

SUCCEED OVER DIFFICULT PROBLEMS BY EMBRACING COMPLEXITY-THINKING

MICRO-GUIDE TO THRIVING IN EVERYDAY COMPLEXITY BY BREAKING FREE FROM ORDERED AND LINEAR APPROACHES



LUCA MINUDEL

Succeed over difficult problems by embracing Complexity-Thinking

Micro-guide to thriving in everyday complexity by breaking free from ordered and linear approaches

Luca Minudel

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Foreword by Sunil Mundra

**Author of the bestseller Enterprise Agility: Being Agile in a Changing World
Change and Transformation Leader, CXO Advisor at Thoughtworks**

This book is a treatise on the subject of complexity. The book is highly relevant in today's times where complexity is increasing at an exponential rate within enterprises as well as in the external environment. This makes it imperative for both leaders and practitioners to appreciate the need to move away from applying linear approaches to dealing with complexity, and this book provides valuable insights on navigating complexity in the most effective ways.

Foreword by Marcin Floryan

Director of Product and Engineering, Spotify
Stockholm, December 2023

I feel fortunate that my grandfather introduced me to James Gleick's now-classic book "Chaos: Making a New Science" in the early 2000s. It opened my mind to the reality that the world around us is not, as we always pretended, ordered and linear. This realisation profoundly influenced my approach to software development and leadership, especially after connecting this new science with my own work through the 2002 publication "Agile Software Development with Scrum".

In the decades that followed, I learned to navigate the intricacies of software development and leadership, fully appreciating the challenges posed by complex adaptive systems. I have witnessed both the failure of projects and organisations that clung to familiar, mechanistic and reductionist thinking and the success of those who embraced a new way of thinking, one that recognizes ambiguity, uncertainty, and interconnectedness.

In 2016 at Spotify, together with Anders Ivarsson, we ran a series of workshops called "Complexity for leaders and managers" to equip our colleagues with the same understanding and tools that we grew accustomed to in our own work. By shifting their approach to recognize the complex adaptive systems at play, we saw remarkable transformations. Projects that once seemed mired in uncertainty found new incremental and iterative pathways to success. This wasn't just theory at work; it was practical, impactful change.

Now you can follow a similar path and learn how to "Succeed over difficult problems by embracing Complexity-Thinking". The book in front of you is more than a guide; it's an invitation to see the world differently. Complexity is not just an occasional obstacle; it's a constant presence in our modern problems. But recognizing this is only half the story. The real magic happens when we equip ourselves with the right skills and tools to navigate this complexity.

As you explore this micro guide, I encourage you to embrace the journey with optimism and curiosity. Whether you're in software development, product management, or simply looking to enhance your problem-solving skills, there is immense value in understanding and applying complexity thinking. This book is a stepping stone in a never-ending journey, one that I am still traversing with enthusiasm and an ever-deepening understanding.

Welcome to a world where complexity isn't just a challenge to overcome, but an opportunity to grow and excel.

Foreword by Paolo Aversa

Paolo Aversa, OSI
Professor of Strategy
King's College London

The evolution of technologies, the ever-accelerating pace of life, and the expectations of an increasingly connected, turbulent, and virtual world confront us with intricate, pervasive, and exponential problems that require a different approach from the traditional, typically ordered and linear one. The Agile methodology, born in the early 2000s, introduced principles and practices that have proven effective in solving complex problems. However, the widespread adoption of Agile has gradually diluted its effectiveness, perpetuating the old way of working.

This is where Complexity-thinking comes into play. Based on the Complexity Science, complexity thinking represents a new philosophy of approaching life and work that allows us to thrive in a chaotic and non-linear environment. This book offers us a valuable insight into understanding complex problems and the differences with non-complex problems. It is a practical aid in adopting a mentality that embraces unpredictability, emergence, and interconnectedness.

There are several reasons that make this book an interesting and worthwhile read. Firstly, the discussion of complexity thinking in this text provides a solid theoretical foundation that explains and interprets the complex problems we face on a daily basis. By learning to apply this perspective, it will be possible to broaden the understanding of complex situations and develop a set of tools to successfully tackle them.

