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of knowledge

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Surprises: not just the spice of life but the source of knowledge

Yiannis GABRIEL

University of Bath, School of Management
yg218@management.bath.ac.uk

As befits a publication whose very name suggests surprise, I have decided to present some reflections on surprises or, perhaps, some surprising reflections. I cannot be alone in seeing two startled eyes staring back at me from the word *M@n@gement*. Nor can I be alone in thinking that surprises, good and bad, are an important part of every sphere of life—political, cultural, scientific and personal.

Think of it like this—what would life be without surprises? There would be no space for stories since stories demand reversals of fortune, transformations of trouble into opportunity, of crisis into challenge, of glory into catastrophe, of order into disorder and disorder into order. Nor would there be much space for the arts, at least not for those arts that thrive on astonishing or rattling the public. There would certainly be little scope for sport, since the result of every contest would be known in advance. There would be little space for adventure and exploration; there would be no discovery, good or bad. Hence, there would also be no space for the creation of new knowledge, at least no knowledge beyond that which merely builds infinitesimally on what already exists and which seems to find favour with a certain genre of academic publishing. What a drab, boring world this would be!

And yet surprises are far from a straight blessing. We mistrust surprises, some of us more than others. Surprises bring excitement but they also bring trouble. ‘The best surprise is no surprise’ was the founder’s logo for the hotel chain Holiday Inn. ‘No surprises’ holds the promise of a smooth, predictable, orderly, managed universe, one that runs with the reassuring predictability of Prussian bureaucracy or a Swiss clock. Eliminating surprises certainly reduces anxiety and induces a sense of being in control.

The elimination of surprises, or at least their normalisation and containment, may be seen as virtually a definition of the word ‘management’ (though not of ‘*m@n@gement*’). Management offers the promise that life can be ordered, organised and controlled. More than this, it claims that the forces of disorder and chaos can be contained through rationality, knowledge and science. As Jules Verne’s hero Phileas Fogg demonstrates (with the help of a Thomas Cook timetable, an ingenious Passepartout and sensible planning), one can travel around the earth in precisely eighty days, no matter what surprises are thrown in one’s path.

In times of change, stress and uncertainty, it can be comforting to believe that the world is a predictable and regular place, or at least that there are certain things on which we can rely—airplanes delivering us to our destinations, electricity powering our homes and workplaces, promises being honoured, tasks discharged and assumptions fulfilled. At the same time, we are aware that in a highly interdependent world like ours a volcanic eruption in Iceland can

halt all air transport in Europe for several days and that a minor contamination of Worcestershire sauce can lead to a recall and the destruction of thousands of tons of food. Bad surprises or the prospect of them (terrorist attacks, natural disasters, food scares, health scares and every conceivable other 'scare') have become mother's milk for the mass media, especially if accompanied by graphic pictures.

Where do bad surprises originate? We often like to blame them on human error or malevolence, whether individual or collective. Undoubtedly this makes for powerful narratives and compelling sensemaking. They are easily viewed as causes of trouble. But trouble also comes from natural disasters: floods, fires, earthquakes (sometimes exacerbated by human activities). Trouble comes from the slings and arrows of everyday life: illnesses, accidents, deaths, job loss, loss of loved ones and so forth. In the world of business, trouble comes from the vagaries of markets, the caprices of consumers, the rise of competitors, the surges of new technologies, the whims of CEOs and many other quarters. All of the above locate surprise somewhere outside ourselves in a place we cannot control (even in the case of our body, which features above as something external to our 'self'.) But trouble can also spring from within ourselves: from inner disorder, our own erratic desires, our fears and anxieties, our errors and miscalculations.

