

# Craftsmanship, companionship and care with Konpanion

*As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke Alexandre Colle, Swen Gaudl & Camila Jimenez Pol, the founders of Konpanion about loneliness, robotics, provocation and a future where technology enriches human lives through empathetic design*

Temps de lecture : minute

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## What was the catalyst for launching Konpanion?

[ALEX] *Konpanion's* evolution was driven by a desire to create empathetic and realistic companion robots that would seamlessly blend in to a home environment and be accessible for everyone - and also into settings where people in vulnerable situations would benefit.

Mental health professionals took an active interest in the company particularly as loneliness has become such a widespread issue and the need for greater interactions.

Recognising the potential of social robots as supportive interventions to alleviate loneliness, our flagship product, 'Maah,' was developed. Initially conceived as a research project in 2018, it has since evolved into a pre-commercial product that challenges the traditional notion that humanoid robots are necessary for meaningful human-robot interactions.

Maah's journey began at Central Saint Martins in London, later becoming a PhD research project at the University of Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt. It

embodies our business's commitment to creating a living environment focused on design excellence, sustainability, and human-centric innovation. The robot is an intelligent, customisable, and connected companion, offering emotional support similar to that of a pet.

Maah also integrates advanced health and wellness monitoring through sensing technology. Its built-in API allows direct feedback for users during interactions, enhancing the overall experience.

With a unique cognitive architecture, Maah replicates animal-like behaviours and expresses emotions inspired by domestic animals, embodying a future where technology enriches human lives through empathetic design.



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

[SWEN] We are focused on creating innovative companion robots that engage on a deeply personal level. Maah is designed to connect with users through non-verbal communication, where the person and robot will build a bond through learning to understand and engage with one another. Unlike traditional companion robots, which do not offer empathy and emotional understanding, Maah leverages advanced AI architecture to learn from interactions, express emotion-inspired feedback through body language and sound, and adapts to the user's emotional state.

[CAMILA] We work closely with mental health professionals and researchers to refine our technology and its applications, as we work towards providing tailored and personalised support to those who need it most. Our approach to innovation is highly collaborative — we don't wait until a product is launched to engage; instead, we involve key stakeholders from the very beginning to ensure seamless adoption.

We reach our customers through direct sales, partnerships with healthcare providers, and a growing online presence, all aimed at making Maah accessible to all.

## How has the business evolved since its launch?

[CAMILA] While Konpanion was founded in 2018 as a provocation to the robotics sector, it wasn't until 2022 that we decided as a team to truly build Konpanion. Since then we have continually evolved to better serve our community by focusing on improving the well-being of those who need it most.

Accruing the support of academics, well-being and care sectors as well as the startup community by winning Scottish Edge and joining OCC's portfolio in 2023.

We initially concentrated on creating emotionally intelligent companion robot that could connect with users. Over time, we recognised the growing demand for such technologies within the care industry and those with vulnerabilities.

To meet this need, we have recently introduced Konpanion+, a dedicated service tailored specifically for the care sector. Konpanion+ builds on our core technology by offering specialised support and customisation options designed to enhance the quality of life for care recipients.

This service is a direct extension of our mission to use innovative technology to foster meaningful human-robot interactions, helping to alleviate loneliness and provide emotional support in settings where it's most needed.

## How are you funded?

[ALEX] Konpanion began its journey with a strong foundation of support from ourselves as founders and a range of external funding sources.

Creative Informatics, an initiative aimed at driving innovation for the Scottish creative industries, provided crucial kickstarter funding that enabled the business to explore the intersection of design, technology, and human interaction.

Scottish Edge, a competitive funding programme designed to support high-potential entrepreneurs in Scotland, also played a key role in Konpanion's growth by offering financial resources and business support. This backing allowed us to accelerate our development and bring

products closer to market.

A small investment from Old College Capital, the University of Edinburgh's venture fund, provided not only financial investment but also strategic guidance, connecting us with a network of industry experts and resources that further fueled its progress.

