



EMERGING COMPANIES TO WATCH IN 2026

Under-the-Radar Disruptors Across 10 Categories
Ready to Reshape Industries

Prepared by JJ Shay | Global Gauntlet AI | February 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



\$200B+ poured into AI startups in 2025. Defense tech doubled to \$49.1B. Yet the next wave of disruptors are companies most executives haven't heard of — operating in niches from AI-powered gene therapy to autonomous naval vessels.

\$200B+

AI Startup Funding
(2025)

\$49.1B

Defense Tech
Investment (2025)

46%

Global VC → AI &
Tech Startups

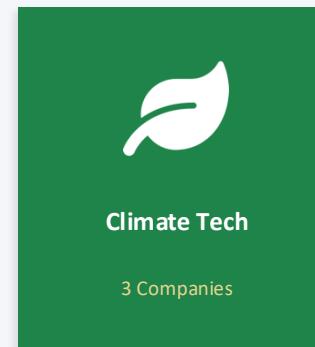
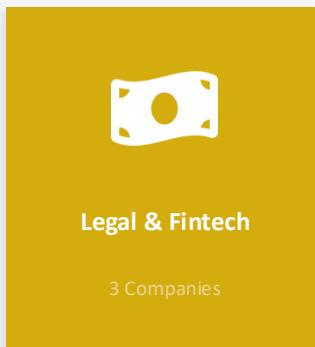
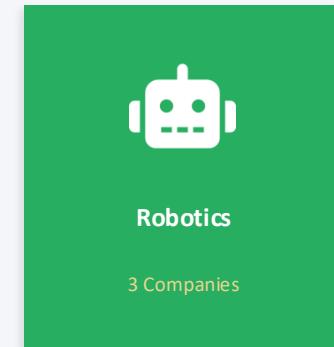
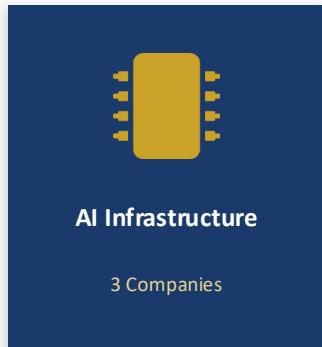
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Companies Profiled
Across 10 Sectors

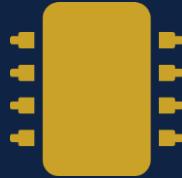
CATEGORIES COVERED

AI Infrastructure • AI Healthcare • Cybersecurity • Defense Tech • Robotics • Biotech & Gene Therapy • Legal & Fintech • Space Tech • Climate & Sustainability • Enterprise AI & Agents

THE EMERGING COMPANY LANDSCAPE



01



AI Infrastructure & Developer Tools

The picks-and-shovels players powering the AI gold rush — from model inference to observability

AI INFRASTRUCTURE & DEVELOPER TOOLS

Baseten

San Francisco | Founded 2019 | Series B

High-performance ML inference platform. Deploys open-source, custom, and fine-tuned AI models on optimized infrastructure. Achieved 225% cost reduction for high-volume processing. Used by Descript, Bland.ai, and enterprise teams replacing legacy serving infra.

 \$60M+ raised | Backed by Greylock, IVP

Goodfire

USA | Founded 2024 | Series B

AI observability and model-inspection platform. Enables enterprises to see inside large AI models, understand behavior, debug failures, and ensure compliance. Emerged from stealth with \$209M raised — one of the best-funded players in AI interpretability.

 \$209M raised | B Capital, Menlo, Lightspeed

Cursor (Anysphere)

San Francisco | Founded 2022 | Series B

AI-powered code editor that hit 1M users by word of mouth — no marketing. Aimed at experienced developers. Leading the 'vibe coding' revolution alongside Lovable and Replit. Fastest-growing dev tool since GitHub Copilot.

 \$900M+ raised | \$9B+ valuation | a16z, Thrive

WHY IT MATTERS

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

AI infrastructure is the 'AWS moment' of this cycle. As enterprises shift from experimenting with AI to deploying at scale, the companies that control inference, observability, and developer tooling will capture durable, recurring revenue. This layer is where margins live.