Management may be an attempt to deal with all such surprises. At times, it may anticipate them and forestall them (Comte: 'Savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour prévenir' – 'To know in order to anticipate, to anticipate in order to prevent'), at times it mitigates their effects and at others it simply makes them invisible. But, surprisingly, management is also the cause of surprises. I am thinking here of at least two types of surprises. First, the carefully choreographed surprises that seek to entertain and bewitch the consumer. Think of Disneyland, think of showbusiness, think of spectacle: a large part of today's economic activity is aimed at bewitching the consumer with pre-packaged, managed surprises. Second, the surprises with which the management of many organisations seek to 'catch' their rivals and competitors. Just as military strategists seek to surprise their enemies, today's business strategists look for ways to surprise and outwit their adversaries with new products, new initiatives and new ideas. Management may seek to master surprises and take advantage of them, but surprises cannot be eliminated from our lives. We live in an unpredictable world. It is not a random, arbitrary world, devoid of causes and effects and in which nothing can be managed. It is a world in which order and disorder, routine and accident all coexist: what is managed threatens to become unmanageable, and what seems unmanageable can become managed. This is as true on the largest scale as it is on the smallest. It is as true of international and social relations as it is of personal life, where many significant aspects (when and where we are born, who our parents are etc.) and turning points (unintended meetings, discoveries, accidents) in our lives and our personal histories happen entirely by chance.

Order and disorder coexist in organisations too; they are as capable of providing surprises as any area of personal and social life. There are unmanageable and unmanaged spaces in every organisation, just as there are in most of our social and personal lives. I have long been fascinated by the idea of the unmanaged organisation (Gabriel, 1995). This is not the same as the informal organisation, but is a kind of organisational dream world, dominated by desires, fantasies

and intuitions. The unmanaged organisation does not directly challenge or resist management, seeking instead to side-step it through spontaneous, uncontrolled activities in which pleasure, fantasy and play take precedence over usefulness, rationality and performance. It does, all the same, challenge the requirement that every organisational activity should serve a function or be part of a plan.

The dominant principle of the unmanaged organisation is not the 'reality principle' (or the performance principle, as Marcuse called it) but something more akin to the pleasure principle. Pleasure comes from many quarters, not least from what management and consumerism seek to provide: pre-packaged experiences, luxuries and other banalities to 'wow' the customer. In the unmanaged organisation, pleasure comes from the telling of stories which celebrate victories of right over wrong, which arouse sympathy for the innocent victim, which rejoice in the power of love, which ridicule pomposity and hypocrisy and so forth. If the managed organisation dislikes surprises, the unmanaged organisation relishes them—not only pleasant surprises (like a romance between two employees) but also unpleasant ones (like the accidental loss of part of a finger in a sausage-making machine). It celebrates cock-ups, accidents, turn-arounds and shocking revelations. The unmanaged organisation laughs as the managed organisation becomes alarmed and seriously reviews its procedures. It chuckles as the best laid plans of mice and men come asunder, as small miscalculations demolish grand designs. 'Surprise me' is the challenge an audience sets to its storyteller: no matter how predictable, well rehearsed or well known the story, a storyteller must discover a new twist to meet their audience's thirst for surprise.

Pleasure is ineluctably linked to surprise, just as boredom is to routine. As Freud himself might have said, Eros engineers the unexpected just as the death instinct is silently working towards inertia. And if Eros relishes the unexpected, he also relished the forbidden. Pleasure comes from actions and ideas that venture into new territories and transgress boundaries. This is what makes forbidden love more exciting than conventional one, undeserved victories sweeter than deserved ones, and accidental discoveries more delicious than predictable ones. The transgressive qualities of pleasure should not come as a surprise. Nor should it come as a surprise that seeking knowledge in forbidden territories comes at a price, as shown by the punishments meted out on the biblical Adam and Eve and Dante's Ulysses. Quests for knowledge can be driven by doubt and curiosity in the face of mysteries as well as by the concerns of practical problem solving (Gherardi, 1999; 2004). Doubting orthodoxy, argued Adorno (1954-8/1984), represents the innermost law of the essay, hence writing essays (in contrast to most published scientific papers) is in essence a heretical art. 'By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible' (171).

