

The analytics startup made a pickax-during-the-Gold-Rush product, the kind venture capitalists loved to get behind. History saw the Gold Rush as a cautionary tale, but in Silicon Valley, people used its metaphors proudly, provided they were on the right side of things. Pickaxes were usually business-to-business products. Infrastructure, not services. Just as startups in New York were eager to build off their city’s existing cultural legacy, by creating services for media and finance—or, more commonly, creating sleek interfaces to sell things that would require more time, money, energy, or taste to buy elsewhere—the same was true of the Bay Area, where software engineers sought to

usurp older technology companies by building tools for other software engineers.

It was the era of big data, complex data sets facilitated by exponentially faster computer processing power and stored, fashionably, in the cloud. Big data encompassed industries: science, medicine, farming, education, policing, surveillance. The right findings could be golden, inspiring new products or revealing user psychology, or engendering ingenious, hypertargeted advertising campaigns.

Not everyone knew what they needed from big data, but everyone knew that they needed it. Just the prospect incited lust in product managers, advertising executives, and stock-market speculators. Data collection and retention were unregulated. Investors salivated over predictive analytics, the lucrative potential of steroidal pattern-matching, and the prospect of bringing machine-learning algorithms to the masses—or, at least, to Fortune 500 companies. Transparency for the masses wasn't ideal: better that the masses not see what companies in the data space had on them.

The analytics startup wasn't disrupting anything so much as unseating big-data incumbents: slow-moving corporate behemoths whose products were technically unsophisticated and bore distinctly nineties user interfaces. The startup not only enabled other companies to collect customized data on their users' behavior without having to write much code or pay for storage, but it also offered ways to analyze that data in colorful, dynamic dashboards. The cofounders had prioritized aesthetics and hired two graphic designers off the bat: men with signature hairstyles and large followings on a social network for people who referred to themselves as creatives and got excited about things like font sizing and hero images. In general, it was hard to say what, exactly, the designers did all day, but the dashboards were



both friendly and elegant. The software looked especially pleasing, trustworthy, airtight. Good interface design was like magic, or religion: it cultivated the mass suspension of disbelief.

I had no qualms about disrupting extant corporations in the big-data space, no inherited nostalgia or fondness for business. I liked the underdog. I liked the idea of working for two kids younger than I was, who had dropped out of college and were upending the script for success. It was thrilling, in that sense, to see a couple of twentysomethings go up against middle-aged leaders of industry. It looked like they could win.