

Gravity Sketch, a virtual studio for designers to create and share in 3D

As part of a series with Google for Startups Black Founders Fund, Maddyness spoke to Oluwaseyi Sosanya at Gravity Sketch about funding, plans for the future and their advice for other founders.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Gravity Sketch started in 2013 as a team thesis project in academia. We were practitioners in the field of industrial design who decided to return to school to explore how engineering and design disciplines can better work together. The common human language is 3D yet the way we describe and explore our ideas before they become reality is through flat media. With the rise of virtual and augmented reality, there was an opportunity to work, think, and create directly in 3D space. We saw a better way to explore, share, and collaborate on 3D ideas with peers natively in a 3D environment. Upon graduation, my cofounder and I were recruited to work for Jaguar Land Rover where we learned a great deal about the automotive workflow, saw the challenges in the design process, and felt that someone had to innovate the workflow. After several years we decided to leave our jobs and explore bringing this idea to reality.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Gravity Sketch is a 3D design and collaboration platform that allows

designers and various other stakeholders to join a virtual design studio where they create, communicate, and collaborate together in real time. The platform helps accelerate product production processes by bringing conversations that would normally happen much later in the product development cycle to the beginning, helping avoid confusion and misunderstandings that result from the use of traditional flat media. We've been community driven from day one, providing a free product to any individual who wants to explore the tools. The vast majority of our community users are professional designers or aspiring professionals who are exploring new workflows in their creative process. They eventually bring their learning experience with the product to their professional working environment at which case we initiate an enterprise sales process.

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with the Google for Startups Black Founders Fund?

This opportunity has provided me with a link to like-minded founders from mutual cultural backgrounds. We share experiences and collaborate with one another to help navigate the start-up world. We all have unique experiences but are trying to achieve a common business success; we rely on investment and talent acquisition in order to build our businesses and scale them to become profitable and sustainable technology start ups. Black founders in the tech space face similar challenges yet we don't have a platform to share our learnings and developments. The Google Black Founders Fund is a great step towards building invaluable networks. There's much more to do in order to help the next generation avoid some of the mistakes that we've made, so I look forward to seeing how the programme evolves. This programme is a catalyst, and beyond the programme, my peers and I will continue to build and grow connections in the startup ecosystem.

Tell us about the working culture at Gravity Sketch.

There is a real buzz in the team, everyone is on the same path. We look at this journey as an opportunity to grow in our respective disciplines. Each member of the team is focused on developing a great product and experience for our users. We are also focused on creating great learning opportunities for ourselves.

We have a culture of ownership: we are here to learn and develop ourselves through the growth of this company and the delivery of a great product/customer experience. We hold ourselves accountable to one another and our users. It feels a bit like a sports team, both leaders and Individual Contributors are on the field to progress the ball down the pitch, we strike when the opportunity is in front of us, and we win and lose as a team.

Building a team like this takes patience; we look for people who are hungry to not only work hard, but want to take chances in the spirit of developing themselves. We have an all or nothing mentality, either we grow beyond our targets and deliver a product that rivals the giants in our industry or we write history trying to do so.

How are you funded?

We are venture backed and our most recent round was led by Accel. This is a new experience for me; building a Board who are focused on helping the business develop and scale is a really interesting challenge. We must find partners who are excited about our mission and have various experiences that they can bring to the business both in and out of the boardroom. We tend to pick investors who are excited about the journey and not only the destination, this generates healthy discussion and

collaborative problem solving. We are all responsible for building the business to the point that it not only meets the needs of our customers but returns multiples on the investments that have been made on the way.

Putting things into perspective; not only are our investors shareholders but so are each of our teammates. Our employees hold shares in the business; my mindset has been focused on delivering value to all shareholders, not only our venture partners but every member of the team as well. This framing has helped bring the voice of the team into the boardroom and has allowed us to be transparent about the health of the business with everyone involved in building it. In addition, the community has contributed a tremendous amount of knowledge and support. We've been able to grow a company for several years without a traditional marketing function and in the early days our users supported the company with donations and beta testing so I see them as investors as well; we need to keep advancing the product to provide them with returns on their initial investment in our initial idea.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

The biggest challenge as a leader has been evolving and developing my communication style. As a small team of ten, it was quite easy to hold meetings and set initiatives to get everyone on the same page. Today at just under 100 people there is so much more to consider. I've had to learn how to articulate the mission clearly and succinctly. I found that transparency is the key to avoiding miscommunication and that it builds trust between leadership and ICs. However this is a challenge that will persist with each stage of growth. I'm now learning how to communicate to a broad audience - a team that deeply understands the product, and prospective customers/investors. As the company grows this becomes

more nuanced and I must tailor my talk track for each but keep them as similar as possible in order to make sure everyone understands the core mission and vision. I can't stress enough how important it is to develop communication skills and continue to learn and develop these skills.

How does Gravity Sketch answer an unmet need?