Escaping from the dominion of usefulness (or relevance), as James March argues in this issue, lies at the heart of discovering beautiful ideas, ideas that give aesthetic pleasure. It is what March describes as 'playing with ideas'¹. Playing with ideas is very different from playing a game that calls upon ideas, such as, for example, the publishing game of many academic publications or the knowledge transfer game assiduously pursued by many organisations and networks. Playing with ideas can be a very difficult and serious activity.

1. Usefulness by itself is not uncondusive to beauty. It is only the requirement that intellectual activity should be aimed directly and exclusively at relevance that undermines the aesthetic beauty of ideas, replacing it with the cold hand of convention and formula. By contrast, the accidental discovery that a certain idle idea can be of relevance in resolving a serious problem or find a practical use can be the source of pleasure. Once again, the surprise of accidental discovery lies at the heart of this.

A large part of this activity may be 'idle', generating few if any palpable outputs; time may be 'wasted' without having much to show for it. It can be engaged in individually or in groups, and its playfulness lies in transgressing boundaries, allowing seemingly absurd flights of fantasy, suppressing the demands of the reality principle and tolerating a certain amount of uncertainty. This recalls the concept of negative capability, an idea that occurs in a famous letter by the poet John Keats to his brothers George and Thomas Keats, dated 21 December 1817. In it, he refers to 'Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. Playing with ideas means avoiding premature closure and resisting the appeal of certainty. Instead of seeking solace in the certainty of definitions, proofs and facts, playing with ideas requires one to maintain conflicting and contradictory views, allowing them to cross-fertilise, mature and engage with each other.

Playing with ideas can be more or less pleasurable. What is undoubtedly pleasurable is surprising discovery, but playing by itself, with no purpose and no outcome, can be less pleasurable and may eventually lead to boredom. This suggests that playing with ideas is not entirely purposeless, even though generating useful ideas may be far from its original aim. It suggests a readiness to recognise and grasp a new discovery if and when it arises, in line with Louis Pasteur's famous observation that 'chance favors the prepared mind'. The combination of chance and the prepared mind lies at the heart of the concept of serendipity, as understood by British art historian Horace Walpole, the man who coined the word. In a letter to his friend, diplomat Horace Mann, in 1754, he describes the Persian fairy tale 'The Three Princes of Serendip', whose heroes 'were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of'. Notice how, unlike many contemporary usages, Walpole's original conceptualisation of serendipity involves both accident and sagacity, i.e. the ability to recognise the meaning and value of what one has encountered.

The concept of serendipity preoccupied sociologist Robert K. Merton for over 40 years—his book on the subject was only published in English posthumously (Merton & Barber, 2004). Merton, widely regarded as the founder of the sociology of science, offers evidence that most scientists themselves are aware of the vital importance of serendipity in scientific discovery, even if they tend to stay quiet about it in the presentation of their results:

Since it is the special task of scientists to make discoveries, they themselves have often been concerned to understand the conditions under which discoveries are made and use that knowledge to further the making of discoveries. Some scientists seem to have been aware of the fact that the elegance and parsimony prescribed for the presentation of the results of scientific work tend to falsify retrospectively the actual process by which the results were obtained (Merton and Barber 2004: 159).

The word 'elegance' is used here to describe an adherence to formal scientific standards, whereby the published results of a scientific inquiry follow a carefully reasoned and planned course of action, following the dictates of scientific methodology. It is interesting to contrast briefly this formal elegance, which denies surprise and pretends that discovery is the result of

careful planning, to the beauty of the unexpected discovery. Both can afford pleasure. Like a perfectly designed French garden, the former's pleasure is Apollonian, the product of reason, balance, symmetry and control. The latter, on the other hand, evokes the pleasure of discovering an unexpected delight while venturing away from the trodden paths in a neglected or overlooked part of the garden. (By the same metaphor, the English landscape garden would represent the ideal of managed surprise, pleasure arising from carefully arranged features meant to appear 'natural' and be 'discovered' by the visitor). In his *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Merton offers a very precise account of the role of serendipity in scientific discovery.

