

THE UNIVERSE AND ITS OBSERVERS

IDE Children's Edition

Twenty-four approachable investigations for readers aged 9 to 12

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Juan Segurola

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How to read this volume

Each chapter begins with something you can picture, observe or try. The aim is to ask a clear question, look for a check and remember where the answer stops.

You do not need advanced mathematics. New scientific words appear only when they help name an idea accurately.

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IDE-001 | Where does a bouncing ball's energy go?

Story source: IDE-001 · Energy: A Conserved Account, Not a Substance · v0.8

Start here. A bouncing ball seems to lose energy because every bounce is lower. The energy has not vanished: some reaches the floor and air as tiny motions, warmth and sound.

Look for evidence. A microphone can register the sound, and a thermometer can sometimes detect warming. Counting the ball alone misses transfers that cross its boundary.

Try it. Draw one loop around the ball and another around the ball plus floor. List what crosses each loop during a bounce.

Remember the limit. Energy conservation is an account for a chosen system. It does not say that all stored energy remains equally useful.

IDE-002 | How much surprise is in a message?

Story source: IDE-002 · Information: Quantifying Alternatives and Dependence · v0.6

Start here. A message is informative when it helps a receiver choose among possibilities. On average, learning the result of a fair six-sided die removes more uncertainty than learning one fair coin toss.

Look for evidence. The number of possible messages and their chances determine the information measure. The words may be true, false, kind or rude without changing that particular calculation.

Try it. Make two secret-code games, one with two symbols and one with eight. Count how many yes-or-no questions are needed to identify a symbol.

Remember the limit. Information measured this way is not a liquid inside an object, and it does not by itself measure meaning or truth.

IDE-003 | Why can the same result happen in many ways?

Story source: IDE-003 · Entropy: Counting, Constraint and Irreversibility · v0.8

Start here. Four coins can show two heads and two tails in more arrangements than four heads. Entropy uses this kind of counting, with carefully chosen rules, to compare possible microscopic arrangements.

Look for evidence. A gas spread through a box has vastly more compatible arrangements than the same gas crowded into one corner. Large systems therefore tend to be found in the more numerous conditions.

Try it. List every result for three coin tosses. Group the list by number of heads and compare the sizes of the groups.

Remember the limit. Entropy is not a label for anything that looks untidy. The states, constraints and scale of description must be stated.

IDE-004 | Can two changes share a hidden cause?

Story source: IDE-004 · Causality: Intervention, Counterfactuals and Physical Influence · v0.7

Start here. Umbrellas and wet pavements often appear together, but umbrellas do not make rain. Two things can change together because a third event affects both.

Look for evidence. A causal test asks what would happen if one factor were changed while the relevant alternatives were controlled. Sometimes experiments can do this; sometimes careful comparisons are needed.

Try it. Invent a story in which two classroom measurements rise together. Add a hidden cause, then design a fair way to test it.

Remember the limit. Being earlier, nearby or useful for prediction is not enough to prove that one event caused another.

IDE-005 | What stays the same after a turn?

Story source: IDE-005 · Symmetry: Transformations, Invariants and Broken States · v0.5

Start here. A shape has a symmetry when a particular move leaves it looking unchanged. A square returns to the same appearance after some turns, while a rectangle allows fewer.

Look for evidence. Scientists use the same idea beyond shapes: first name the transformation, then ask which feature remains unchanged. This can reveal rules that many situations share.

Try it. Trace a square, a rectangle and an uneven shape. Rotate each tracing and record the angles that restore its original appearance.

Remember the limit. Symmetry means invariance under a stated transformation. Beauty, balance or resemblance alone does not define it.

IDE-006 | Why does a weather map ignore molecules?

Story source: IDE-006 · Scale: Which Details Matter at Which Level? · v0.7

Start here. A weather map can predict a storm without following every air molecule. It keeps temperature, pressure and wind because those are useful at the map's scale.

Look for evidence. A mechanic repairing one paving stone needs details that disappear from an aerial view. Neither view is wrong; each answers a different question with a different resolution.

Try it. Describe your street for a pilot, a cyclist and someone fixing a drain. Circle which details each person needs.

Remember the limit. Leaving out detail is reliable only inside a stated range. A model that works at one scale need not work at every other scale.

IDE-007 | How can a crowd make a new pattern?

Story source: IDE-007 · Emergence: When Collective Patterns Become Explanatory · v0.8

Start here. One bird does not make a flock pattern, and one water molecule does not make a wave. A new pattern can appear when many parts interact.

Look for evidence. The pattern can be measured without tracking every part. It still depends on those parts and on the rules by which they affect one another.

Try it. Watch people enter a doorway or magnets arrange on a table. Describe something visible only when several participants are present.

