Paul Graham

I have chosen Paul Graham, cofounder of "Viaweb" and "Y Combinator", as well as a prominent essayist in the tech sphere. I find Graham a compelling figure, as he has been successful in changing the world in many ways, often most prominently without code (although that is no dig at his coding ability). I see Graham as a well-rounded individual. Despite the deepest desire of many functional programmers (his kin), the world is a messy place, and changing it requires much more than lines of code. Graham has been an integral part of not just technologies that have improved the world (I will expand on this later), but also ensuring they cross the threshold to sustain themselves, instead of floundering like many promising technologies. Graham's greatest contribution in this regard is mentoring start-ups, lending his decades of experience in the industry to help them avoid early pitfalls in the life of a technology company. Graham's influence extends beyond the start-ups enrolled in the start-up accelerator Y Combinator however, as he eagerly shares his experience and opinions freely on the internet. The quality of his essays (the most authoritative source of his opinions) has attracted the interest of many in the spheres of Computer Science, start-ups, and beyond. Essays backed up by the credentials of companies valued at $155 billion as of October 2019 ("Y Combinator"), *it is clear that the philosophy behind them has merit, and thus Graham has emerged as an inspiration and guru to many wishing to emulate his success.*

Regarding the structure of this biography, I will begin with a brief overview of my introduction to him and his work, then begin a chronological overview of his work, and finish with his broader influence in many communities.

As silly as it sounds, considering the depth and richness of Graham's commentaries, my introduction to him was his Twitter. He appeared as a recurring figure in my Twitter feed at the beginning of this Summer (kudos to Twitter's algorithm for the success of that recommendation), and I was quickly charmed by Graham's enthusiasm for growth, development, and art? (It's refreshing to have one's horizons expanded by an enthusiast. Graham actually studied painting at Rhode Island School of Design. *"Paul Graham biography"*). *Often Graham would link to his essays at PaulGraham.com rather than condense an opinion into 140 characters, and thus I found his sizeable and influential work. I was startled when I first read essay* "The Age of the Essay". It was like an awakening, in which I realized opinions that hadn't surfaced (why I wasn't particularly fond of Secondary School), and yet comforted me at the same time by assuring me that I wasn't unusual, that the subject matter we were taught was needlessly obscure, and that there were other subject matters in which I could truly enjoy and learn from the medium. Simply my enjoyment of the essay proved its concept, and awakened a desire within me to experience similar revelations which changed my perception on things I had taken for granted. And thankfully I had a repository of such revelations wating for me in his website.

From my study of his life, Graham does not appear as a boring, socially inept stereotype, but instead as a lively and perhaps cheeky character. He does not shy away from dangerous ideas, but instead is fascinated by them, as through his encouragement of his friend Robert Morris in the development of "The Morris Worm" in 1988 while he was still a student at Harvard. Graham was succeeded at witnessing a seminal event in computing history, while deftly keeping a safe enough distance from it to avoid federal prosecution, unlike the culprit, Morris.

Graham's first success in his career was the founding of Viaweb with his friends Robert Morris and Trevor Blackwell in 1995. Viaweb was a tool that build online stores. It was sold to Yahoo! for $49 million of Yahoo stock. Viaweb was rebranded to Yahoo! Stores. In the following years Graham became known for his essays, such as "Beating the Averages". Graham had been

flirting with the idea of Angel Investing, and on one fateful evening walking home from a talk at Harvard about building a start-up, Graham and his then girlfriend Jessica Livingston conceived the idea of an investment fund, which would take a batch of start-ups for a set amount of time. This investment fund became Y Combinator, which also include Trevor Blackwell and Robert Morris as its founders. Without going into the details of how the accelerator works, it has been responsible for AirBnB, Stripe, Reddit, Justin.tv (now Twitch.tv) and over 2000 other companies (not all of which have succeeded. Among the attributes of Y Combinator, I'm fascinated that in terms of Y Combinators market value, the company is successful based on a tiny fraction of its start-ups. As of 2012, three quarters of the value of the companies Y Combinator had funded was concentrated in Airbnb and Stripe. Thus from a market value perspective, Y Combinator is only concerned in cultivating those handful of potentially massive companies of its alumni. Y Combinator could take a batch of 100 start ups and none of them may make a noticeably difference in Y Combinators valuation. However, Y Combinator is not focused on making money, and while it does not shy away from "Black Swans" or "Unicorns", they are not the sole focus of the company. The founders of Y Combinator had already made their fortunes when they started the company. The goal of the company was to aid growth and have fun. I admire Graham's balance in life. Instead of chasing money to no end, he instead has chosen to chase what brings him fulfilment, which appears to aiding in the success of others, what I see as an admirable trait. This ties back into what I first noticed in Graham's twitter. Authenticity and enthusiasm that was contagious.

As of 2014, Graham is no longer involved in the day to day activities of Y Combinator. Despite this, his influence is still far reaching. He has been very involved with Lisp, authoring On Lisp, ANSI Common Lisp, and participating on Arc, a dialect of Lisp. I find his dedication to the language endearing despite not having any interest in the language itself. Graham has consistently chosen to dedicate part of his time to the language for what appears to be a love of the language and its capabilities. In his essay The Python Paradox, (now a misnomer as Python is no longer an example of the concept), Graham theorized that hiring Python programmers was more likely to select high skilled programmers than other, more popular languages at the time. As of the time of writing the essay, Python had not been widely adopted by industry, and thus had poorer job prospects than Java for example. This means that programmers were not learning the language as a means to make money or further their career, but instead from a genuine interest in the language and in coding more broadly. Graham believes that having a genuine interest is more likely to produce high quality coders, thus hiring Python programmers was a heuristic for hiring good programmers. I am inspired by innate interest in Computer Science and its surrounding fields, therefore Graham's attraction to Lisp is fascinating to me as I see a coder who loves the craft. I believe that such a fondness is recognizable even to a gentile (non-coder).

As of today, Graham's essays have been focusing on his criticism on cancel-culture, but more specifically the rejection of non-orthodox ideas, as seen in his essay Orthodox Privilege. In it Graham states that an essential attribute of selecting a start up is to be able to overcome a prejudice against non-orthodox ideas, as many of the best start ups initially sound like bad ideas. Most people would not be able to overlook this prejudice, but that was okay, as they were not funding start-ups. In Graham's opinion, this has changed due to cancel culture, in which people were rejecting ideas, and cancelling their conceivers, often academics, and now their prejudice is causing actual harm. Still, a central recurring topic of his essays is advice to founders of start-ups, as seen in his latest essay Early Work. I frequently see Graham's name treated with reverence in the comments of Hacker News, showing his influence in a set of influential individuals within the tech world. I've always found Graham's opinions insightful, and have been inspired by his passion, as I believe many others have as well.s