

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

SILICON VALLEY ENTREPRENEURS: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

By DAVID JIA

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

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From an early age, the idea of being “self-made” has always intrigued me¹. Immigrating to the United States, my family was not wealthy, so the idea of starting my own business and making my own ends meet fascinated me. I started my own company when I was 15, designing and selling car audio electronics through the Internet. For a kid my age, the company can be considered successful. Although looking back, I know I have made many grave mistakes, but in the end, it somehow worked out. In a year, I started from my parent’s studio to an office downtown, and had five employees. The business had grown to a million dollars in sales, and I had my own distribution network. The proceeds from this first company would later help fund my college education. In later years, I discovered the joys of academia, clean of the classroom racism that marred my childhood education and rid of the burnout attitudes that pervaded the slums where my family and I lived. Although I continued to start companies in college, my intellectual pursuit soon began to overtake my entrepreneurial ones. As this happened, and as entrepreneurship began to overtake traditional careers among my peers, I became extremely curious and skeptical of the startup scene, so much so that I transferred from MIT to Stanford in an effort to both study the entrepreneurial community and obtain a more well-rounded education.

In the following ethnography, I hope to characterize, from my findings and from my personal experience, a set of core, shared values of startup culture. In doing so, and from having some prior understanding of tendencies in the startup world, I have refrained as much as possible from revealing myself to those I interact with save those that already know me well. I do this not to emulate the faux-objective Lone Ethnographer that Renato Rosaldo warned in *The Erosion of Classic Norms* (Rosaldo 30), but in hopes of bringing out the true sentiments of Silicon Valley

¹ It was only later in my matured years that I fully realized the indispensable value of those around us to our success, like our friends, our teachers, and our parents, and the mentorship and support they provide. These relationships are indispensable to our success. I feel now that there is no such thing as a truly “self-made” man. The idea is only an enticing illusion.

individuals through their interactions with me. Hopefully, the reasons for my restraint will become clear soon enough. It may also be important to note that much more work is necessary to understand the culture of the entrepreneurship community, and that I was unable to fully bring out all aspects of my research data due to limitations posed by the scope of this paper. I hope to bring out these other aspects in my future work.

Through my findings, the set of core shared values of what I call “startup culture” is characterized by a goal-oriented undertone, an exclusive community of carefully selected members, and individuals with a deep conviction of purpose. I believe that these values emerged because they give the diverse group of people in Silicon Valley a way to identify others that also share this set of core beliefs. Because entrepreneurs feel deeply committed to their work, identifying others with these core, shared values allows entrepreneurs to systematically and measurably optimize their time to best further their goals. Ultimately, this ability to identify others who are deemed as part of the entrepreneurship community helps valley entrepreneurs to choose those most fitting and worthwhile with whom they can work together to further their shared goal of “changing the world.”

My journey to critically understand the culture of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs began on an overcast night earlier this year. I was having dinner with a close friend, Dylan, who had taken leave from school at the University of Arizona a year ago to work at a Bay Area startup called Circle. “We build a mobile app for location-based social networking, but most people just use it to hook up.” Dylan would tell people after the usual introductions. On the way back from dinner, Dylan’s cell-phone rang.

“Where are you now? Okay I’ll be there in 20 minutes.” Dylan hung up the phone. “Hey, can we go pick up my friend Nora? She just came back from DC and the Caltrain dropped her

off right next to the office.” Dylan had told me about Nora before. She is currently a Peter Thiel Fellow, which is a fellowship given by the famed, and in many ways infamous PayPal co-founder and billionaire Peter Thiel. The Thiel fellowship is given to people under 20 year of age for these young entrepreneurs to either leave or delay college for two years and pursue their “passion.” The award includes perks² and a \$50,000 a year stipend. Having known the hype surrounding the fellowship from living in the valley, I became curious, so I agreed to pick her up.

“This is David, who I told you about.” Dylan introduced.

“Wow, what a nice car! How can someone still in school afford such a nice car like this?” was her first comment upon entering the back seat. Initially, her reaction took me by surprise me, but I will come back to this in a later section.

When we got back to Circle’s office at the intersection of Alma and University Ave, I thought I would stay to talk with her and satiate my curiosity surrounding her fellowship.

“So, is it true that academics are afraid to go out to the real world?” She said after learning that I am currently pursuing a PhD at Stanford.