Remember the limit. Emergence is not magic or creation from nothing. It names a stable collective pattern linked to an underlying system and scale.

IDE-008 | What can a chance number promise?

Story source: IDE-008 · Probability: A Calculus for Uncertain Alternatives · v0.5

Start here. A probability describes uncertain possibilities under stated conditions. A fair coin can be assigned one chance in two for heads, but one toss is still free to land either way.

Look for evidence. Long runs often show steadier proportions than short runs. That pattern lets us test the model without promising the result of the next single trial.

Try it. Toss a coin ten times, then combine your results with several classmates. Compare how far each proportion lies from one half.

Remember the limit. Probability is neither a cause nor a guarantee. Its meaning depends on the event, conditions, model and interpretation.

IDE-009 | How can every place have its own value?

Story source: IDE-009 · Field: Quantities Spread Over a Domain · v0.5

Start here. A field is like a map that gives a value at every place. A room can have a temperature field because different positions may have different temperatures.

Look for evidence. Several measurements let us draw the map and estimate values between them. Rules describe how nearby values change and how disturbances travel.

Try it. Measure or imagine temperatures near a window, door and radiator. Mark the values on a floor plan and predict an unmeasured point.

Remember the limit. Arrows alone do not make a field. Its domain, assigned values and rules must be identified.

IDE-010 | Why can a late correction make a wobble?

Story source: IDE-010 · Feedback: When Output Returns as Input · v0.6

Start here. Feedback happens when part of a result returns and changes what the system does next. A thermostat uses the measured temperature to alter heating.

Look for evidence. A correction can settle the temperature, but a late or oversized correction may push it too far and create repeated swings.

Try it. Imagine steering while watching an old video of the road. Explain how a longer delay would change your corrections.

Remember the limit. Calling feedback negative does not prove stability. Strength, delay and limits also determine the motion.

IDE-011 | How can small differences spread through generations?

Story source: IDE-011 · Selection: How Differential Persistence Accumulates Structure · v0.7

Start here. Selection can change a group when individuals differ, some differences affect success, and offspring inherit part of those differences.

Look for evidence. A helpful inherited feature may become more common over generations in one environment. The environment does not plan the feature in advance.

Try it. Make several paper shapes, copy the better-flying ones with small changes and repeat the test. Identify variation, success and copying.

Remember the limit. Selection is not a complete explanation until the varying feature, measure of success and route of inheritance are named.

IDE-012 | How does a map stand for a place?

Story source: IDE-012 · Representation: When One Thing Stands For Another · v0.9

Start here. A map represents a place because its marks follow agreed links to roads, distances and directions. The paper does not need to look exactly like the landscape.

Look for evidence. A subway map preserves connections but bends distances; a hiking map preserves terrain detail. Each succeeds at a different task by keeping different relations.

Try it. Draw one map for reaching school and another for showing where the route climbs. Explain what every symbol stands for.

Remember the limit. Resemblance is not enough. A representation needs a vehicle, a target, a mapping and a purpose.

IDE-013 | Can two good clocks disagree?

Story source: IDE-013 · Time: Clocks, Order and the Arrow · v0.10

Start here. Two accurate clocks can meet again with different readings if they followed different paths or spent time at different heights. Neither clock has to be broken.

Look for evidence. Clocks compared at different heights show tiny, predictable differences. Relativity says each clock records the elapsed time along its own route.

Try it. Place two imaginary clocks on different floors of a tower. List what must be controlled before their readings can be compared fairly.

Remember the limit. Local clock time and the everyday direction from past to future are related topics, but one result does not by itself explain the other.

IDE-014 | What makes a number a measurement?

Story source: IDE-014 · Measurement: From Indication to Value · v0.6

Start here. A displayed number becomes a measurement only after we say what was measured, how the instrument responds and how uncertain the result is.

Look for evidence. Two rulers may give slightly different table lengths because their markings, alignment and reading conditions differ. Repeating the procedure helps reveal variation.

Try it. Measure one object with two tools. Record the value, unit, smallest division and one reason the readings might disagree.

Remember the limit. A number without a quantity, unit, method and uncertainty is not a complete measurement.

IDE-015 | Why do we need different models?

Story source: IDE-015 · Model: An Inference Machine With a Domain · v0.8

Start here. A model is a useful stand-in that helps answer a particular question about the world.

Look for evidence. A globe helps with continents but not street directions, while a street map does the opposite. Each leaves things out on purpose.

Try it. Choose a playground, a toy town or the Solar System. Draw two different models and name the question each can answer.

Remember the limit. A successful model is not a perfect copy and does not have to work outside the task for which it was tested.

IDE-016 | Can two things be complex in different ways?

Story source: IDE-016 · Complexity: Several Questions Wearing One Word · v0.5

Start here. Complexity can mean different things, so a fair comparison must first say what is being counted.