The serendipity pattern refers to the fairly common experience of observing an unanticipated, anomalous and strategic datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory... The datum is, first of all, unanticipated. A research directed toward the test of one hypothesis yields a fortuitous by-product, an unexpected observation which bears upon theories not in question when the research was begun. Secondly, the observation is anomalous, surprising, either because it seems inconsistent with prevailing theory or with other established facts. In either case, the seeming inconsistency provokes curiosity... And thirdly, in noting that the unexpected fact must be strategic, i.e., that it must permit of implications which bear upon generalized theory, we are, of course, referring rather to what the observer brings to the datum than to the datum itself. For it obviously requires a theoretically sensitized observer to detect the universal in the particular. (Merton, 1957/1968, p. 157f, emphases added)

Famous accidental discoveries like Teflon, Viagra and penicillin have attracted much attention (see, for example, Roberts, 1989), but Merton argues that most scientific discoveries are unintended. They happen, as he notes above, as 'fortuitous by-products'. This is true in abstract as well as applied research, in the natural as well as the social sciences, in qualitative as well as quantitative inquiry.

What is especially interesting in Merton's writing is his argument that a lot of the time scientists, like the rest of us, are 'blind' to accidental discovery. Unlike the Princes of Serendip, we encounter fortuitous accidents but have not the sagacity to recognise them. Why? Because, argues Merton, what is remarkable and surprising usually becomes normalised and goes unnoticed or taken for granted. He approvingly quotes Wittgenstein: 'How hard I find it to see what is right in front of my eyes!' (Merton, 1996, p. 167), a view that finds ample support in the famous experiment of the basketball players and the gorilla. A number of people watch a video of basketball players passing the ball to each other having been instructed to count the number of passes. Absorbed in the counting of passes, the majority fail to notice a gorilla who walks slowly across the screen. Immersed in the hurly burly of everyday life, our minds cluttered with detail and information, we frequently fail to notice what is not already part of our mental schemes—hence we fail to notice surprises even when they happen in front of our very eyes. In a similar way, as researchers, we are often too absorbed in our research agendas, counting numbers of questionnaires or milligrams of compounds, to notice interesting things that go on outside our field of vision.

Let us summarise our argument thus far. We live in an unpredictable world full of surprises, good and bad. Managers seek to eliminate or reduce the impact of bad surprises and orchestrate pleasant surprises for their customers and unpleasant ones for their competitors. But management can never attain its agenda of total control. A considerable part of what goes on in organisations is unmanaged and unmanageable. Pleasure rather than rationality is the guiding force in the unmanaged organisation. Pleasure is attained by allowing free-reign to fantasy and permitting the temporary prevalence of the pleasure principle over instrumental rationality and the reality principle. Play takes many forms, including 'playing with ideas', which sometimes features excursions into forbidden or seemingly fallow territories. Such excursions do not always produce useful results but are liable to spawn surprises and generate interesting new ideas and discoveries. There is strong evidence that many discoveries, theoretical or otherwise, are, in fact, the outcomes of serendipity. This involves fortuitous accidents and a preparedness and willingness to deviate from existing routines of thought and action in order to notice them and learn from them. Yet, our own thought habits conspire against this, restricting us mostly to carefully controlled, instrumentally driven, methodologically tight work.

A great part of theoretical knowledge, as we have argued, comes from intellectual surprises. It also seems that many great theories owe their greatness neither to their relevance nor their truth value, but rather to their surprise value—their ability to stand conventional assumptions on their head and shock the listener. As Murray Davis (1971) argues, 'a theorist is considered great, not because his theories are true, but because they are interesting. [...] A new theory will be noticed only when it denies an old truth, proverb, platitude, maxim, adage, saying, commonplace, etc.', adding, 'all interesting theories, at least all interesting social theories, then, constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted world of their audience. [...] If it does not challenge but merely confirms one of their taken-for-granted beliefs, [the audience] will respond to it by rejecting its value while affirming its truth' (311).

