

Dedicated venture capital for the Bitcoin ecosystem with Stillmark

In the ever-growing investment landscape, funds are multiplying and diversifying, and for startups there is more to raising investment than the money and the media moment. With #QVCS Maddyness profiles different funds to give founders and entrepreneurs the information they need to choose the right investor. Today we speak to Vikash Singh, newly appointed Principal Investor at Stillmark.

I started my career doing research in artificial intelligence (AI) and decided to pursue graduate research in the field, where I chose to focus on machine learning on graph structured data.

I was first drawn to AI after realising its potential to make a positive impact in healthcare and biotechnology. This passion led me on a journey building AI systems for routing clinical teams and providing clinical insights at Heal, a healthtech startup that I joined at the seed stage and at X, Google's moonshot lab where I worked on a moonshot in AI and biotechnology.

I started following Bitcoin in 2016 and began to dive deeper into the frontier of Bitcoin technology (Lightning Network, side chains, etc.) during a fellowship I held with Stillmark in 2018, in preparation for the firm's launch the following

year. Even though my career was progressing in AI, I was increasingly excited by Bitcoin's potential to redefine how businesses atop the internet are built. This was against the backdrop of levelling the global playing field in terms of access to reliable financial infrastructure.

When the opportunity came to work at Stillmark, I was thrilled at the prospect of using my previous experiences to contribute to building the Bitcoin ecosystem.

Which industries are you working in?

Stillmark is a Bitcoin only VC, focused on investing in and supporting the vision of entrepreneurs whose plans, products, and technologies advance Bitcoin's core principles and the opportunities inherent and unique to the technology.

While Bitcoin-only may incorrectly seem like a narrow investment mandate, we believe that having secure, dependable, and scalable internet-native money will lead to a fundamental rewiring of the way internet businesses are built.

I think what isn't necessarily obvious, is that the way today's successful internet businesses have been built, is a direct result of being constrained by the velocity of value transfer being orders of magnitudes slower than the velocity of information/data transfer. A Bitcoin-only thesis is therefore nothing short of a thesis redefining the way businesses over the internet are constructed.

What do you look for in a founder?

We don't see founders as needing to fit a particular mould and believe that the Bitcoin startup ecosystem benefits heavily from diverse perspectives and backgrounds. That said, we look for founders that align with Bitcoin's mission and who view entrepreneurship in Bitcoin as an avenue to make a positive impact.

For founders whose visions are tackling a specific problem in driving Bitcoin/Lightning adoption forward, we look for a background in that problem space and how the founder's journey both led them to understand said space and equipped them with the tools and experience to build solutions within it.

Can you talk about your current

portfolio?

We have had the privilege of working with some of the industry's leading Bitcoin and Lightning focused founders, who are each advancing the adoption of Bitcoin in different ways.

This is reflected in our portfolio, which includes companies advancing the Lightning protocol itself (Lightning Labs), bridging the gap between renewable energy and Bitcoin mining (Satoshi Energy), creating a new class of Bitcoin self-custody solutions (Casa), providing merchant payment processing solutions (Ibex Mercado), and integrating Bitcoin/Lightning payments into gaming (pnkfrg).

Our recent investments in Voltage and Amboss represent a commitment to investing in solutions that will propel further growth of the Lightning Network by increasing access to reliable Lightning infrastructure, and data-driven insights, for node and channel management respectively.

We view the journey of onboarding billions to Bitcoin/Lightning as a multi-dimensional problem. To better understand these challenges, we attempt to put ourselves in the shoes of different stakeholders that interact with Bitcoin/Lightning. This includes merchants in El Salvador, retail customers, Lightning node operators, gamers, Bitcoin HODLers, and the grandmas and grandpas that got into Bitcoin through millennial family members, but don't consider themselves technical. We want to identify the key issues these stakeholders face, and the pain points they're tackling.

Our portfolio is built upon identifying the founders best positioned to solve these problems and thus fulfil Bitcoin's potential.

How has COVID-19 changed the way you operate?

While COVID-19 taught the world that remote work can be effective, our work is naturally remote in many ways. We are constantly engaging with a global community of Bitcoin/Lightning focused entrepreneurs, from El Salvador to Turkey, Salt Lake City to Brooklyn, Austin to Helsinki, and teams that are themselves, globally distributed.

What does the future look like?

The maturation of the Lightning Network – partly driven by nation state adoption in El Salvador – has seen millions onboard to Lightning payments over the last year. The narrative of Bitcoin being digital gold is expanding to recognise that the Lightning Network serves as scalable open payments' technology, which can be used for day-to-day merchant payments, online payments, and earning.

We expect to see Lightning payments create better monetisation models for content creators, remove the need for remittance payments all around the world, and expand the pool of the global population that is able to earn via digital work over the internet.

What makes Stillmark stand out as a VC fund in your eyes?

Stillmark is unique in its vision and demonstrated commitment to providing dedicated venture capital for entrepreneurs building in the Bitcoin ecosystem. Our early presence in the industry and backing from early Bitcoiners fosters a sense of community around the fund, so that founders can feel like they have an extensive network of support when they partner with us.

Our early investments have been crucial in driving Bitcoin adoption forward – from the protocol development level, through to onboarding merchants in El Salvador.

What one piece of advice would you give to founders?

One of Stillmark's goals is to create a welcoming community for entrepreneurs interested in building in the Bitcoin ecosystem. No idea is too early to engage in a discussion with us, and our goal is to provide honest feedback, constantly learn more, and expand our views and perspectives on different opportunities in the space each day.

Vikash Singh is Principal Investor at *Stillmark*