 \$80B+ invested in AI infra in 2025 alone

02



AI Healthcare

Clinical documentation, diagnostics, and care delivery — AI is eliminating 2+ hours of admin per provider daily

Ambience Healthcare

San Francisco | Founded 2020 | Series C

AI operating system for clinical documentation, coding, and workflows. Integrates with EHR systems to reduce admin burden. Used by UCSF Health, Memorial Hermann, and John Muir Health. Expanding into revenue cycle intelligence.

 \$243M raised | Andreessen Horowitz, Optum

Kailera Therapeutics

USA | Founded 2024 | Series B

Using AI and computational tools to develop multi-pathway obesity drugs. Secured an unprecedented \$600M Series B — one of the largest biotech raises of 2025. Targeting the booming GLP-1 therapy market with next-gen approaches.

 \$600M Series B | Mega-round in obesity AI

Abridge

Pittsburgh | Founded 2018 | Series C

Listens to provider-patient conversations and auto-generates clinical documentation integrated with Epic EHR. Saves providers ~2 hours/day. 'Abridge for Nurses' named TIME Best Invention. Expanding into revenue cycle and billing code validation.

 \$212M+ raised | Lightspeed, CVS Health Ventures

WHY IT MATTERS

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

Healthcare admin costs \$1T+ annually in the US alone. AI documentation tools aren't incremental — they're structural shifts. Providers using Ambience and Abridge report 40-60% reduction in documentation time, directly impacting burnout, retention, and margin.

 AI healthcare market projected \$188B by 2030

03



AI Cybersecurity

Autonomous security agents, deepfake prevention, and identity systems — the fastest-growing defense layer in enterprise IT

AI CYBERSECURITY

7AI

Boston | Founded 2025

Raised largest cybersecurity Series A ever (\$130M) just 10 months after stealth. AI agents automate SOC investigations, reducing response from hours to minutes. Founded by Cybereason veterans.

 \$166M | \$700M val | Index

Airia

Atlanta | Founded 2024

AI security & orchestration platform. Scaled 0 → 300 enterprise customers in 12 months from stealth. Provides visibility, governance, and protection for enterprise AI deployments.

 \$100M Series A | Gen Catalyst

imper.ai

NYC/Israel | Founded 2024

Real-time deepfake and cyber impersonation prevention across Zoom, Teams, Slack. Founded by elite Unit 8200 veterans. Combats CEO fraud and AI social engineering attacks.

 \$28M Seed | YL Ventures

82%

of breaches involve compromised identities

\$1.4B+

cybersecurity VC funding in 2025

55x

more identities per employee vs 5 yrs ago

The 'Agentic Security Inflection Point' — AI agents now handle complex security investigations autonomously, addressing the critical cybersecurity skills shortage.

04



Defense Technology

Record \$49.1B in 2025 funding. Autonomous systems, AI battlefield software, and maritime drones are redefining national security.

DEFENSE TECHNOLOGY

CHAOS Industries

USA | Founded 2023

Raised \$510M Series D just 6 months after a \$275M Series C. Developing autonomous defense systems and AI-enabled command platforms. One of the fastest-scaling defense startups ever.

 \$785M+ | \$4.5B val | Accel

Sarmonic Technologies

Austin, TX | Founded 2022

Building autonomous naval vessels for maritime defense. Addresses the critical gap in unmanned surface vehicles for the US Navy. Manufacturing at scale is the 2026 priority.

 \$4B valuation | A16z backed

Helsing

Munich, Germany | Founded 2021

Europe's defense AI champion. Battlefield AI software replacing traditional hardware-centric approaches. Represents Europe's push for technological sovereignty.

 €12B valuation | Gen Catalyst

SECTOR DYNAMICS

- Defense tech funding doubled YoY: \$27.2B (2024) → \$49.1B (2025)
- NATO allies committed to 5% GDP defense spending — unlocking \$100B+ in new procurement
- European defense tech deal count grew 67% vs 30% in the US
- Manufacturing scale is the 2026 competitive battleground — not just invention

05

Robotics & Autonomous Systems

Humanoid robots, infrastructure inspection bots, and autonomous delivery — hardware meets intelligence at scale



Figure AI

Sunnyvale, CA | Founded 2022

Developing general-purpose humanoid robots. Raised \$1B Series C in 2025. Partnered with BMW for manufacturing deployment. Building toward autonomous, multi-task robots for logistics and industrial use.