“No, I don’t think so. Why, is that the word on the street these days?” I replied.

“Yeah, that’s what everyone thinks. Okay, so tell me what drives you in life. What’s your life’s goal?” She pushed on.

Being asked this by an eighteen-year old girl who had just recently postponed one of her own natural rites of passage in life to pursue her “passion,” I felt surprisingly baffled by the question. Could she have figured it out when I still have not?

“I don’t know, I guess that’s what I’m here to find out. What about you? What’s your life’s goal?” I said as I finally awoke from my brief moment of contemplative respite.

² These included free vouchers at various other startups, such as free stays through AirBnB. In the current year of fellows, one fellow-elect convinced Amazon to hand out 10,000 hours of free computing time on their Amazon Web Services server farm to each Thiel Fellow.

“My life’s goal,” she hesitated for a moment, gazing up at the ceiling as if to marvel at what is about to be uttered. “So it’s sort of complicated.” She continued. “Women have to choose between having a career and having a family. The healthiest age for a woman to have a child, physically, is in her twenties, but that’s also when her career opportunities are the ripest...I want to create surrogacy clinics in India where women who can afford it can pay young girls in their twenties to have their babies when they’re ready. We can just pay them \$25,000, which is more than they’ll make in three lifetimes, and we’ll also give them excellent healthcare and keep them healthy throughout the whole process. In a way, we’ll be solving both poverty and the problems of feminism at the same time.”

At first, I was internally conflicted: my entrepreneurial mind, trained in the arts of capitalistic self-persuasion, told me that this was a genius idea, and asked why no one was doing it already³, but my moral mind questioned the sheer conception of the idea. I had quite an intense and gruesome debate with her about her beliefs that night, which culminated to my likening of her “life’s goal” to *Brave New World*, to which she responded by saying that she had never read the book. When I left the office, it was already 4:00AM, and I had felt so disturbed by the events of the night that I found it necessary to clear my head by calling my mother.

It may feel comforting to dismiss this encounter with Nora by attributing her failure to consider the possible greater moral and social impacts of her temerarious goals to her lack—or rather, postponement—of her higher education. But to do this would be to overlook the true impact, be it good or bad, moral or immoral, that Nora and other Silicon Valley entrepreneurs like her are destined to make on the world. To dismiss my discomfort with the conversation would thus, in a way, be just as irresponsible. After all, the famed Peter Thiel did select her as

³ Later on I found out that many were actually already implementing surrogacy clinics in both the developing world and the United States.

one of the famed “Twenty under Twenty⁴,” one of a lucky bunch invited aboard Noah’s Ark, which to many is a symbol of success, making her a shining example that others are bound to follow. Thus, my curiosity and investigation into Silicon Valley startup culture built even greater steam after this encounter.

One phenomenon I noticed in my conversation with Nora is her goal-oriented approach to life. The main thread of our conversation began only when she asked me about my “life’s goal.” Even having Dylan as a mutual friend, it seems strange to be asked this question upon only our first conversation with each other. That Nora chose to open her conversation with me by asking about my “life’s goal” suggests that the idea of centering one’s life around a “goal” is important, maybe of the utmost importance to her, and that her goals are something she constantly thinks about. Conceivably, she asked me to define my goals so quickly in our conversation in order to identify whether I subscribe to the core startup value of having a goal-oriented mind, or at least her conception of it.

After hearing her speak about her own “life’s goals,” it became clear that they are not only grand, but also long-term. In our conversation, she even said, “this is like my ten or twenty year goal.” Nonetheless, she feels a strong sense of urgency and significance toward her grand goal, evident by her need to talk about it upon first meeting me. Because of this, I can understand that her mind may be routinely preoccupied with it. Perhaps this is why she was so interested to determine my own “life’s goals,” to establish early on whether I fit the rudimentary startup mantra of being goal-oriented. She does this to evaluate my ability to become a “worthwhile” acquaintance, one with whom she may discuss ideas, gain advice, and ultimately collaborate to further her own goals.

⁴ “Twenty under Twenty” was what the fellowship was originally called. Despite the name change, the original term has gradually caught on and has been continually thrown around the valley to indicate a young and “passionate” entrepreneur.

