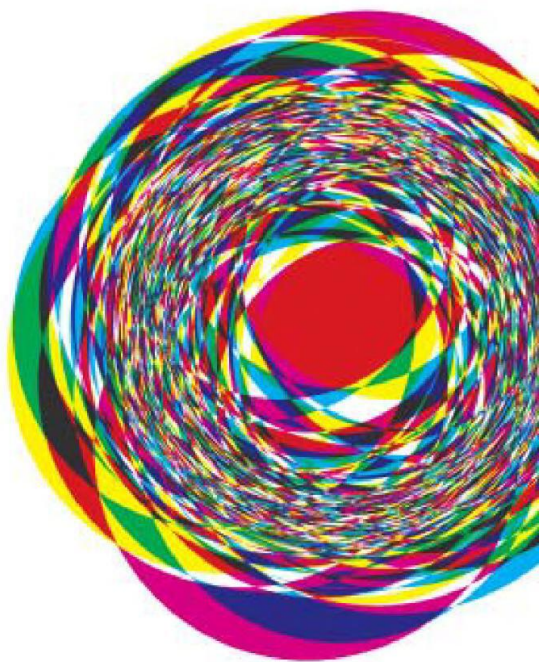


T H E L A W S O F
S I M P L I C I T Y

DESIGN, TECHNOLOGY, BUSINESS, LIFE



John Maeda

“Maeda is the Master of Simplicity.”

—Andrea Ragnetti BOARD OF MANAGEMENT, ROYAL PHILIPS ELECTRONICS

THE LAWS OF
SIMPLICITY

John Maeda

DESIGN, TECHNOLOGY, BUSINESS, LIFE

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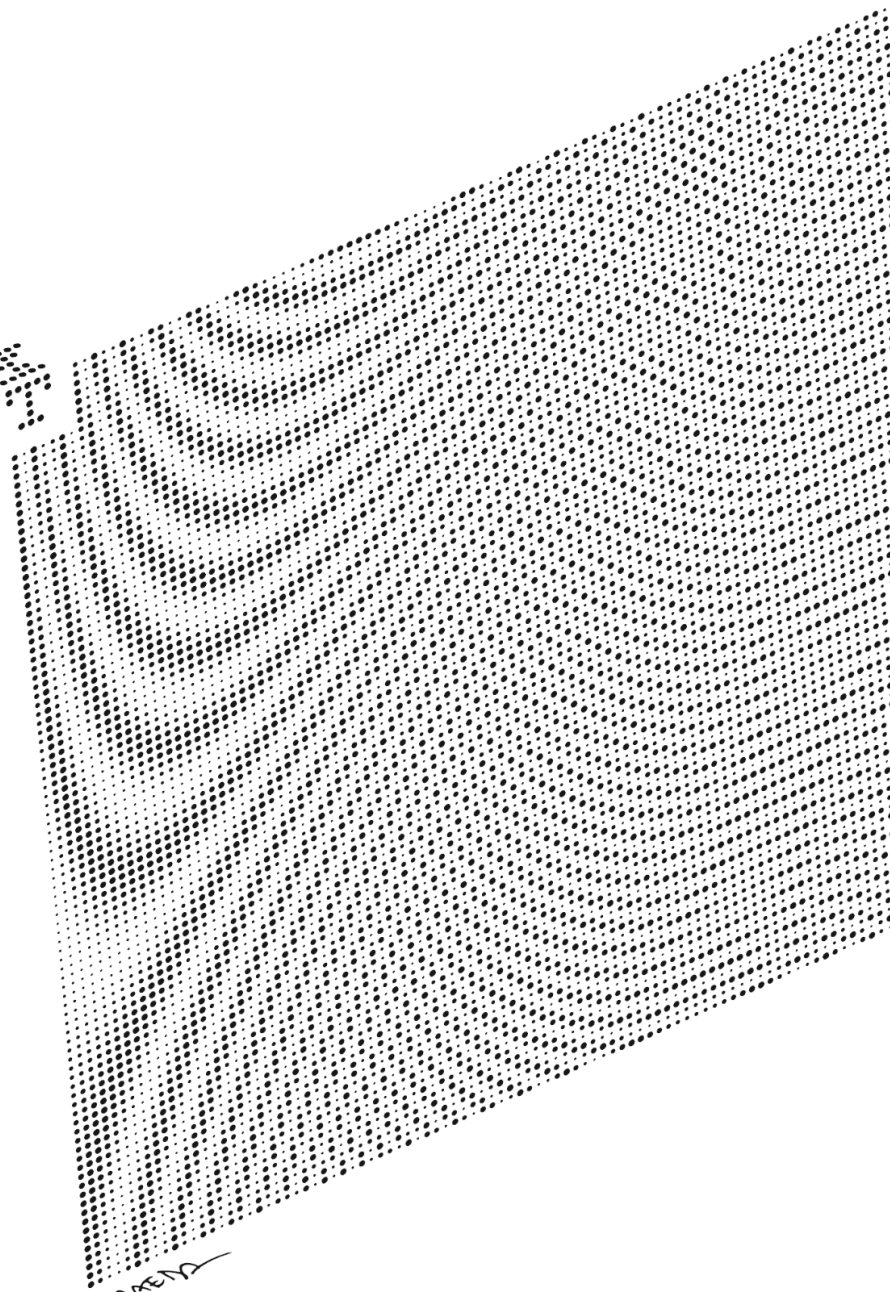
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MRE12

