The Laws of Simplicity by John Maeda

Book Summary

People not only buy, but more importantly love, designs that can make their lives simpler. Maeda offers ten laws for balancing simplicity and complexity in business, technology, and design, as he explores the question of how we can redefine the notion of "improved" so that it doesn't always mean something more, something added on.

Law 1

The simplest way to achieve simplicity is through thoughtful reduction. This law addresses question of "how simple?" through the SHE technique (Shrink, Embody, Hide):

- **Shrink:** Simplicity is about the unexpected pleasure derived from what is likely to be insignificant and would otherwise go unnoticed. Pity gives way to respect when much more value is delivered than originally expected.

- **Hide:** Such evolutions are driven by a market that demands innovation and is willing to pay for clever ways to HIDE complexity.

- **Embody:** Exactly where to invest-real or believed quality-to get maximum return is a question with no single definitive answer. The power of suggestion is powerful. The upside of materialism is that the way something we own feels can change how we feel. Thus the perception needs to be made visible somehow. It might be necessary to advertise qualities that cannot be conveyed implicitly, especially when the message of embodiment simply tells the truth.

Law 2

Organisation makes a system of many appear fewer. This law addresses the challenging question of "What goes with what?" through the SLIP technique (Sort, Label, Integrate, Prioritise):

- **Sort:** Write down on small post-it notes each datum to be SLIPped. Move them around on a flat surface to find the natural groupings.

- **Label:** Each group deserves a relevant name.

- **Integrate:** Whenever possible, integrate groups that appear significantly like each other.
- **Prioritise:** Well, prioritise.

Law 3

Savings in time feel like simplicity. This law addresses the question of saving time and balancing the trade-off between the quantitatively fast versus the qualitatively fast:

- In the end it's about choosing how we spend the time we're given in life. Thus, choosing when to care less versus when to care more lies at the heart of living an efficient but fulfilling daily life.
- Telling people how much time they have left to wait is a humane practice that is becoming more popular (think of progress bars). Knowledge is comfort, and comfort lies at the heart of simplicity.
- When speeding-up a process is not an option, giving extra care to a customer makes the experience of waiting more tolerable.

Law 4

Knowledge makes everything simpler. This law addresses the problem with taking time to learn a task that can make you feel as if you are wasting time (a violation of the third Law):

- Observing what fails to make sense to the non-expert, and then following that trail successively to the very end of the knowledge chain is the critical path to success. Gathering these truths is worthwhile and repetition just works (repeat after me).
- A metaphor used as a learning shortcut for a complex design is most effective when its execution is both relevant and delightfully unexpected (Relate-Translate-Surprise)

Law 5

Simplicity and complexity need each other. This law addresses the (simple) need for complexity:

- Without the counterpoint of complexity, we could not recognize simplicity when we see it. Variety tends to keep our attention when the rhythm of difference captivates.

Law 6

What lies in the periphery of simplicity is definitely not peripheral. This law addresses the trade-off between being found versus lost in simplicity:

- When there is less, we appreciate everything much more (more white space means that less information is presented). Small things in the environment matter more when you are forced to pay attention to them.
- Once you have properly situated yourself, you're completely free to get lost in the rhythm.

Law 7

More emotions are better than less. This law addresses the human need to better express emotion and to capture the nuances of communication that we take for granted in speech:

- The Tamagocchi craze of the late 1990s also showed that anyone could fall in love with a small electronic keychain unit that yearned for human attention.
- Aichaku (ahy-chaw-koo) is the Japanese term for the sense of attachment one can feel for an artefact. While great art makes you wonder, great design makes things clear.

Law 8

In simplicity we trust. This law addresses the fact that we can only truly relax when we trust that we're in the finest hands and are treated with the best intentions:

- Embrace the undo button on your laptop as a rational partner in maintaining the many complex relationships with the objects in your environment. But put the UNDO button away when dealing with real people if possible. Privacy is sacrificed for extra convenience when following the Master's lead.

Law 9

Some things can never be made simple. This law addresses the point that some things are simply complex and that's that:

- Deeming something as complex or simple requires a frame of reference (its respective definition depends upon the other's existence).

Law 10

Simplicity is about subtracting the obvious, and adding the meaningful. This law addresses the key point of the book:

- An experience is made simpler by keeping the result local, and moving the actual work to a far AWAY location.

- Openness simplifies complexity: With an open system, the power of the many can outweigh the power of the few.

- Use less, gain more: Urgency and the creative spirit go hand in hand, and innovation as a positive return is a desirable benefit.