As Spartan as the idea of choosing one's acquaintances based purely on a "life's goal" may sound, it is nevertheless recommended by numerous books on entrepreneurship. In the best-seller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey states that "we find two ways to put ourselves in control of our lives immediately. We can make a promise—and keep it. Or we can set a goal—and work to achieve it" (Covey 43). Later in the book, Covey adds by saying "[a]n effective goal focuses primarily on results rather than activity. It identifies where you want to be" (Covey 69). In the Silicon Valley cult classic *The 4-Hour Workweek*, Tim Ferriss highlighted the dangers of surrounding oneself with those who do not help to achieve one's goals. Ferriss argues that "you are the average of the five people you associate with most, so do not underestimate the effects of your pessimistic, unambitious, or disorganized friends. If someone isn't making you stronger, they're making you weaker" (Ferriss). In a later conversation, Dylan also corroborated this sentiment by contending that:

You've got your social life, which means you've got a variety of people that you connect with and relate to for whatever reason, they could be childhood friend, they could be people you meet at conferences, or just any people you work with. A lot of those people, I think, can waste your time very easily, and it's not their fault obviously. But when you are devoting your life or a portion of your life to solving a goal, it's not very clear how the time spent in other facets of your life, not just work, might actually contribute to your work. So...when you decide to attack a problem, think about what person could I meet or gain access to, or what people do I already know that can actually help me with this issue, can I maybe interact with more than the other people that I am currently interacting with?

In this short snippet of our interview, Dylan aptly echoed the shared mentality of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, constantly thinking about furthering their goals. To Dylan and to many other entrepreneurs, this end goal is the prize to which their eyes should be constantly fixed. Every "facet" of one's life, including one's "social life," which may include time spent with "childhood friends...people you meet at conferences, or just any people you work with" can either be a

means to achieving this end, or a barrier to it. Yet, what's more interesting is the very particular way in which Dylan imagines his goals should be furthered. Dylan goes on to say:

Can I somehow reallocate my social time to optimize for surrounding myself with people who may be facing a similar problem? And can I maybe hangout less with the people who are perhaps wasting my time, and hangout more with the people who I can help and who can help me? Not only are you taking your time and your work, but also aspect of your life, particularly your social life, to optimize for putting yourself in a mindset that will position you best to achieve this goal.

Dylan emphasized that to achieve one's end goal, a reallocation or repartitioning of time spent with different people is necessary, even if it means cutting out some of those deemed to be "wasting [one's] time." So "wasted" time in the context of startup culture means any time spent that does not make a difference towards furthering one's goals. But one could argue that ordinary activities such as hanging out with friends or even taking a hike to see the sunset do make a difference towards furthering one's goals by rejuvenating the spirit or improving quality of life. Nevertheless, Dylan condemns these activities unless one's friends can *directly* help achieve his goals. So in a way, "wasted" time really means any time spent that does not make a *measurable* difference towards one's end goal. When defined this way, seeing the sunset may not seem so productive. Ultimately, every aspect of life should be "optimized" to "position you best to achieve [your] goal." So in order to "optimize" "value," time spent must be measurable before hand, so that the spender of the time may evaluate, ahead of time, the worth of the time spent. In this case, "value" is determined, or rather *calculated* by the ability of the time spent to furthering one's goal. Like any standard optimization problem in mathematics, these calculated values are then summed and compared across all possible allocations of time and partitions of activities in the mind of the entrepreneur, and the set of activities having the highest such value is chosen.

Now, it's certainly not surprising that Nora was so quick to seek out my "life's goal:" her time is unquestionably valuable to her, so for her, every drop of it, if spent, should further her own "life's goal," and if my "life's goal" does not align with her own, then her time may be better spent elsewhere. Ultimately, through identifying this core shared belief of being goal-oriented in the individuals they meet, entrepreneurs like Nora and Dylan can better choose those with whom are worthwhile to spend time and capable of furthering their own goals.