Secondly, the book helps develop a mentality that promotes collaboration, adaptability, and recognition of the role of human factors in problem-solving. In an increasingly interconnected world, these skills are essential for working effectively and achieving meaningful results.

Lastly, complexity thinking can be applied in various fields, from software development to geopolitics, and even emergency management. This book presents concrete examples of how complexity thinking can be successfully employed in these challenges, opening up new possibilities and perspectives.

Therefore, for those ready to abandon old ways of operating and embrace a new vision that allows them to thrive in everyday complexity, this book will serve as a solid springboard into complexity-thinking.

Happy reading!

Foreword by Marco Fainello

Marco Fainello, Mechanical Engineer

Winner with Ferrari of 8 Formula 1 Constructors' World Championships and 6 Drivers' World Championships and 4 Endurance WEC world titles as Head of Performance Development.

Chief Technical Officer at Danisi Engineering and Executive Director at Addfor S.p.A.

Professor of Race Track Engineering: Management, Preparation and Strategy, at the Modena and Reggio Emilia University – MUNER.

I have spent a large part of my professional career solving complex problems, learning a great deal during my experience in the world of racing and the extended period spent with the Ferrari Formula 1 Team, during which I got to know Luca.

I have often noticed the ineffectiveness of classic planning and management methods in dealing with situations that are not easily schematised and have many unknowns, to the point of having tried to invent alternative methods to those I saw being applied.

The most common limit I have observed is the tendency to reduce everything to schemas derived from past experience, even at the cost of distorting reality to fit our vision and theories. I recall reading years ago about someone who was surprised at hammering a corner of the Great Pyramid of Cheops because, by a few centimetres, the measurements did not satisfy his esoteric theory; well, this is what we do every day, creating many of the problems we then have to face.

Applying known schemes is undoubtedly a very useful mechanism, elaborated over millennia of biological and social evolution, allowing us to make hundreds of decisions every day without the need to pause and analyse each one individually. However, when problems are complex and force us to confront profound and multiple changes, trying to bend reality to our experience can be a significant limitation. In attempting to analyse situations, we are blocked by the fear of not having control, we superficially focus on symptoms instead of going to the root of the problems, and consequently, in teamwork, we aim to force consensus to create a false sense of security instead of facing an open and real confrontation.

Every day, in many fields of our activities, we are faced with increasing complexity of the situations we have to face, brought about by:

- the possibility of accessing an enormous amount of data and processing it in a rapid and complex way;
- the globalisation of markets and therefore of competition;
- the interaction between diverse cultures.

The reaction that we often notice in all sectors and levels is a growing rigidity of processes and the fragmentation of global objectives into micro-goals: in the illusion of simplifying and regaining control, we actually end up building ineffective methods in the attempt of evading responsibility for any problems or failures. This attitude leads to phase-gated, simplified, and rigid approaches, neglecting the potential for teamwork and sharing just when they are needed the most.

Instead, it would be more beneficial for us to focus on understanding our interaction with problems and people, recognizing complex situations, refining the sensitivity needed to understand if some seemingly obvious or harmless choices can result in unforeseen and negatively amplified consequences.

And once a complex problem is recognized, we must:

- be able to work and share as a team;
- delay decisions and recognize the right moment to make them;
- be willing to make choices even with effects that are not fully knowable in advance;
- manage the unexpected by choosing where we can afford to be wrong;
- prepare alternative plans;
- ensure that we have the necessary resources to face unexpected events and failures;
- accept mistakes.

The difference between a serious approach to complex problems and a reckless attitude that ignores consequences may sometimes seem subtle but is, in fact, substantial, and is based on well-defined principles rather than improvisation.

This guide addresses all of this: it provides concepts and examples to understand how to recognise situations that cannot be analysed and solved with linear processes and describes some effective alternative principles and tools to tackle them.

It does so in a simple yet not superficial manner, forcing us to question our way of seeing reality and interacting with it, enabling us to be aware of our limits and leverage our potential to handle the unexpected without being paralysed.