Technology has made our lives
more full, yet at the same time we've
become uncomfortably “full.”

I watched the process whereby my daughters gleefully got their first email accounts. It began as a tiny drop—emails sent among themselves. It grew to a slow drip as their friends joined the flow of communication. Today it is a waterfall of messages, e-cards, and hyperlinks that showers upon them daily.

I urge them to resist the temptation to check their email throughout the day. As adults, I tell them, they will have ample opportunity to swim in the ocean of information. “Stay away!” I warn, because even as an Olympic-class technologist, I find myself barely keeping afloat. I know that I’m not alone in this feeling of constantly drowning—many of us regularly engage (or don’t) in hundreds of email conversations a day. But I feel somewhat responsible.

My early computer art experiments led to the dynamic graphics common on websites today. You know what I’m talking about—all that stuff flying around on the computer screen while you’re trying to concentrate—that’s me. I am partially to blame for the unrelenting stream of “eye candy” littering the information landscape. I am sorry, and for a long while I have wished to do something about it.

Achieving simplicity in the digital age became a personal mission, and a focus of my research at MIT. There, I straddle the fields of design, technology, and business as both educator and practitioner. Early in my ruminations I had the simple observation that the letters “M,” “I,” and “T”—the letters by which my university is known—occur in natural sequence in the word SIMPLICITY. In fact, the same can be said of the word COMPLEXITY. Given that the “T” in M-I-T stands for “technology”—which is the very source of much of our feeling overwhelmed today—I felt doubly responsible that someone at MIT should take a lead in correcting the situation.

In 2004, I started the MIT SIMPLICITY Consortium at the Media Lab, comprised of roughly ten corporate partners that include AARP, Lego, Toshiba, and Time. Our mission is to define the business value of simplicity in communication, healthcare, and play. Together we design and create prototype systems and technologies that point to directions where simplicity-driven products can lead to market success. By the publication date of this book, a novel networked digital photo playback product co-developed with Samsung will serve as an important commercial data point to test the validity of the Consortium’s stance on simplicity.

When the blogosphere began to emerge, I responded and created a blog about my evolving thoughts on simplicity. I set out to find a set of “laws” of simplicity and targeted sixteen principles as my goal. Like most blogs, it has been a place where I have shared unedited thoughts that represent my personal opinions on a topic about which I am passionate. And although the theme of the blog began just along the lines of design, tech-

nology, and business I discovered that the readership resonated with the topic that underlies it all: my struggle to understand the meaning of life as a humanist technologist.

Through my ongoing journey I've discovered how complex a topic simplicity really is, and I don't pretend to have solved the puzzle. Having recently spoken to an 85-year old MIT linguistics professor who has been working on the same problem his entire life, I am inspired to grapple with this puzzle for many more years. My blog led me to the fact that there aren't sixteen laws, but rather the ten published in this volume. Like all man-made "laws" they do not exist in the absolute sense—to break them is no sin. However you may find them useful in your own search for simplicity (and sanity) in design, technology, business, and life.

