

Systems Ultra: Making sense of technology in a complex world -

Georgina Voss

(Dr Bea Wohl)

Information & Culture, Volume 61, Number 1, 2026, pp. 92-93 (Review)

Over the last several decades, there have been countless books that claim to be “guides” of one sort or another to the technological future. Systems Ultra: Making Sense of Technology in a Complex World enters this arena with a unique voice. Delving into historical anecdotes (the emergence of the word “system,” the development of airplane navigation systems and management, and even the development of digital architecture software), Georgina Voss draws on her experience as an artist, designer, consultant, and researcher. She presents both a history and a vivid guided tour through the many technical systems that shape everyday contemporary life.

Systems Ultra peels back the surface to take a deep dive into understanding systems. The book looks at both specific systems and the underlying abstract concept of systems as such. Voss takes the reader on an odyssey of the modern world, from the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas to the air space of Belgium. The book raises the question of how to make sense of a world shaped by complex systems, where a single line of code changes the emissions made by a Volkswagen car and ubiquitous digital payment systems have been shaped by the online porn industry.

The book breaks systems down into five themes: scale, legacy, matter, deviance, and breakages. Chapter 1, “Systems,” begins at CES and uses the event to consider what is and isn’t included in the conversation about technology while drawing out a history of the term “system.” Chapter 2, “Scale,” looks at how systems scale through the lens of global shipping, spending time at the new automated docks in Rotterdam, Europe’s largest port. Chapter 3, “Legacy,” gives a history of air traffic control systems, examining how such systems are shaped, limited, and ultimately defined by their history, even when this history is hidden or forgotten. Chapter 4, “Matter,” takes the reader to a 3D manufacturing facility in San Francisco, examining the materiality of modern systems to show how, specifically, modern design software is still ultimately built around the constraints of the physical world. Chapter 5, “Deviance,” brings us back to Las Vegas, where the adult entertainment industry has shaped widely used online payment systems. Finally, chapter 6, “Breakages,” shows how the 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal came down to a few lines of code in the vehicle software, prompting Voss to examine what happens when systems break down. The book ends with an afterword reminding us that while systems often seem to exist everywhere all at once, they ultimately need to be examined and understood on far more granular and localized scales when we seek to understand the modern digital world.

Voss employs a somewhat scattered approach in Systems Ultra, with little to link the many locations, industries, and global systems that the book employs to build its narrative. Each chapter sits proudly alone, describing one industry, usually based on a single location, although each is at least tentatively linked to a project the author is engaged in (an art project, a design project, research, consultancy, etc.). These

vignettes are fascinating and engaging; the author's first-person voice reminds the reader that these systems, from global shipping to air traffic control and even sex work payment, are not abstract artifices to be considered from a distant office but rather material realities experienced in visceral, local ways. The overarching message of the book is to remember the human. In this reconciliation with humanity, the value of the work comes through. While many texts on technology seem to assume a frictionless universal experience, Systems Ultra highlights how systems break down when confronted with exceptions. "If you transgress," Voss writes, "the system shows itself for what it is" (122).

Systems Ultra is a dispatch from the front lines of the future and is refreshing in its uniqueness. Rather than telling the reader how to navigate these systems, Voss documents her own experiences doing so. However, a sense of overall narrative is lost in the book's parade of hyperspecific examples. Voss's work is exceptionally readable, though at times it leaves the reader wanting more intellectual depth. Nonetheless, this is an ideal text to use as an entry into understanding design or systems thinking. Each chapter provides an excellent starting point for a discussion or investigation, sitting well on a syllabus either individually or as a whole text. Each chapter has something for a range of readers or students to connect with and engage in, allowing them to find their own way into the topic.

Systems Ultra sets out to make sense of technology in a complex world. In doing so, it begins a valuable conversation, nudging the reader to think more deeply. It takes its reader on a journey around the world and across industries, drawing back the curtain on many of the systems that touch each of our lives every day. As the book itself says, "The system has shown itself to you now, and what was previously hidden cannot be unseen" (148).

Verso - 2024

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG

US: 388 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 11217

[Versobooks.com](https://www.versobooks.com)

Hard Cover - ISBN-13: 978-1-83976-055-6 \$19.96