Prior to the development of our platform there was no way for creatives to create and collaborate in real time at true scale in 3D. Designers of our cars and shoes used 2D software and shared flat images and files via email in order to get full sized prototypes made so that they could validate their designs. Today creative teams can get into our platform and work on projects from the early ideation phase through to full size prototype.

Communicating and developing a 3D idea is extremely hard. The pen and paper is the fastest way to get an idea from your mind into the physical space. We do these things to help communicate what we are imagining; however, by focusing only in the 2D arena we're missing that third dimension and clarity. It wasn't until recently that we were able to get into 3D natively from the early stages of ideation. With our product many folks did not understand the need for such a tool. But once they put on a virtual reality headset and start to create in real time and share ideas with their peers, they find that they unlock a world of possibilities and start to interrogate their existing workflow. We're currently solving a problem that most people don't know they have and the problem is getting the idea from your mind into the mind of your peers and people responsible to bring that idea to reality.

As a company, we are working at the forefront of this emerging technology. Therefore, we have to do a tremendous amount of education with our customers. There's a lot of change management as the tools are

new and the processes are new, which means that companies are developing a new way of working. When you're learning anything for the first time, there's always going to be an initial decrease in your performance. However, after your learning has taken place you see a sharp increase in your productivity. The challenge that we face is helping customers go through that period of disruption to get to the other side where they're seeing huge gains in their productivity. The way we address this today is by bringing on expert designers to help facilitate the learning and development of our customers, as well as the learning and development of our team, to better understand how to build our product and solve the problems that our customers are currently facing, and will face in the future. But being early to the space means that we also need to manage our budget, which means we need to focus on key customers in the industry segments we service, which sometimes means that we need to let go of other opportunities, which may not yield the best returns for the business at this time. This is an extremely hard thing to do as a founder who really wants the product to support and service all people that I could potentially help.

What's in store for the future?

As we grow and develop as a business and team we look forward to supporting a wider user base. We want to support folks that may just need to communicate 3-D ideas in non-design settings, such as medical (MRI, technicians, exploring, three-dimensional, scans of humans) or educational (geometry teachers explaining how to calculate the volume of a pyramid). Our free product helps us to deliver our solution to a wide range of different users, but we can do so much more by diversifying the hardware platforms we support, as well as making our cloud infrastructure much more scalable. Our grand vision is to support all types of communication that benefits from taking place in a virtual 3-D environment. Although our free product is accessible to anyone anywhere

in the world we tend to focus on enterprise sales regionally. We see opportunities to support customers beyond Europe in the US and plan to extend our reach to Asia and South America.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders

What I've learned on this journey, is that each day poses an opportunity to sharpen your sword. Advice I gave everyone is that there is always going to be peaks and troughs in the entrepreneurial journey just like there are peaks and troughs in life. But with every one of these, you're able to learn something new, and take that learning and recycle it into actions, and I encourage everyone to show up curious and open to learning through both the good times and the tough times. I feel extremely fortunate to be able to go on this entrepreneurial journey with a team that's supportive, and just as hungry as I am to achieve greatness.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Every day I wake up, do some light callisthenics and walk 20 minutes to work. Frequent activity and exercise is really helpful because it takes your mind away from the day-to-day tasks and keeps you occupied in motion. As founders it is really helpful to disconnect from all of the things that we have going on in our minds at any given moment.

I try to give someone a compliment or positive feedback every day. I tend to see the media focusing on all the negativity out there and so I try to counterbalance with a bit of positivity.

I try to do one creative thing every day whether it's sketching, composing a short piece of music, or writing something that is not directly related to the work I do. Being creative outside of work actually helps me be more creative with my day-to-day work. This is because I can bring outside influence much easier by getting outside of the work, observing something new and then bringing it to my work.

Learn something new every day: each day is a great opportunity to develop your skills and understanding of the space you're working in, but we often get stuck on what we know and try to push our agendas based on the known. I like to take time out of each day to learn something totally new. Sometimes it relates to the work I do and sometimes it's a completely random piece of information like the origins of words.

I express gratitude each day. I'm often taken back by how far we've come on this journey, where I've come from, and just having gotten this far is a great achievement itself. By appreciating the progress to date it's very hard to get down or get discouraged. If the journey was to stop today, I'd be so grateful for how far all that we've achieved.

Oluwaseyi Sosanya is cofounder and CEO at *Gravity Sketch*.

The *Black Founders Fund* aims to tackle racial inequality in venture capital funding. In June 2023, 40 selected Black-led startups received \$150,000 each in non-dilutive cash awards through the fund. The Black Founders Fund was first launched in 2021 with a \$2M (£1.5M) fund - this year's fund doubled to \$4M (approx. £3.3M).

Prior to the fund's launch in 2021, *less than 0.25%* of venture capital (VC) funding went to Black-led startups in the UK.

British tech startups make up a quarter of the 40 companies selected across Europe and are set to transform a wide range of sectors - *this year's UK startups* are using technology to transform the fitness industry,

tackle the country's workforce shortage and disrupt rental insurance.

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