However, something still seems amiss about my experience with Nora. As I began to notice the same goal-oriented and time-sensitive patterns in other entrepreneurs, I wondered: if Nora was so disciplined about how and with whom she chooses to spend her time, couldn't she just as easily not have bothered to interact with me in the first place? Wouldn't that have saved her the trouble of even explaining to me what her own "life's goal" is, let alone defend it for as long as she did? Instead, she spent the good part of over six hours discussing it with me, especially right after a long trip back from DC. Granted, I was giving her a hard time by morally questioning her desire to build surrogacy clinics and she felt the need to defend, but it's just as conceivable that she, like most entrepreneurs, face this kind of criticism daily. Yet, if she had spent the same amount of time acknowledging and subsequently defending her stand each time someone challenged her ideas, she would get nothing done. After all, the leading entrepreneurship books urge budding entrepreneurs to consider these challenges, but to tread along with one's goal in mind. In his 2005 commencement address, Steve Jobs urged the new Stanford graduates to "have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary⁵" (Jobs 2005). This

⁵ In fact, this speech gave me great comfort when I was going through a darker time in my life. I used to listen to it every morning as I looked out the window of my dorm room to another gloomy day in Cambridge MA. It gave me a reason to get out of bed each day.

brings me to the next characteristic of startup culture in the valley: exclusivity with selective membership.

Not long after the conversation with Nora, I had decided that the only way to make sense of my moral dissonance that came with it was to further investigate the culture of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. This led me to participate in one of Silicon Valley's highest profile hackathons, the annual Greylock Hackfest. In Silicon Valley and elsewhere, hackathons have become the initiation, or pledging process through which one must participate to join the exclusive fraternity of entrepreneurs. Like a marathon, from which its name is derived, a "hackathon" is a nonstop, multi-day event in which budding entrepreneurs participate, "hack" up projects as teams, and pitch to a panel of judges, usually consisting of previously successful entrepreneurs, big name angel investors, and key partners at top venture capitalist firms—the already initiated brothers of the fraternity. As the connotation suggests, and not so different from the pledging process of a college fraternity, a hackathon is meant to be a testing and often times grueling process, typically involving multiple sleepless nights where hopeful pledges work tirelessly to build a product that might impress their future brothers—the judges. Similarly, previous participants and pledge-initiates, regardless of how grueling they found the experience, are more than happy to extol the value they have gained from the arduous process of a hackathon, much like the way fraternity brothers praise and even sentimentalize their own pledging experience.

The exclusivity of the Greylock Hackfest was made immediately clear: to participate, one must apply and be selected. The application process asked for a personal curriculum vita and a response to the single statement: "Dazzle Us." Looking back, the application has an eerie resemblance to job applications, except that what is being asked of the applicant is much less well defined. The word "dazzle" literally means, "to blind (a person) temporarily" ("Dazzle").

Colloquially, one who is said to be “dazzling” is impressive to the point of noticeably standing out above the crowd, a bright light ennobled among the surrounding dimness, so bright that one cannot help but be blinded by it. That “Dazzle Us” rather than a more specific question or statement, and maybe even one that is more pertinent to the technology industry—like “tell us about your previous experiences” or “what project have you worked on before”—was used suggests that the Greylock Hackfest selection committee favors a sense of general rapport or personal affinity with what they consider qualities of entrepreneurs rather than strictly professional competence. This suggests that entrepreneurs favor others who they believe are like them in spirit—not just someone who is competent in their professional endeavors, whatever that may be, but someone who is out-and-out “dazzling.” Later, when I received my acceptance letter, I found out that fewer than one hundred of the over four hundred applicants were selected to participate, an acceptance rate of less than 25%, which is even lower than the acceptance rate of some of the most competitive universities in the nation. The only difference is that for the hackathon, Greylock Venture Partners paid for all expenses, including flights, food, and other accommodations.

My teammates, Anshul and Dylan, and I pulled up to the offices of AirBnB⁶ near the South of Market district of San Francisco on a gloomy Saturday afternoon, prepared to “hack” for the rest of the weekend. Inside, Julie, the organizer of the event, and her helpers greeted us. They handed us our name badges, an envelope containing a \$100 gift certificate to Amazon Web Services—the go-to server farm service for most startups these days—and was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement stating that we promise not use camera photography throughout the two-day event. As we moved our equipment into the atrium where the hackathon was held, most

⁶ AirBnB is a startup that allows people to rent out their house or apartment for short periods of time, such as when they are on a business trip or traveling. The small startup raised a venture capital round last year that valued them at over two billion dollars.

of the dozens of teams who were accepted have already set up their monitors and Macbooks Pros on long, portable folding tables. The space of the atrium was vast, expanding all the way to the ceiling. The five or so stories of the building each made a walkway surrounding the space above the atrium so as to allow sunlight to pass from the windows at the top. Two abstract statues consisting of a smooth material coated in white enamel hung from the ceiling in place of a chandelier. The surviving San Francisco sun shone through the panoramic window on the roof of the building down to the prospective entrepreneurs, the light dispersing as it crossed with the metallic hanging art.

