Serendipity: an interesting word

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Recently, I had a chance to work on a project about the serendipity concept using the Mindsponge information processing (Vuong, 2016; Vuong & Napier, 2015) and 3D creativity making frameworks (Napier & Vuong, 2013; Vuong et al., 2022; Vuong & Napier, 2014). The word “serendipity” was coined by Horace Walpole, an English novelist and the youngest son of British Prime Minister Robert Walpole, in a letter that he wrote to his distant relative, Horace Mann. The word originated from the term “Serendip” in the fairy-tale “The Travels and Adventures of Three Princes of Serendip,” which was about three princes who made discoveries of things which they were not looking for by accidents and sagacity on their adventures. The three princes in the story are sons of Jafer, king of Serendip. Serendip is the Old Persian name for Sri Lanka nowadays (Merton & Barber, 2004). Despite appearing centuries ago, the term “serendipity” has only become fashionable, and its concept has been systematically studied by scientists quite recently.

The definition of “serendipity” is various and usually refers to chance, fate, luck, destiny, karma, coincidence, providence, etc. (Sethna, 2017). According to Merton and Barber (2004), Horace Walpole – the word’s inventor – regarded serendipity as “[...] making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of [...].” The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “the fact of finding interesting or valuable things by chance.” Other researchers define serendipity as an accidental or unexpected discovery of something that turns out to be valuable (Cunha et al., 2010). For instance, Denrell et al. (2003) refer to serendipity as “not just luck, but effort and luck joined by alertness and flexibility,” while Andel (1994) think of it as “the art of making an unsought finding.”

I, personally, think that serendipity is an interesting word due to not only its intrinsic values but also discoveries and ideas related to serendipitous moments that I can observe around me (Nguyen et al., 2021; Vuong, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022).

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