With complexity now permeating every aspect of our lives, whatever we do, Luca provides us with a key to open windows from which we can have a new perspective and open doors that lead to new paths to embark upon.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to those friends, colleagues, and complexity practitioners who have contributed their suggestions to this micro-guide to Complexity-Thinking: Corrado De Sanctis, Carlo Beschi, Simone Casciaroli, Stefano Muro, Maurizio Pedriale, Carlo Volpi, Christian Mastrodonato, and Remigio Rancan.

I would like to thank the many conference speakers and other participants at conferences I attended, whose insights and conversations have also contributed to this micro-guide.

And I would like to thank the distinguished practitioners who have agreed to be interviewed for this micro-guide: Sunil Mundra, Daniel Mezick, Sonja Blignaut, Chris Matts, John Coleman, Valerie McLean, Tiani Jones, and Carol Mase.

Introduction

We can accurately predict the position of a planet in the sky 400 years from now. Yet we cannot predict if and when a certain project will be completed. Why is that? And what can we do?

More and more often we find ourselves facing problems that are unprecedented, for which we lack essential information, and simultaneously we do not have enough time to process all the available information. We find ourselves facing problems that, despite the best experts in the field, and all the time necessary for the analysis, we begin to understand only after we have started the work, or retrospectively after completing it. We find ourselves facing problems in which those involved have conflicting agendas. We find ourselves facing problems that are constantly evolving, or never fully solved, but require constant attention and continuous interventions. We find ourselves surrounded by elusive problems that escape our efforts.

The frequency with which we encounter this class of problems, which we will later call complex problems, is growing to the point where they are no longer an exception, and we can no longer effectively address them simply by advancing our current “ordered and linear” way of working and thinking.

Instead, we need a new awareness and new ways of thinking, accompanied by practices and tools suitable to face the unstoppable acceleration that change is undergoing and the exponential innovation that surrounds us. To find them, we will look at the science of complexity, a relatively new field that is revolutionising our understanding of the world around us.

<< There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’ >> - David Foster Wallace

Where all these complex problems originate from

In recent years, I've found myself hearing from occasional conversations someone commenting on the *complexity* of our times, mentioning the *butterfly effect*, or citing the *chaos theory*. All terms that seem to have become part of the popular narrative, in novels, movies, newspaper articles, and everyday speech.

But every era has had a class of problems that have eluded the conventional approaches and solutions of its time. Even when counting on the best minds available and virtually infinite time and resources.

A reference I have encountered to this particular class of problems is that of the legend of the **Gordian Knot**, impossible to untie. It dates back to 333 BC and regained popularity at the end of the eighteenth century.

Another reference I have come across is that of **Wicked Problems**, defined in the late 1960s as problems that are difficult or impossible to solve because they can only be understood in an incomplete, contradictory manner, and they are continuously changing.

It is since the late 1980s that the acronym **VUCA** has been around and used to describe the conditions that give rise to challenging and unpredictable problems.

To arrive at **Complexity**, studied as an interdisciplinary science, and increasingly popular since the 2000s. Complexity is the central axis around which the themes of these pages revolve, along with Complexity-thinking and Human Complexity, which I will introduce later.

If complex problems have always existed, why are we hearing so much about them only now?

What has changed from 333 BC to the present day is the spread of complex problems: how many people have to deal with them, and how often.

For example, in the 1980s, typically only those working on multilateral trade agreements, joint peacekeeping missions, or in intergovernmental organisations such as the World Bank or the United Nations frequently found themselves dealing with very complex problems.

Around 2000, I experienced first-hand the rapid and unprecedented technological revolution driven by the Internet, the Web, and Web development technologies. Everyone who worked in the Tech sector and software development, like me at the time, found themselves at the centre of a revolution fuelled by the exponential growth of Web and later Mobile commercial applications. This revolution led us to face complex problems almost daily.

This complexity, initially experienced by the Tech sector, gradually permeated companies in other sectors over the following two decades.

As the spread of complex problems has grown, so too has the need for awareness, understanding, and knowledge of how to tackle complexity, and how to benefit from complexity.

How widespread and acknowledged are complex problems today

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Management gets invented

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Fordism and Taylorism become dominant

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Complex problems reach a critical point

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The specific nature of complex problems remains ignored

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Fordism and Taylorism continue to fall short. Why?