So what makes a theory interesting? In proposing an 'Index of the Interesting', Davis argues that a theory is interesting if it demonstrates that what seems organised is, in fact, disorganised, or vice versa; what seem like heterogeneous phenomena are in fact homogeneous or vice versa; what seems a local phenomenon is in fact a general one, or vice versa; what appears to be a bad phenomenon is in fact a good one, or vice versa, and so forth. In sum, interesting theories are those that come as surprises to their audiences. Notice that Davis does not explain how interesting theories are generated, but merely what it is that makes them interesting. In advising authors how to generate interesting theories, he recommends that they become familiar with their audiences' assumptions and then aim to subvert them. He observes that interest declines when its author seeks to systematise it by crossing the 't's and dotting the 'i's: 'In trying to construct The Index of the Interesting, I had hoped to make it as systematic as possible. However, as I proceeded in this attempt, I discovered—to my dismay—that the more systematic I tried to make it, the less interesting it became. Rather than continue to spin out a system at the increasing cost of decreasing interest, I decided that my dilemma itself might serve as the basis for some reflections on the relation between the interesting and the systematic' (340, emphasis in original).

It seems to me that in order to be interesting, a theory must be fertile or generative. In other words, it must open up new possibilities for thought and exploration, as March argues in this issue. All the same, amassing or observing the gradual accumulation of fruits of research decreases the interest value of a theory. It turns exploration into a routine harvest. It may be exciting for those eager to exploit it (the way that all bounty is exciting to the greedy), but it loses its surprising qualities and becomes 'normal science' (Kuhn, 1962/1996): sorting out irregularities, resolving puzzles and making very marginal contributions to knowledge. Writing in 1971, Davis explicitly disagrees with Kuhn, urging young researchers to aim for 'interesting' research, discovering as opposed to resolving anomalies and testing existing paradigms rather than being their 'handmaidens'. 'The best way to make a name for oneself in an intellectual discipline is to be interesting—denying the assumed while affirming the unanticipated' (343). Further, in opposition to Kuhn, he proposes somewhat excitedly that 'sheer boredom' with existing paradigms will always motivate researchers to reach for new and more interesting ones.

In this, I believe that Davis was gravely mistaken. Far from seeking to break with existing traditions, formal academic research has assumed more and more the character of being a handmaiden to existing paradigms. At least in the social sciences that I am familiar with, researchers find themselves pursuing careers, doing more and more conservative research and producing more and more standardised outputs. The main characteristics of such publications will be clearly familiar to any practicing researcher:

- They specialise in minuscule sub-disciplines of their field
- They identify tiny 'gaps' in the literature (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011).
- They almost religiously cite all existing 'authorities' in their sub-specialisation (not least to forestall any criticisms from journal reviewers who are likely to be the very 'authorities' being cited).
- They affect to follow very rigid protocols of inquiry that address closely scrutinised research questions aimed at filling the gaps in the literature.
- They describe methodologies for their field research from which not even the smallest deviations are ever acknowledged.
- They are organised and presented in highly standardised structures, devoid of any discontinuity or originality.
- They are written in a most pedantic fashion, seeking to eliminate all ambiguity and tension, as well as the author's personal style, from the text.

Davis, who sadly died in 2007, must surely be turning in his grave at the increasingly formulaic qualities of the research publications that currently fill the pages of most academic journals (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). He would not, however, be surprised, that most researchers view such outputs as of very little interest, though not of very little use, and can barely bring themselves to read beyond the abstract unless the content is relevant to their minuscule subspecialisations.