Along the upper deck, to the right of the atrium, a row of catered foods lined the walls. As it was lunch time, I came up closer and noticed three trays of sandwiches wrapped in fancy green paper; they were labeled “mushroom,” “beef,” and “chicken,” with most of the beef and chicken gone. Further down along the dining table laid jars upon jars of sweets, from assorted chocolates to long laced licorice of all different shapes and colors to simple childhood favorites like Sour Patch Kids. Even further down, on the ground next to the table were various flavors of Gatorade. Those who wanted water must resort to filling up their own bottles from the fountain⁷. On the opposite corner of the room, two large boom boxes blasted an indie playlist from Pandora Online Radio, which included many replays of Of Monsters and Men’s *Little Talks*. I grabbed a mushroom wrap⁸ and headed back to my table where Anshul and Dylan had settled.

For the Hackathon, we decided to build a nutrition tracker application for Google Glass⁹. Dylan’s company was able to obtain a prototype of Glass since Circle is building a location-

⁷ I will report on the significance of Gatorade at the hackathon in a later part of the paper.

⁸ I was told that the plates used at the hackathon were hand made out of fancy “leaves.” They certainly looked fancy; at first I thought they were non-disposable from how hardy they felt.

⁹ The application would utilize Google Glass’ built in camera to take a picture of any foods that one might consume, and uses artificial intelligence algorithms to determine what food is eaten. Then it tracks the nutritional values of those foods throughout the day.

based application¹⁰. Fortunately, his CEO allowed us to use it for the hackathon. One obstacle that struck us immediately was our need of a front-end designer. Anshul, a fellow PhD student at Stanford, worked on our computer vision algorithm for image detection, Dylan who is an iPhone developer, worked on our iPhone application, and I worked on the backend and the server-side code. None of us had front-end design expertise. Julie, the organizer suggested that we make an announcement to the entire hackathon, asking for people who may be able to help us.

“Hello everyone, my name is David, and my teammates and I are trying to build a cool application for Google Glass. Right now, we need a designer to help us with the application’s front-end design. If anyone doesn’t have a team yet, or have some free time, we would love to talk to you. Our table is over there by the entrance. Please stop by.” I stood on a podium and declared on the microphone as I pointed to our table.

In the next hour, our table was bombarded with participants from the hackathon. First, it was Sanjiv, who had on his own pair of Google Glass, his in the alternate milky-white color.

“Nice, you have a pair too.” Said Dylan, who was wearing our own black pair.

“I think we’re the only ones here with Glass. It’s pretty bad that Google’s not releasing their GDK¹¹ until next year. How’re you guys making function calls to it without the GDK?” Sanjiv asked Dylan.

“Yeah, it fucking sucks man, I had to root the device¹² to do anything.” Dylan replied.

¹⁰ At the time of writing of this paper, Google Glass is very difficult to obtain. To get one, one must first submit an application, which consists of a number of various short answer and essay style questions. If accepted, the successful applicant is then allowed to purchase one Glass from Google, which is roughly \$1,500. Currently, applications have closed and Google has not made it clear whether they will accept more applications in the future.

¹¹ GDK stands for Glass Development Kit. It’s a play on the usual SDK, which stands for software development kit. The GDK is an interface that allows developers to perform operations on Google Glass.

¹² Rooting the device means to hack into the internals of a device, generally through non-standard means which device makers usually disallowed. In this case, “root” refers to the “root” user, which is the super-

Then came Peter, who introduced himself as a recent college grad from the East coast.

“Yeah, I literally just moved out here yesterday. I live like right down the street...San Francisco is nice, I really like it here...So, I heard you guys needed a designer. I’m not a designer, but I wanted to checkout the Google Glass.” He said.

“Sure,” Dylan handed it to him almost before he finished asking, as if it was a routine question like “how are you?”

“So, what’re you working on Peter?” I cut in.

“Well actually, I’m not on a team right now, but I wanted to see if you guys needed any help. I’ve done a bunch of mobile apps. I make all the college map apps on the iPhone.” He said.

“Oh, that’s cool, how long have you been doing that?” I asked.