 \$1B+ raised | Bezos, NVIDIA, Microsoft

Gecko Robotics

Pittsburgh | Founded 2013

Wall-climbing robots for infrastructure inspection. Enters confined and dangerous spaces humans can't safely access. Used by US Navy, energy companies, and industrial facilities. \$125M Series D at \$1.2B valuation.

 \$125M Series D | Founders Fund, YC

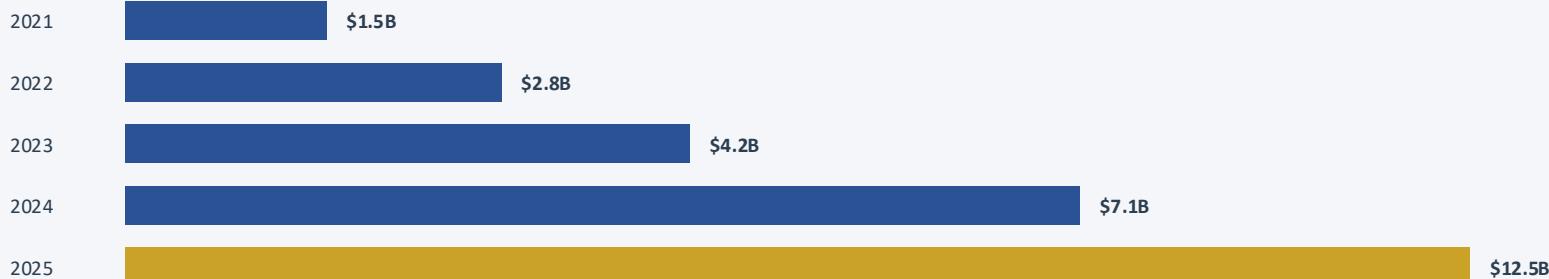
Agility Robotics

Corvallis, OR | Founded 2015

Creator of 'Digit,' a humanoid robot designed specifically for logistics and warehousing. Unlike general-purpose robots, Digit is optimized for the repetitive, physical tasks in supply chain operations.

 \$200M+ raised | Amazon-backed

ROBOTICS FUNDING TRAJECTORY (2021–2025)



06



Biotech & Gene Therapy

CRISPR-free gene editing, large-gene delivery, and AI-driven drug discovery are creating a new frontier in precision medicine

Tune Therapeutics

Durham, NC | Founded 2021 | Post-Series A

Delivers large gene-tuning payloads to permanently disable viral genes without cutting DNA. Lead asset is a one-time injectable gene therapy for hepatitis B. Raised \$175M — massive for post-Series A. Clinical trials underway in Asia-Pacific where HepB is endemic.

 \$175M raised | Originated from Duke University R&D

Averna Therapeutics

USA | Founded 2023 | Early Stage

Gene-insertion platform that adds therapeutic DNA via standardized molecular design. Simplifies manufacturing steps that normally slow gene-therapy development. Reduces need for custom engineering per program. Building scalable production methods.

 Early-stage | Backed by leading biotech VCs

SpliceBio

London, UK | Founded 2020 | Series B

Solves the 'large gene problem' in gene therapy. Uses engineered inteins to split large genes into pieces that self-assemble inside the patient. Vastly expands treatable genetic disorders. Lead program: Stargardt macular degeneration.

 \$135M Series B | Sanofi Ventures, EQT

WHY IT MATTERS

STRATEGIC INSIGHT

Gene therapy was a \$7.8B market in 2024, projected to reach \$44B by 2032. The bottleneck isn't science — it's delivery and manufacturing. Companies like SpliceBio and Averna are solving exactly these constraints. First movers in scalable gene delivery will define the next decade.

