn't really love (because of time and financial constraints)

Feels that aesthetic is less about individual components and more about how everything comes together

There should be more structured workflows to shape the generation of structured prompts for design

As an international it was hard to get funding due to a lack of contacts

Frustration with lack of networks, leading to venture failures

Wants tools like VO to add more personalization

It would be great if when collaborating on design, different users could leave their feedback

Analysis - Steven



Surprise: Amidst the large development of GenAI in technical applications, it was surprising seeing how Steven wanted to be more technical. Despite this, Steven was not writing code and more so using GenAI tools to become more technical.

Insight: Founders find collaboration on **design tools slow** and difficult because they need to organize meetings to best communicate changes. These meetings **add extra hours** to their days, when they feel communication can be better streamlined. They believe customization is lacking and trust that AI can easily generate the aesthetic you want if you specify it.

Need: A design tool that uses a short quiz or selection process, showing users different design options to choose from, in order to better understand their preferences.

Empathy Map – Samantha



Says

She's a biotech/med-tech founder who built two startups and raised money.

"The second company pivoted to become a pharma company after a strong obesity-drug signal."

Shares her biggest role strengths, which are taking companies to zero-to-one and one-to-ten, and go-to-market and commercialization.

"I didn't let the team use ChatGPT before due to proprietary work."

"ChatGPT once told me the thread had to end, and therefore months of context were stranded."

Describes starting in a PhD program focused on gene editing gene therapy for blindness.

"We got FDA clearance and later raised about \$10M, plus NIH SBIR grants."

"I don't like Slack because it's too many people and too many channels to be doing that"

She says she uses GenAI now for decks, storytelling, research.

"Gamma, Notion AI, Gemini, Perplexity."

"I combine multiple AI for my design process... I may create my outline for pitch on chatgpt and then feed it to gamma AI to get slides and vice versa"

Thinks

"Memory loss" in chat tools undermines creative and operational flow.

If a tool matched Google Docs-level collaboration with top-tier LLM quality, it'd be a game-changer.

Canva's versatility helps, but specialty tools (Gamma) speed first drafts.

Trello was simple and effective for project management; she still sees it as her favorite

She feels niche-specialized tools like Gamma outperform "jack of all trades" tools.

GenAI is a good collaborator if it preserves long-running context.

The "see one, do one, teach one" model is antiquated for high-stakes care.

Skill (not just tools) drives surgical outcomes; rehearsal reduces risk.

Thread-level continuity is product-critical for founders ("infinite thread").

Gamma lacks memory, "I'm not going to sit there and re-explain" what ChatGPT already knows.

Does

Files patents and runs clinical pilots while fundraising and shipping.

Keeps separate "bins/threads" in ChatGPT by project/domain.

Bounces between Gamma (draft slides) and ChatGPT (context-aware edits).

Shows founders of five surgeries to understand real clinical workflows.

Scales from a kitchen lab to a 25,000 sq ft facility with cross-functional teams.

Brings surgeons in as advisors and early customers, co-developing solutions with them.

Builds prototypes of 3D surgical rehearsal models from MRI/CT scans.

Shifts project management tools as team scales: G Suite → Asana → Trello → Notion.

Runs double-blind pilots with patients and surgeons to measure outcomes.

Coaches founders to keep paper trails of customer conversations.

Feels

Frustrated by Slack's overwhelming noise and clutter.

"ChatGPT is like a friend", she feels supported, less alone in the creative process.

Concerned that founders' tacit knowledge is hard to onboard into teams.

Frustrated when chat tools "forget" long threads; "like talking to someone with Alzheimer's."

Proud of raising \$10M and building credibility in a highly regulated industry.

Disappointed that Canva's breadth meant lack of specialization.

Feels bottlenecked when tools force her to repeat herself.

Curious and open to trying new tools, but wants ones beyond just ChatGPT.

"What is everyone's favorite tool and don't say chatGPT"

Irritated by ChatGPT Canva's lack of collaboration and formatting control.

Curious and playful when experimenting with combining ChatGPT + Gamma workflows.

Analysis - Samantha



Quote: "I combine multiple AI for my design process...I may create my outline for pitch on ChatGPT and then feed it to Gamma AI to get slides and vice versa."

Insight: Founders are already hacking together workflows by combining multiple tools(e.g ChatGPT for outlining, Gamma for slides), but they find this process **confusing, frustrating, and inefficient** having to switch between tabs because it creates **distraction and inconvenience, pulling away from the main task.**

Need: She needs seamless workflows across AI and design tools so she doesn't waste time jumping between different platforms or re-explaining context.

Conclusion

Key Insights/ Putting it all together

Communication and Collaboration

Long iterative process of startup founders collaborating with designers

Founders need to go through Figma and think about what needs to be improved and then give those comments to designers on call

Potential Example: Sharing GPT chats about ideas where multiple people can ask questions

Key Insights/ Putting it all together

Customization

Founders want the ability for GenAI tools to customize to their aesthetic

Design tools do not allow for easy editing by founders. As a result, they need to ask designers to make changes for them.

Potential Example: Quizzes for GenAI tools to learn more about people's preferences ask questions

Key Insights/ Putting it all together

Lack of Context

Chats are not infinite. As a result, the context of GenAI tools are very limited and can not match founder's tastes.

No integration between design tools, GenAI chatbots (like ChatGPT), and backend tools

Potential example: A GenAI tool that can “clone the founder's brain”

Key Insights/ Putting it all together

Opinions of AI on Creativity

Some founders hated AI for creativity work and relied on designers

Some founders use genAI to create visuals for their work

Some founders use GenAI for small design tasks and rely on designers for important visuals

In general: Creative potential of AI does not match designers

Whats Next?

More Interviews

We plan to conduct additional interviews with startup founders and users who can offer **unique perspectives** on **design** and **social accountability**. Our goal is to engage with individuals from **diverse backgrounds and lifestyles** to capture a **wider range of insights**.

Identify Patterns

We plan to further **develop** more of our **key insights** and **see if the conclusions hold** in the additional interviews. By doing so, we hope to uncover more insights, needs, and surprises and **develop POVs and HMWs** to better define our project.

Narrow Scope

We will develop potential solutions for our HMWs. By doing so, we will **narrow the area** of creative tools and founders down further to an **actionable problem** we can try to solve.

Appendix

Major Documents

Brainstorming and Interview Questions

Interview Notes and Recordings