“Since my undergrad at University of Virginia. It’s been going well. As of last month, I’m net positive. Basically, I hire a bunch of guys in India to do all the data-entry.” Peter continued to tell me about his college map mobile application, saying that he found the time for it only by skipping most of his CS classes in school.

“If you’re good you know, you can do that. That’s how I got it done.” He proclaimed.

Then there was Steven, who also wanted a more intimate view of Glass. Putting Google Glass on, he told us that he was an experienced hackathoner.

“I started coding for the first time at my first hackathon last year. After that, I’ve been to twelve hackathons so far,” he said, proud of his veteran status. “It’s great man, I think it’s the best way to get to know more people and hack up some awesome projects.”

“Right now, I’m on my way to throw this surprise party for my buddy, trying to get some girls to come over on Tinder.” He said as he handed Glass back to Dylan and quickly began tapping away on his iPhone.

“What is Tinder?” I asked.

“You’ve never heard of Tinder? It’s like the best hook-up app man. So it shows two people pictures of each other in real-time and you swipe up for yes or down for no. If you said yes and the girl said yes, then it lets you guys connect.” He says this as he shows me the app on his phone, swiping up several times through a number of pictures, each with a woman posing.

“No, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Like here, see, we just both said yes.” He showed me his phone, which now switched to a screen much like that of a standard text messaging application, with the previous girl’s picture at the top left corner. “Let me text her to see if she wants to come to the birthday party...” He continued to tap away. Then turning back to Dylan,

“Hey, are you going to any other hackathons? I’m organizing a huge hackathon next month, you should definitely come.”

“Yeah, I’m going to PennApps in a couple of months with a friend. Let me know, I’ll definitely be interested to check it out.” Dylan and Steven exchanged information, and Steven walked off, his fingers still dancing on his phone.

Many more made the pilgrimage to our table throughout the night to pay homage to the anointed Google Glass. We never did find a suitable designer until halfway through the night, but the various amenities soon soothed our sorrows: towards midnight, each of the hackathon

participants was greeted with ten-minute back and neck massages; at 1:00AM, a smoothie and espresso bar; at 3:00AM, gourmet pizza; and at 6:00AM, hot catered breakfast¹³.

We have already seen through the exclusiveness of the Greylock Hackfest that the entrepreneurship community is highly selective in its membership as a whole, but this exclusivity is also true in startup culture on an individual level. First, individuals are highly attracted towards artifacts whose ownership demonstrates one's social exclusivity. Participants at the hackathon only came to our table to play with Google Glass, an exclusive device whose ownership, to the participants, represented a unique power, which in the valley equates to success. Although we were merely asking for design help at the hackathon, we got no designers, but instead received many who wanted to feel aligned to those they view as successful.

Next, the way in which each of the participants who came up to look at Glass behaved and interacted with each of us in very particular ways. At first, they all flocked to Dylan, who wore the Glass as he tested its functionalities for our own application. It was not until I asked a question or gestured that the onlooker would acknowledge my existence. Anshul, who was busy almost the entire time with the difficult task of implementing object recognition algorithms, was even further ostracized from onlookers. Of course, some introduced themselves to each of us as they came up, but afterwards, continued conversation almost exclusively with Dylan. From the view of the exclusivity of startup culture, this is only natural: Dylan wore Google Glass, the representation of power and success, so he commanded most, if not all of the attention. To these onlookers, Anshul and I were only supporting casts that did not need to be acknowledged. To them, our values are not in any way measurable, so spending the time to acknowledge or get to

¹³ I have a lot more to say about the hackathon that I think is quite telling of the entrepreneurship scene, but unfortunately, they are out of the scope of the current paper.

know us may be detrimental to furthering their goals, whatever they may be. As Dylan mentioned, this would be a “waste” of their time.

This idea of individual selectivity is particularly evident in the interactions with Steven. Steven, upon seeing that I was not familiar with a popular iPhone application, immediately deemed me as someone with whom it not worthwhile to interact. In the end, he decided to invite only Dylan to the hackathon he is organizing. In this case, Steven’s goal is to make his hackathon a success, which meant that he must recruit only the best and most talented engineers. Because I failed to even recognize a popular iPhone application like Tinder, Steven saw that I was unqualified to be part of the elite group invited to his hackathon, whereas he believed Dylan must be qualified since he wielded the famed Google Glass¹⁴. It’s unlikely that Steven did not invite Anshul or me because he believed we were not interested in hackathons. The fact that we were at a hackathon that day should be clear evidence that we were at least somewhat interested. Even though it is not impossible that Anshul or I are exception hackers, to Steven, our abilities were unclear from our words and actions, and thus, our ability to further his goal of recruiting the best hackers became *unmeasurable*.