 CAGR 24.1% | Gene therapy market to \$44B by 2032

07



AI Legal & Fintech

Automating the \$1T+ legal services market and reinventing financial infrastructure with AI-native platforms

Lawhive

UK → US | Founded 2022

Reinventing legal services by combining human lawyers with AI workflows. Automates document drafting, case management, and research. Offers family law, tenant disputes, and consumer rights at a fraction of traditional cost.

 \$60M raised | Scaling to US market

Accrual

USA | Founded 2024

AI-native software unifying tax preparation, invoices, and regulatory filings. Emerged from stealth Feb 2026. Targets banks and lenders still using spreadsheets. Backed by General Catalyst incubator.

 \$75M Series A | Edward Jones

Mercor

San Francisco | Founded 2023

AI-powered talent market place. Reached \$10B valuation and \$850M+ ARR by end of 2025. Uses AI to match companies with talent at unprecedented speed and accuracy. One of the fastest revenue ramps in startup history.

 \$10B valuation | \$850M+ ARR

TRADITIONAL vs. AI-NATIVE APPROACH

Metric	Traditional	AI-Native
Legal document drafting	4-8 hours	15-30 minutes
Tax prep per filing	\$500-2,000	\$50-200
Talent matching	2-6 weeks	Hours to days

08



Space Technology

In-space manufacturing, orbital defense, and reusable rockets — the \$620B space economy is accelerating

SPACE TECHNOLOGY

Varda Space Industries

SF Bay Area | Founded 2020

Manufacturing products in space for terrestrial applications. Microgravity enables creation of materials impossible to make on Earth. Backed by Khosla and Founders Fund. Already completed re-entry missions.

 \$187M Series C | Founders Fund

True Anomaly

Colorado | Founded 2022

Space domain awareness and orbital defense. Developing autonomous spacecraft for tracking, inspection, and defense of assets in orbit. Addresses the growing threat of anti-satellite weapons and space debris.

 \$100M+ raised | Riot Ventures

Stoke Space Technologies

Seattle | Founded 2019

Building fully reusable rockets with a unique approach — reusable upper stages (not just boosters like SpaceX). This could cut launch costs by another 10x and is the 'holy grail' of rocketry.

 \$100M+ raised | YC, Breakthrough Energy

THE SPACE ECONOMY

\$620B

Global space economy (2025)

2,300+

EO satellites expected by 2032

\$42B

Quantum networking market by 2035

67%

Cost reduction from reusable systems

09

Climate & Sustainability

Carbon removal, biowaste conversion, and vertical farming — where biology meets industrial scale



CLIMATE & SUSTAINABILITY

Varaha

India | Founded 2022

Nature-based carbon removal platform expanding across Asia. Uses satellite monitoring and AI verification for carbon credits from agriculture and forestry projects. Raised \$20M to scale operations.

 \$20M raised | Climate-focused VCs

Entomal Biotech

Malaysia | Founded 2020

Uses black soldier fly larvae to upcycle food waste into protein feed and fertilizer. Mobile bioconversion units deployed across universities and recycling centers. Planning 15 ton/day central plant. Expanding to India and North America.

 Grant-funded | Petronas Future Tech

Plenty

San Francisco | Founded 2014

Indoor vertical farming growing fresh produce with 95% less water and 99% less land than traditional farming. Using AI-controlled environments for year-round harvests. Backed by SoftBank Vision Fund.

 \$900M+ raised | SoftBank, Bezos

THE OPPORTUNITY

Global food waste: 1.3B tons annually — Malaysia alone generates 17,000 tons/day. Entomal's approach tackles this while producing valuable protein and fertilizer byproducts.

Carbon credit market:

Expected to reach \$100B+ by 2030. Varaha's AI-verified, nature-based approach provides the transparency buyers demand.

Vertical farming:

\$31B market by 2030. As climate disruptions increase, controlled-environment agriculture becomes critical infrastructure, not just a premium product.