It seems to me that, in addition to the normal blindness that we display when presented with surprises (as pointed out by Merton, following Wittgenstein), the institutional practices of academic research, academic publications and professional recognition encourage conservatism and adherence to formulae. To take just one core academic practice, consider article reviews. Reviewers are currently prone to criticise authors if an article has failed to identify 'a gap', if its 'contribution' is not specifically focused on one issue, if the review of literature has omitted to name an important authority and so forth. Notice how rare it is these days for an author to take a position against another or, even rarer, against a gang of others, preferring instead to recruit allies and supporters for even the most commonsensical propositions. To parody—'As X (2013), Y (2013) and Z (2013) have demonstrated, poverty is not generally welcome by those afflicted by it, and, unless strongly counter-acted by state (A, 2013), welfare (B, 2012) or charity (C, 2011) agencies, may adversely impact their psychological (D, 2013) and physical (2012) wellbeing'. Overall, even when a piece of work contains the germ of an interesting idea, the odds are that, following successive reviews and revisions, the idea will be normalised, stripped of its originality and reduced to the pedantic function of filling a theoretical gap.

It seems to me that, under a variety of organisational and professional pressures, a large majority of researching academics today become wilfully blind. It is not simply that we are unprepared for surprises, we actively don't want them (at least not too many). As researchers, we invest much time on those questionnaires or those milligrams of compound and anything that takes us beyond our brief is seen as a distraction. We are constantly encouraged (and we encourage each other) to focus on our research questions and view everything else as a distraction, as irrelevant, or, worse, as a waste of our time. Research outputs, measured in journal articles in 'starred publications', make and break academic careers. Even less prestigious journals, in their incessant drive to emulate the more prestigious ones, adopt practices and conventions that encourage formulaic research—specialisation, uncritical vacuum cleaning of literature, identification of tiny gaps and incremental contributions aimed at filling those gaps. As Alvesson (2013) has argued, the stealthy pursuit of return-on-investment (ROI) rather than the quest for surprising discoveries becomes the guiding force in most inquiries; research is replaced by 'roi-search'.

In all these ways, it appears that the reality principle has scored a considerable victory over the pleasure principle in the world of academic research. Yet the pleasure principle has not been silenced. By analogy to the distinction between the managed and the unmanaged organisation delineated earlier, I believe that a useful distinction can be drawn between managed and unmanaged inquiry. If the greatest part of published research is the product of purposeful, cumulative, formulaic, mostly joyless work aimed at furthering academic careers, there remains a space for inquiry that is spontaneous, playful, eccentric, disorganised and frequently purposeless. The activities of unmanaged inquiry often go unseen by managed inquiry. When seen, the activities and fruits of unmanaged inquiry are frequently drawn back into the ambit of managed inquiry. Playing with ideas, seeking surprises, delighting in paradoxes and enduring unresolved contradictions are all features of unmanaged inquiry.

While managed inquiry would be a lot poorer without the contribution of her unmanaged sister, she never ceases criticising the latter's unruly and idle habits. Hard-working and dead-serious managed inquiry finds 'playing with ideas' particularly irksome and constantly nags her sister with questions and comments like:

- Isn't playing with ideas just a waste of time? What guarantees of firm results can it offer?
- Does it not just amount to an exercise in narcissistic navel-gazing, of interest to academics but to nobody else in society?
- Why should anyone pay academics to play with ideas? It is all very well for academics to engage in games that give them pleasure, but if their activities are not aimed at the public or private good, should they not carry the economic cost themselves, like the gentlemen researchers of yesteryears?
- Far from marking the dominance on the pleasure principle, playing is very hard work. Unlike children in their sandpits, most adults cannot just spend their day playing.
- ... and if they do, they eventually get bored with idle playing and look for something more meaningful on which to spend their time.

In addressing such criticisms, we must acknowledge that playing with ideas is indeed not easy, its fruits are not guaranteed and many public agencies will shy away from individuals or groups that acknowledge receiving money to play games. It is not easy because it involves overcoming resistances, both external and internal. As we have noted, external resistances—institutional and professional pressures and so forth—are difficult enough to overcome. Internal resistance, however, is even harder to surmount. Living with uncertainty, forsaking the safe rewards of doing normal science for the uncertain recompense of pursuing surprises and questioning orthodoxy is hard work. It can certainly lead to prolonged fallow periods of doubt and disappointment. Instead of challenging assumptions, most academic researchers prefer the comfort and safety of their paradigmatic enclaves, especially when protected from assault by other paradigms walled by incommensurability.

