

Supporting technologies — serendipity

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Chapter 9

Supporting technologies

9.1 Serendipity¹

The word serendipity is often used in the context of discovery and innovation; its original usage was very specific—discovering, quite by accident, something that you were *not* looking for (Remer 1965). The word is ascribed to Horace Walpole (1717–1797), who used it in 1754 in a letter² to Horace Mann, then living in Florence (Toynbee 1903; Remer 1965, Boyle 2000).

I must tell you of a critical discovery of mine *à propos*: in an old book of Venetian arms there are two coats of Capello, who from their *name* bear a *hat*, on one of them is added a flower-de-luce on a blue ball, which I am persuaded was given to the family by the Great Duke, in consideration of this alliance; the Medicis you know bore such a badge at the top of their own arms; this discovery I made by a talisman, which Mr Chute calls the *sortes Walpolitanæ*, by which I find everything I want *à point nommé* wherever I dip for it. This discovery indeed is almost of that kind I call *serendipity*, a very expressive word, which as I have nothing better to tell you, I shall endeavour to explain to you: you will understand it better by the derivation than by the definition. I once read a silly fairy tale, called *The three princes of serendip*:³ as their highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of: for instance, one of them discovered that a mule⁴ blind of the right eye had travelled the same road lately, because the grass was eaten only on the left side, where it was worse than on the right—now do you understand *serendipity*? One of the most remarkable instances of this *accidental sagacity* (for you must observe that *no* discovery of a thing you *are* looking for, comes under this description) was of my Lord Shaftsbury, who happening to dine at Lord Chancellor Clarendon's, found out the marriage of the Duke of York and Mrs Hyde, by the respect with which her mother treated her at table.

Horace Walpole — January 28, 1754
From: Toynbee (1903)

The animal in the original version of the story was actually a camel. The relevant extract from the 1964 English translation of the 1557 Italian version (Boyle 2000), runs as follows.

Misfortune befalls the princes when a camel driver stops them on the road and asks them if they have seen one of his camels. Although they have not, they have noticed

¹<http://www.nickalls.org/dick/papers/thoracic/hand-serendip.pdf>

²Letter dated 28 January, 1754—see Toynbee (1903).

³Sri Lanka.

⁴A camel in the English version.

signs that suggest a camel has passed along the road. Ever ready to dazzle with their wit and sagacity, the princes mystify the camel driver by asking him if the lost camel is blind in one eye, missing a tooth and lame. The camel driver, impressed by the accuracy of the description, immediately hurries off in pursuit of the animal. After a fruitless search, and feeling deceived, he returns to the princes, who reassure him by supplying further information. The camel, they say, carried a load of butter on one side and honey on the other, and was ridden by a pregnant woman. Concluding that the princes have stolen the camel, the driver has them imprisoned. It is only after the driver's neighbour finds the camel that they are released.

The princes are brought before the Emperor Beramo, who asks them how they could give such an accurate description of a camel they have never seen. It is clear from the princes' reply that they had brilliantly interpreted the scant evidence observed along the road.

As the grass had been eaten on one side of the road where it was less verdant, the princes deduced that the camel was blind on the other side. Because there were lumps of chewed grass on the road the size of a camel's tooth, presumably they had fallen through the gap left by a missing tooth. The tracks showed the prints of only three feet, the fourth being dragged, indicating that the animal was lame. That butter was carried on one side of the camel and honey on the other was clear because ants had been attracted to melted butter on one side of the road and flies to spilled honey on the other.

Boyle (2000)

- Boyle R (2000). *The three princes of Serendip*. http://livingheritage.org/three_princes.htm [downloaded June 2006]
 - Garrett AB (1963). *The flash of genius*. (D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., Princeton, New Jersey, USA) pp. 239–240.
 - Remer TG (1965). *Serendipity and the three princes: from the PEREGRINAGGIO of 1557* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, USA). [includes an English translation of the 1557 *Peregrinaggio* edition]
 - Toynbee P (1903). *Letters of Horace Walpole*; arranged by Mrs. Paget Toynbee. (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, UK). See letter dated: 28 January, 1754.
[Walpole's letters (4 volumes) are available on the internet at the *Project Gutenberg* website (<http://www.gutenberg.org/>). For the letter of 28 January 1754 (to Horace Mann) see letter 90, Volume 2 (1749–1759), pages 203–205: http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?fk_files=61088pageno=203]
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