Look for evidence. A long random scribble is hard to compress, while an ant colony may follow simple rules yet build an organized nest. These are different kinds of difficulty.

Try it. Compare a repeated pattern, a random pattern and a maze. Rank them by length, predictability and difficulty of solving.

Remember the limit. Having more pieces does not automatically make something more complex in every useful sense.

IDE-017 | Why are some uncertainties easier to reduce?

Story source: IDE-017 · Uncertainty: Naming the Sources Before Adding Them · v0.5

Start here. Uncertainty tells us what a result does not settle, and different causes need different ways of checking.

Look for evidence. Repeated throws show chance variation, but repeating a badly marked ruler does not repair its scale. Missing information and a poor model create other problems.

Try it. Measure the same object several times, then compare with another tool. Decide which differences repetition can reveal and which need calibration.

Remember the limit. More measurements can reduce some uncertainty, but they cannot automatically remove bias or make a wrong model adequate.

IDE-018 | What does a line between two dots mean?

Story source: IDE-018 · Connection: What an Edge Claims · v0.6

Start here. A network begins when we decide what the dots and lines stand for.

Look for evidence. The same pupils can form one network for friendship and another for shared bus routes. Direction, strength and timing can change the picture again.

Try it. Draw two networks for the same five objects using two meanings for a connection. Compare which dot looks most important.

Remember the limit. A line between dots proves only the relation that was defined and measured, not every kind of influence or cause.

IDE-019 | How can light make dots and stripes?

Story source: IDE-019 · What Is Light? Wave, Quantum and Observer · v0.9

Start here. Light is not forced to choose between being a tiny ball and being a water-like wave.

Look for evidence. A detector records separate dots, yet many dots can build bright and dark bands. Quantum rules predict both the single events and the collected pattern.

Try it. Place dots one at a time on a drawing until stripes emerge. Mark what belongs to each event and what appears only in the group.

Remember the limit. Wave and particle pictures are useful comparisons, but neither is a complete description of light.

IDE-020 | Is a quantum particle a tiny ball?

Story source: IDE-020 · What Is a Particle? · v0.12

Start here. A quantum particle is not simply a permanent bead following an unseen track.

Look for evidence. Detectors record separate events, and physicists group them by stable properties such as mass and spin. Interactions can even change how many particles are counted.

Try it. Imagine one detector click. List what was recorded, then list the extra guesses needed to tell a continuous hidden journey.

Remember the limit. The measured event must be kept separate from a story about a tiny object travelling between measurements.

IDE-021 | How can a field produce particles?

Story source: IDE-021 · What Is a Field? · v0.8

Start here. Quantum theory describes fields throughout space and time, and particle events can arise as their excitations.

Look for evidence. Every electron has the same defining properties because all electrons belong to one kind of field. Even a vacuum is a lowest-energy state rather than a box with every structure removed.

Try it. Compare identical notes from one instrument with electron events from one field. Write where the comparison helps and where it stops.

Remember the limit. A quantum field is not an ordinary fluid, and calling particles excitations does not make them little waves of material.

IDE-022 | Why is a proton heavier than its quarks?

Story source: IDE-022 · What Does Mass Mean? · v0.7

Start here. Mass belongs to a complete system and includes the energy held inside it.

Look for evidence. Most of a proton's mass comes from the energy of quarks and gluons interacting, not from simply adding the quarks' own masses.

Try it. Imagine a sealed box whose contents move faster. Decide what must remain inside before comparing the mass of the whole box.

Remember the limit. The Higgs mechanism matters for elementary particles, but it does not supply most of the mass of everyday matter.

IDE-023 | What turns a detector mark into evidence?

Story source: IDE-023 · What Is Observation? · v0.20

Start here. A detector mark becomes an observation only when we know how it was made, recorded and checked.

Look for evidence. A bright spot might come from the event being studied, background noise or a fault. Calibration and comparison help decide among them.

Try it. Invent a detector result and write three parts: the physical mark, the rule used to interpret it and a check another person could repeat.

Remember the limit. Seeing a mark is not enough to prove one explanation, and observation is not merely a private glance.

IDE-024 | When does a change carry a message?

Story source: IDE-024 · What Is a Signal? · v0.9

Start here. A signal is a distinguishable difference that could have been otherwise and that a receiver can pick out from noise.

Look for evidence. A lamp flashing once or twice can carry meaning if both people know the code. Random flickering may change the light without sending a message.

Try it. Create a two-message code, pass it through a noisy game and record when the receiver can still tell the messages apart.

Remember the limit. A signal does not need a known sender. Calling it a message or assigning it meaning requires additional evidence.

For the complete evidence record, consult the canonical IDE collection.