From our interactions with the myriads of Google Glass enthusiasts, I was not the only one who felt the need to demonstrate value. Peter, for example, greatly felt that need in his conversation with us. He not only detailed to us his previous experience with building iPhone applications, he also felt the need to tell us how he built those applications while still attending school: through skipping his classes. The fact that Peter felt this need suggests that he finds his accomplishment of building college campus map applications demanding or difficult, so much so

¹⁴ The irony of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that Dylan and his friend from MIT, who applied together as a team to the Greylock Hackfest, were rejected. Dylan was only allowed to attend Greylock Hackfest after I applied with Anshul as a team, was admitted, and later convinced Julie to accept Dylan into the hackathon as one of our team members.

that without an explanation, it may seem inconceivable that one may accomplish it while attending school. This explanation, Peter hopes, will be impressive, or dare I say, “dazzling” to us, in the words of the Greylock Hackfest selection committee. Even though I believe that positive and constructive interactions with people are perfectly possible without such enumerations or explanations of accomplishments, Peter certainly felt the need to back up his abilities. This suggests that the imperative to establish immediate social value is the norm in Silicon Valley, and Peter recognizes this. Peter, who just moved from the East coast, hopes to establish himself well in the valley. As we can see from the similar need to establish worthwhileness from the interactions with Steven, a native of San Francisco, Peter’s eagerness to demonstrate value is not necessarily idiosyncratic or a trait of East coast entrepreneurs. Rather, that East coast entrepreneurs adopted this highly exclusive and selective startup culture is more likely the case. In fact, it is possible that Peter felt an even stronger need to demonstrate his value in order to overcompensate for his outsider status.

The only other person at the hackathon who also had Google Glass, Sanjiv, did not feel the need to present to us his worth. His case was certainly different: to him, he was just as worthy as Dylan, who also had a pair of Glass. Sanjiv’s difference in attitude can certainly be seen through his interactions at our table. Instead of justifying his value to us, Sanjiv immediately dived into conversation with Dylan about the particularities of Google Glass. Yet, Sanjiv and Dylan discussed Glass using such esoteric language that I had to later ask Dylan what GDK meant. Having obtained a MS in computer science at Stanford, not knowing such a term may seem embarrassing, but after finding out that GDK stands for Glass Development Kit, I was indeed not surprised by my ignorance: it was not only specific to Google, but also specific to the unreleased Glass device. Image going out to dinner with a friend and his family, who are from

Paris, and during dinner, your friend and his family resort to conversing in French among each other as they speak to you in English, all the while not explaining what any of their conversations meant. Dylan and Sanjiv's esoteric chatter was done in much the same way. In this way, Dylan and Sanjiv have exhibited the behaviors of an elite clique. Furthermore, during the two-day event, the conversation between Sanjiv and Dylan was the only one I recall in which Dylan did not present Glass in an overwhelmingly positive light. Of all the innovative qualities of Google Glass, Sanjiv and Dylan decided to discuss its lack of a dedicated software development kit. This discussion of the follies and not the virtues of such a sought over device seems, at first, snobbish. The entire interaction reminds me of a pair of wealthy 18th century heiresses discussing the various qualities of cake at teatime while the commoners struggled for bread. As silly and exaggerated as that image may seem, the likeness in the exclusivity of such discussion to that of Sanjiv and Dylan is not far from the representative truth. This seems to be a common phenomenon, and I even catch myself doing it. The ability to criticize and even mock high-class cultural artifacts such as Google Glass is a means of demonstrating one's comfort with the ownership of such artifacts. With another that owns the same kind of artifact, this communal act of debasing an item of clear high-perceived value is a way to extend one's exclusivity to the other, thereby establishing the trust of the clique.