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Complex problems pervade all sectors

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Today's approach remains unfit for complex problems

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A much better alternative to the status quo emerges

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Despite everything, the status quo still prevails

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How to find out which problems are really complex

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What is Complexity (Science)

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How to gradually approach practice and understanding

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How to embrace Complexity-thinking

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Some elements of Complexity-thinking

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Depth

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Examples

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Which branch of Complexity Sciences to follow

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Common misunderstandings about complexity

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Different aspects of Systems-thinking are relevant for different types of problems

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Systems-thinking together with Complexity-thinking

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How we fool ourselves back into the illusion of certainty, control, predictability

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Connections between concepts related to complexity

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Learning and dealing with Human Complexity in a social way

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What to do next?

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What to do next? Ideas for Leaders

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Principles

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Examples

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What to do next? Ideas for those funding and planning the work

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What to do next? For the teams and their leaders

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One last piece of advice on avoiding trivialisations

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Insights from distinguished practitioners

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Carol Mase, social anthropologist and author

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Tiani Jones, Socio-technologist and Keynote speaker

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Valerie McLean, creator of the McLean Loop

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John Coleman, creator of Kanplexity

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Chris Matts, creator of Real Options e co-author of Commitment

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Sonja Blignaut, creator of Waysfinder and prolific author and speaker

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Daniel Mezick, author of Inviting Leadership, The OpenSpace Agility Handbook, etc.

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Sunil Mundra, Author of Enterprise Agility

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The author

Luca Minudel He has been working in professional software and digital products development for over 20 years, mostly with Agile, Lean, and Complexity.

He has a formal education in Computer Science and a background in software development.

He contributed to the adoption of Lean and Agile practices in the Scuderia Ferrari F1 racing team.

For ThoughtWorks, he has delivered training, coaching, assessments and organisational transformation to leading organizations in Europe and the United States.

He is an Agility and Lean advisor, mentor, coach, and Complexity-thinking practitioner. An organisational gardener, organisation's culture curator, collaboration orchestrator, and delivery facilitator. Among his clients are companies such as Lloyds Banking Group, Japan Tobacco International, BP energy company, The AA, HSBC, LexisNexis, and many others.

Luca is the founder and CEO of SmHarter.com, a London-based company that helps organizations transform the way they work into their competitive advantage.



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Mastodon: <https://mstdn.social/@lukadotnet/>

Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/lucaminudel.bsky.social/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/lukadotnet>

Appendix 1 - Book versions history

Below are the notes for the current version and the history of the previous versions. Check your Leanpub account for the latest available version of this book. For comments, suggestions, and errata, contact the author.

Ver. 1.5 (current), 7 November 2024

First revision of the complete edition. It contains minor changes to improve the clarity of titles and their content. Furthermore in the chapter 'How widespread and acknowledged are complex problems today' and subchapter 'Complex problems pervade all sectors' more examples have been added. In the chapter 'How to find out which problems are really complex' a list of three conditions that can give rise to a complex dynamic has been added. In the chapter 'How to embrace Complexity-thinking' and subchapter 'Some elements of Complexity-thinking' some of the elements have been expandend and others added; in the subchapter 'Examples' some of the examples have been expanded. In the chapters 'How to find out which problems are really complex' and 'Which branch of Complexity Sciences to follow' a few more cases of people spontaneously tackling complexity with success have been added. In the chapter 'Common misunderstandings about complexity' the subchapter now titled 'How we fool ourselves back into the illusion of certainty and control' has been fully rewritten. Finally in the chapter 'What to do next?' the list of sources to follow has been reorganised and rewritten with some additions.

Ver. 1.0, 10 February 2024

First complete edition of the book.

Ver. 0.1, 11 January 2024

First preview of the completed book before the publication. This book was originally written in Italian, incrementally, starting from the 23rd of August 2023. Various additions and gradual refinements have followed, guided by the feedback of readers cited in the acknowledgements, by subsequent revisions by the author, and from conversations, interviews, presentations, and ideas that emerged during the iterative review process. The first incremental publication on Leanpub of the chapters in Italian occurred on September 24, 2023. The English translation of this book started on the 3rd of November 2023 and the bulk of it was finished on the 13th of November followed by minor refinements until the 4th of December.