These funding sources were instrumental in driving Konpanion's growth from a startup into a company operating in the robotics industry, and allowing us to innovate continuously and expand impact within the care sector and beyond.

## How does Konpanion answer an unmet need?

[SWEN] Konpanion addresses a critical unmet need by offering a solution to the growing problem of loneliness and mental well-being, particularly among vulnerable people struggling with life.

Traditional companion robots often fall short in providing meaningful lasting interactions due to their lack of long-term engagement, deeper understanding and limited ability to connect on a personal level. This gap leaves many people without the support they would wish for, especially for those who feel isolated.

Konpanion fills this void by creating more aware and relation-building companion robots that are designed to form lasting connections with users. By combining innovative technology with a deep understanding of human behaviour, we provide a unique and impactful solution that addresses a pressing societal need, ultimately improving the quality of life for those who interact with our robots.

## Tell us about the working culture at Konpanion?

[CAMILA] At Konpanion, we pride ourselves on being both a multidisciplinary and multicultural team, there's already four different nationalities in the co-founders alone. One of the key attributes we seek in future team members is inquisitiveness and open-mindedness. These qualities are essential as they encourage everyone to engage with different areas of the business, learn from other disciplines, and truly appreciate the importance of every contribution. It also ensures there's fresh perspectives and people aren't afraid to speak their mind and contribute in areas that may be out of their field.

User experience is everything to us, which is why we maintain an open-minded approach to product/feature suggestions from our team and feedback from our research participants. It's this culture of curiosity and inclusivity that drives us forward and helps us innovate.

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

[ALEX] Konpanion's biggest challenge was integrating a unique design vision into a robotic embodiment that defies industry norms. By assembling a multidisciplinary team, we are turning this vision into reality.

## What's in store for the future?

[SWEN] We are currently working hard on improving our current robots in terms of embodiment and production but also push forward the work on the underlying AI system, enabling them to learn from users and adapt towards their needs. With the growing capabilities of AI and the rapid

advances in technology, the future is looking like we will be seeing more capable and supportive robots that will finally provide the support and level of engagement that most robotics fall short on.

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

[ALEX] Prioritise building a strong, cohesive team and cultivating a network of passionate individuals who collaborate closely, driven by shared values and a commitment to creating a positive impact.

[CAMILA] My one piece of advice for other founders, or those thinking of starting their own venture, is to find your tribe. Surround yourself with other founders and strengthen your support network. It's common advice, but it's been vital for keeping my sanity intact, especially when everything around me feels uncertain or overwhelming. The emotional support they provide is invaluable (and don't forget to offer it back!), but beyond that, they bring a wealth of experience to the table. Whether it's steering you away from the wrong HR agencies or pointing you to a lawyer who actually speaks 'founder English,' their insights can be a game-changer.

In Scotland, at least, the founder community is incredibly welcoming and supportive. There's a strong 'you find it, you pass it along' mentality when it comes to sharing useful resources and funding opportunities. And one final tip—though I might be a bit biased here—being a founder is always more bearable with co-founders by your side.

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

# by at the moment?

[CAMILA] Personally, while I see the benefits of getting up at 5:30am and running 5km to kickstart your system, this isn't me. I usually like to wake up slowly and take my time to do my face wash routine and cycle to work. I do, however, like to keep my meals prepped ahead of time; there's only so many days in a row I can eat wraps!

Recently, I've made it a point to have one creative and one physical outlet every week — whether it's painting, sewing, tennis, volleyball, or even a little weekend hiking trip to the Highlands. It does wonders to clear the mind, recharge the batteries, and, who knows, might even spark some inspiration for the next Maah Skin collection...like the Highland Range! Nothing like a bit of fresh air and a creative spark to keep things interesting.

Alexandre Colle, Swen Gaudl & Camila Jimenez Pol are the founders of Konpanion.



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