

Founder Mode leadership, AI’s “Bitter Lesson,” and a talk on x402 agentic payments

Recommended Reading from Tech Founders

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By Recommended Reading from Tech Founders • February 20, 2026

Today’s strongest picks cluster around founder leadership (“Founder Mode” + a related Chesky conversation), plus AI-first mental models (“The Bitter Lesson” and “keep your identity small”) and a founder-endorsed video on x402 agentic payments. Also included: a standout technical book and a few worldview-shaping fiction recommendations.

Most compelling recommendation (highest operator leverage)

Paul Graham — “Founder Mode” (essay)

- **Title:** “Founder Mode” ¹
- **Content type:** Essay ²
- **Author/creator:** Paul Graham ³
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Garry Tan (Y Combinator President & CEO) ⁴
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Post-product-market fit, “leadership is...presence, not absence,” and the common advice to hire great people and “give them the keys to [the] kingdom” can backfire—creating “a company that I did not recognize.” ⁵

¹Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

²Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

³Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

⁴Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

⁵Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

- **Why it matters:** It's a direct, experience-backed prompt for founders to stay actively involved as the company scales, especially after PMF when delegation patterns harden.⁶

“Leadership is like, is presence, not absence.”⁷



Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC (45:00)

Companion listen (same theme):

Social Radars — episode with Brian Chesky & Jessica Livingston on “Founder Mode” (podcast episode)

- **Title:** Social Radars episode on Founder Mode (Brian Chesky with Jessica Livingston)⁸
- **Content type:** Podcast episode⁹
- **Author/creator:** Social Radars (episode featuring Brian Chesky and Jessica Livingston)¹⁰
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Garry Tan¹¹

⁶Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

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⁸Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

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¹⁰Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

¹¹Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Tan points to Chesky's reflections (including remaking Airbnb during COVID) as a practical complement to the "Founder Mode" idea. ¹²¹³
 - **Why it matters:** A founder-case narrative that Tan found instructive alongside the essay. ¹⁴
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AI & building: principles + mental models

Richard Sutton — “The Bitter Lesson” (blog post)

- **Title:** “The Bitter Lesson” ¹⁵
- **Content type:** Blog post ¹⁶
- **Author/creator:** Richard Sutton ¹⁷
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny (Head of Claude Code at Anthropic) ¹⁸
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** “The more general model will always outperform the more specific model.” ¹⁹
- **Why it matters:** A concise heuristic for AI product and research strategy—prioritizing general approaches over narrow, hand-crafted specialization. ²⁰

“Keep your identity small” (essay/blog post)

- **Title:** Essay/blog post advising “keep your identity small” ²¹
- **Content type:** Blog post / essay ²²
- **Author/creator:** A founder from Applied Intuition (name not specified) ²³
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Speaker A (in a conversation featuring Elad Gil) ²⁴
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** “Keep your identity small,” described as “wonderful overall advice for this period of time.” ²⁵

¹²Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

¹³Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

¹⁴Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC

¹⁵Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny

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²¹Is the SaaS that we know coming to an end?

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²⁵Is the SaaS that we know coming to an end?

- **Why it matters:** A direct reminder to stay adaptable—avoid over-anchoring to a fixed self-concept while circumstances shift. ²⁶
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Deep work: one technical book pick

Functional Programming in Scala (book)

- **Title:** *Functional Programming in Scala* ²⁷
 - **Content type:** Book ²⁸
 - **Author/creator:** Not specified in the source excerpts
 - **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
 - **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny ²⁹
 - **Key takeaway (as shared):** Called “the single best technical book” he’s read; highlights “elegance” in functional programming and “thinking in types,” and frames it as something that can “level you up.” ³⁰
 - **Why it matters:** Recommended as a durable way to improve how you think about code—not just a language-specific manual. ³¹
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Fiction that shaped leaders’ thinking (and taste)

J.R.R. Tolkien — *The Lord of the Rings* (book)

- **Title:** *The Lord of the Rings* ³²
- **Content type:** Book ³³
- **Author/creator:** J.R.R. Tolkien ³⁴
- **Link/URL (as shared):** <https://www.amazon.com/Lord-Rings-J-R-R-Tolkien/dp/0544003411> ³⁵
- **Who recommended it:** Markus Villig (Founder & CEO, Bolt) ³⁶

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³¹Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny

³²How Bolt Survived An 85% Revenue Crash And Became Europe’s Ride-Hailing Champion (Markus Villig, Founder & CEO)

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- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Villig credits it with shaping his worldview.
³⁷
- **Why it matters:** A rare, explicit “this shaped how I see the world” endorsement from a founder.
³⁸

“Strauss” — *Accelerando* (book)

- **Title:** *Accelerando* ³⁹
- **Content type:** Book ⁴⁰
- **Author/creator:** “Strauss” (as stated in the excerpt) ⁴¹
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny ⁴²
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Recommended for capturing “the essence of this moment” through its accelerating pace. ⁴³
- **Why it matters:** A narrative frame for understanding rapid technological change—recommended specifically for its sense of speed and escalation.
⁴⁴

Cixin Liu — *The Wandering Earth* (short story collection)

- **Title:** *The Wandering Earth* ⁴⁵
- **Content type:** Short story collection ⁴⁶
- **Author/creator:** Cixin Liu ⁴⁷
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny ⁴⁸
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Highlighted for “amazing stories” and for offering a “different perspective than Western sci fi.” ⁴⁹
- **Why it matters:** A specific pointer to broaden creative inputs—both stylistically and culturally—via sci-fi with a distinct viewpoint. ⁵⁰

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Business & crypto: two listens worth queuing

Acquired — start with the Nintendo episode (podcast)

- **Title:** *Acquired* (podcast)⁵¹
- **Content type:** Podcast⁵²
- **Author/creator:** Ben and David (as stated in the excerpt)⁵³
- **Link/URL:** Not provided in the source excerpts
- **Who recommended it:** Boris Cherny⁵⁴
- **Key takeaway (as shared):** Praised for making “business history...alive,” with a specific suggestion to begin with a Nintendo episode.⁵⁵
- **Why it matters:** A concrete entry point into a long-running show—recommended for clarity and storytelling around business history.⁵⁶

@programmer at EthereumDenver — talk on the x402 protocol for agentic payments (video)

- **Title:** Talk on the x402 protocol for agentic payments⁵⁷
 - **Content type:** Video talk⁵⁸
 - **Author/creator:** @programmer⁵⁹
 - **Link/URL (as shared):** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeTEQ4pHv3U>⁶⁰
 - **Who recommended it:** Brian Armstrong (Coinbase CEO)⁶¹
 - **Key takeaway (as shared):** Armstrong calls it a “Good talk” on x402 for agentic payments.⁶²
 - **Why it matters:** A direct founder endorsement of a concrete technical talk in the “agentic payments” space.⁶³
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Sources

1. Garry Tan on the Past, Present, and Future of YC
2. Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny
3. Is the SaaS that we know coming to an end?

⁵¹Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny

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⁵⁵Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny

⁵⁶Head of Claude Code: What happens after coding is solved | Boris Cherny

⁵⁷ post by @brian_armstrong

⁵⁸ post by @brian_armstrong

⁵⁹ post by @CoinbaseDev

⁶⁰ post by @CoinbaseDev

⁶¹ post by @brian_armstrong

⁶² post by @brian_armstrong

⁶³ post by @brian_armstrong

4. How Bolt Survived An 85% Revenue Crash And Became Europe's Ride-Hailing Champion (Markus Villig, Founder & CEO)
5. post by @brian_armstrong
6. post by @CoinbaseDev