10

Enterprise AI & Agentic Platforms

AI agents that don't just answer questions — they execute work across workflows, platforms, and business processes



ENTERPRISE AI & AGENTIC PLATFORMS

Fundamental

USA | Founded 2024

Emerged from stealth Feb 2026 with \$255M. AI-powered accounting and financial operations platform. Already signed several 7-figure enterprise contracts. Backed by Oak HC/FT, Salesforce Ventures.

 \$255M Series A | Record debut

Cresta

San Francisco | Founded 2017

AI for contact centers — combines humans and AI to enhance customer conversations. Used by CarMax, Hilton, Cox Communications. Saves time and cost while driving revenue through consistent, compliant experiences.

 \$150M+ raised | Greylock, a16z

Instruct

Europe | Founded 2023

Build autonomous AI agents using plain English descriptions. No code required. Users describe tasks, connect apps, and watch AI agents execute work across multiple platforms. The 'Zapier of agents.'

 \$3.4M Seed | Lakestar, Creandum

THE AGENTIC AI EVOLUTION

Chatbots
(2023)



Copilots
(2024)



Agents
(2025)



Orchestrators
(2026)

Q&A

Assist

Execute

Manage

CROSS-SECTOR PATTERNS

What the most successful emerging companies have in common

01 Stealth-to-Scale Speed

Companies like 7AI, Airia, and Fundamental went from stealth to \$100M+ raises in under 12 months. The window between invention and market has collapsed.

02 AI-Native Architecture

Winners aren't adding AI to existing products. They're rebuilding workflows from scratch — Ambience in healthcare, Accrual in fintech, Lawhive in legal.

03 Dual-Use Business Models

Defense tech leaders like CHAOS Industries and Helsing serve military AND commercial markets, de-risking revenue and accelerating R&D cycles.

04 Platform, Not Product

Goodfire (AI observability), Baseten (inference), and Instruct (agents) are building infrastructure layers — capturing value from everyone above them in the stack.

SECTOR INVESTMENT HEATMAP — 2025 vs. PROJECTED 2026

Sector	2025 Funding	YoY Growth	2026 Outlook	Signal Strength
AI Infrastructure	\$80B+	+45%	Accelerating	🔥🔥🔥🔥
Defense Tech	\$49.1B	+81%	Accelerating	🔥🔥🔥🔥
AI Healthcare	\$18B+	+35%	Strong Growth	🔥🔥🔥🔥
Cybersecurity	\$14B+	+28%	Strong Growth	🔥🔥🔥🔥
Robotics	\$12.5B	+76%	Accelerating	🔥🔥🔥🔥
Biotech & Gene Therapy	\$22B+	+25%	Steady Growth	🔥🔥🔥
Legal & Fintech	\$8B+	+40%	Strong Growth	🔥🔥🔥🔥
Space Tech	\$15B+	+30%	Strong Growth	🔥🔥🔥🔥
Climate & Sustainability	\$12B+	+22%	Steady Growth	🔥🔥🔥
Enterprise AI / Agents	\$25B+	+60%	Accelerating	🔥🔥🔥🔥

Sources: PitchBook, CB Insights, Crunchbase, Bloomberg | Funding figures are approximate aggregate estimates

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The next trillion-dollar companies are being built NOW in these 10 sectors.

AI infrastructure, defense tech, and robotics show the strongest acceleration. But sleeper categories like AI legal and climate tech offer asymmetric upside with less competition.

Speed is the new moat — not technology alone.

Companies going from stealth to \$100M+ raises in under a year (7AI, Fundamental, Airia) signal that execution velocity matters more than first-mover advantage.

The platform layer captures the most durable value.

Inference platforms (Baseten), AI observability (Goodfire), and agent orchestration (Instruct) are the 'AWS' plays of this cycle — infrastructure that everyone needs.

Geography is diversifying — fast.

Helsing (Germany), Entomal (Malaysia), Lawhive (UK), SpliceBio (London), and Varaha (India) show that the next wave isn't just a Silicon Valley story.



THANK YOU

For deeper analysis, partnership opportunities,
or custom sector deep-dives:

JJ Shay | Global Gauntlet AI

AI Strategy & M&A Executive

15+ Years | \$4B+ in Transactions Closed

bit.ly/jjshay | LinkedIn: /in/jjshay