SIMPLICITY AND THE MARKETPLACE

The marketplace abounds with promises of simplicity. Citibank has a "simplicity" credit card, Ford has "keep it simple pricing," and Lexmark vows to "uncomplicate" the consumer experience. Widespread calls for simplicity formed a trend that was inevitable, given the structure of the technology business around selling the same thing "new and improved" where often "improved" simply means *more*. Imagine a world in which software companies simplified their programs every year by shipping with 10% fewer features at 10% higher cost due to the expense of simplification. For the consumer to get less and pay more seems to contradict sound economic principles. Offer to share a cookie with a child and which half will the child want?

Yet in spite of the logic of demand, “simplicity sells” as espoused by *New York Times* columnist David Pogue in a presentation at the 2006 annual TED Conference in Monterey. The undeniable commercial success of the Apple iPod—a device that does less but costs more than other digital music players—is a key supporting example of this trend. Another example is the deceptively spare interface of the powerful Google search engine, which is so popular that “googling” has become shorthand for “searching the Web.” People not only buy, but more importantly love, designs that can make their lives simpler. For the foreseeable future, complicated technologies will continue to invade our homes and workplaces, thus simplicity is bound to be a growth industry.

Simplicity is a quality that not only evokes passionate loyalty for a product design, but also has become a key strategic tool for businesses to confront their own intrinsic complexities. Dutch conglomerate Philips leads in this area with its utter devotion to realizing “sense and simplicity.” In 2002 I was invited by Board of Management Member Andrea Ragnetti to join Philips’ “Simplicity Advisory Board (SAB).” I initially thought that “sense and simplicity” was merely a branding effort, but when I met in Amsterdam with Ragnetti and his CEO Gerard Kleisterlee at the first meeting of the SAB I saw the greater ambition. Philips plan to reorganize not only all of their product lines, but also their entire set of business practices around simplicity. When I tell this story to industry leaders the consistent feedback I get is that Philips is not alone in the quest to reduce the complexities of doing business. The hunt is on for simpler, more efficient ways to move the economy forward.

WHOM IS THIS BOOK FOR?

As an artist, I'd like to say that I wrote this book for myself in the spirit of climbing a mountain "because it's there." But the reality is that I wrote it in response to the many voices of encouragement—either by email or in person—from people that wish to better understand *simplicity*. I've heard from biochemists, production engineers, digital artists, homemakers, technology entrepreneurs, road construction administrators, fiction writers, realtors, and office workers, and the interest just seems to keep on growing. With support there is always discouragement: some worry about the negative connotations of simplicity where it can lead to a simplistic and "dumbed-down" world. You will see in the latter part of this book that I position complexity and simplicity as having importance relative to each other as necessary rivals. Thus I realize that although the idea of ridding the earth of complexity might seem the shortest path to universal simplicity, it may not be what we truly desire.

I originally conceived this book as a sort of Simplicity 101, to give readers an understanding of the foundation of simplicity as it relates to design, technology, business, and life. But now I see that a foundation can wait until I'm 85 like my professor friend, and for now a framework will suffice which you now hold in your hands. Also, in the course of completing my MBA, I found that the majority of books on innovation and business are published by a single authority. I have been mellowed by many sobering events in my otherwise extremely fortunate life, so I was looking for something that was more heartfelt than a book specifically aimed at the technology or business market.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ellen Faran and Robert Prior of the MIT Press for shepherding the process of publishing this book at a speed unlike any other. The appropriateness of simplicity as a concept coming from MIT made immediate sense to both of them from the beginning. Given the support I've experienced from the MIT Press, I know that their enthusiasm was infectious in a way that made a normally complex task get executed more simply. Of course I would not wish it any other way ;-).

The inspirations for this book are many, and most of them are evident throughout the discussion of the Laws. I don't take inspiration lightly—it sits squarely in the middle of my BRAIN, as presented in the fourth Law of LEARN. I continue to look to inspiration from my brilliant graduate students, energetic undergraduates, incredible staff, and unparalleled colleagues at MIT, especially at the Media Lab.

My texts were tuned and simplified by the masterful literary mind of Jessie Scanlon. I've known Jessie since her *Wired Magazine* days and always look to her for the latest information on breaking trends in design. Jessie was my writing Master in this process, and I appreciate her time and patience.

A final pass of meticulous edits was executed by my students Burak Arikan, Annie Ding, Brent Fitzgerald, Amber Frid-Jimenez, Kelly Norton, and Danny Shen. Thank you guys!

Finally, I thank my wife Kris and our daughters for keeping my life both wonderfully complex, yet infinitely simple.