The exclusivity of the Greylock Hackfest permeated both through the space of the atrium and in the hearts and minds of the participants. Entrepreneurs find it pleasing to feel entitled to certain luxuries. At the hackathon, not only are food and accommodations presented readily and at regular intervals, they are carefully chosen to make the participants feel "special." Even the drinks are well thought out. Gatorade was given to the hackathon participants because Gatorade is the drink of athletes. In our culture, athletes hold a special place, and we eagerly champion

them as heroes and role models, unconditionally cheering them on. Whether it be Timmy's soccer match with Westside Elementary School, or the Olympics, in our society, athletes are our pride and joy. Our social and cultural programming through various corporate advertisement campaigns and athlete endorsements have led us to believe that true athletes drink Gatorade, and by drinking Gatorade, we are also somehow an extension of those athletes. By presenting the participants with Gatorade, the hackathoners may also share in this joy of feeling like an athlete, feeling that in some way, they too are being looked upon with pride and joy. In other words, entrepreneurs want others to be proud of them and of their work.

Going back to the conversation with Nora, it is clear now that she only decided to discuss her "life's goal" with me in the first place because I was "pre-selected" by Dylan to be someone worth her time. Dylan had mentioned to me that he has spoken about me with Nora before. Dylan has also told me that he sees me as one of his close mentors, having had some startup experience myself. Since Nora trusts Dylan's judgment, she believed that discussing what she finds important with me was worthwhile. Her comment about my "nice car" referred to the used vehicle I had recently purchased to replace my falling-apart 1996 Toyota Camry that I had been driving for years. Having started companies in the past, I was able to retain some savings. But being ever so frugal with my spending habits, the only reason I bought the car was because it was in-fact more affordable than the most recent Toyotas or Hondas, and seemed to be more reliable and sturdy too. While to me, the car is merely a more reliable replacement of a daily transportation tool, to Nora it was evidence of success. This evidence of success, combined with Dylan's pre-selection of my worthwhileness was enough to allow her to give herself, someone who is highly time-sensitive and selective about her use of time, the permission to spend more than six hours discussing and debating with me about her "life's goal," something in which she is

deeply convicted. While Steven chose to ignore my presence because I had not demonstrated to him my immediate *measurable* value to furthering his goals, Nora did not hesitate to spend a large portion of her time because she views my opinions as valuable and important. Her perception of my success, to her is enough of a reason for her to believe that spending time talking with me would in fact make a *measurable* difference towards furthering her goals. Only, I sincerely hope that she might still find my opinions “valuable” after our unsettling discussion.

Much like Clifford Geertz’s conception of human culture as “a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what a computer engineer call ‘programs’)—for the governing of behavior” (Geertz 6), the exclusive and highly goal-oriented culture of startup people can be seen as control mechanisms for enforcing and ensuring “success.” These control mechanisms are meant to guard against common tendencies such as the desire to spend an exorbitant amount of time with friends or acquaintance, which can detract from furthering one’s goal. By carefully evaluating the ability of her peers to *measurably* contribute to that goal, an entrepreneur can optimize for accomplishing better and more efficiently. Because of this deep conviction to one’s goal and purpose, a culture of exclusivity naturally emerged. This highly exclusive culture allows entrepreneurs to reason about the people with whom they choose to surround themselves, and to calculate, almost instinctively the value of their acquaintances. More importantly, startup culture allows its subscribers to justify their chosen allocation of time spent with those they deem worthy and those they deem unworthy.

By studying the culture of entrepreneurs, we can shed light on our own desires in the world and our own conceptions of purpose. Geertz contends that humans are complex in nature, that man is “an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (Geertz 1973). As such, our many desires may often times be muddled by other cultural, social, and ethic factors

in which we find significant. Because entrepreneurs have self-trained to have such “cleansed,” even pragmatic approaches to the idea of purpose, seemingly shed from external distraction, by studying their culture, we may be able to better understand our own conceptions of purpose and the “webs of significance” that we attribute to them. In doing so, many more questions arise. In particular, how do entrepreneurs define purpose, and why do they define it in the way that they do? What does their definition of purpose allow them to accomplish? Why define or live by purpose in the first place? These questions may have different answers to different subgroups of entrepreneurs as the startup culture is anything but a monolithic one. In the current study, I have focused mainly on young entrepreneurs, but it is certainly worthwhile to investigate further the perspectives of older, more experienced entrepreneurs, failed entrepreneurs, and even venture capitalists. Of course, ultimately many of these questions are philosophical and may or may not have any explicit or direct answers. But in the words of T.S. Eliot: “[f]or us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business” (Eliot *Four Quartets*).

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