All the same, it seems to me that even these formidable resistances cannot extinguish all desire to engage with ideas spontaneously, to pursue unpromising lines of inquiry and to challenge or sidestep orthodoxy. Even researchers who have made solid reputations on the back of normal science venture from time to time into unknown or even forbidden territories. And ideas and innovations that seem routine may owe their origins to excursions into such territories. My sense is that just as the managed and the unmanaged organisation exist side by side, sometimes ignoring each other, sometimes challenging each other and sometimes supporting each other, managed and unmanaged inquiry find different ways of coexisting. Both at the individual and at the collective level, many researchers are engaged both in methodical, purpose-driven research and in spontaneous play with ideas. Both reality and the pleasure principles find ways of pursuing their agendas in most research environments, where both orthodox outputs and heterodox ways of thinking

are valued. The methodical filling of gaps and the quest for a moment of inspiration (the Eureka! moment) exist side by side.

Unmanaged inquiry may sometimes be invisible, may sometimes be drawn back to the domain of managed inquiry and often may lead to dead-ends and false discoveries that melt away under the most rudimentary critical questioning. Many 'interesting' discoveries (in Davis's sense) wilt in the cold light of day, or turn out to be of interest only to a tiny number of fellow researchers. Yet, as I have insisted throughout this piece, many discoveries of lasting significance come as a result of accident, serendipity and play. Such inquiry can be encouraged, both as a source of pleasure in its own right and as a potentially valuable source of ideas and innovation for managed inquiry.

IN SEARCH OF SERENDIPITY

In my experience, several factors encourage this type of inquiry, but I will limit myself to a few. First, it seems to me that many surprising discoveries are made when researchers with very different backgrounds and interests find ways to communicate. The cross-fertilisation of ideas can sometimes generate spectacular results. This frequently arises when insights from one tradition or discipline can be translated into another, often through the use of analogies and metaphors. This encourages creative imagination and at least temporarily gives prevalence to fantasy over closely reasoned rational thinking. Along similar lines, researchers can make surprising discoveries by delving into the writings of scholars from other disciplines. Even when such works are not fully understood, they can prompt creative thinking and trigger discoveries in other domains. Cross-fertilisation then emerges from the exposure of ideas and theories to those of different domains, to those travelling in unfamiliar territories.

A number of questions frequently result in drawing us out of our assumptions. Chief among them are 'What is X?' and 'What is so great about X?' where X is the topic of our current inquiry. (Try, for example, X equals one of the following: learning, leadership, reflexivity, serendipity). Two questions that are perhaps not asked as commonly as they might be are 'Why?' and 'What if?'. These are especially fruitful when applied to a sentence that contains words and expressions like 'of course', 'clearly', 'obvious' and 'it follows'. One particular question that frequently throws a spanner in the works of routine thinking and forces us to re-evaluate some of our assumptions is 'Where is Y in all this?'. I have noticed that an imaginative choice of Y (for example, politics, gender or even relevance) can transform a discourse from a comfortable reconfirmation of our assumptions into something more dangerous and generative. Finally, the much discussed question 'So what?' is one that prompts researchers to address the implications of their work and can occasionally lead to surprises. All of the above provide ways of drawing ourselves out of managed inquiry into unmanaged terrains through probing, questioning, cross-fertilisation and engagement with alien ideas. A different venture into unmanaged inquiry proceeds in the opposite way: instead of seeking engagement with different and unrelated ideas and approaches, instead of energetically probing and questioning, it pursues disengagement. In particular, it seeks disengagement from existing routines of thinking and being, including taking for granted

goals and rationalisations. It aims at purging the mind of all shortcuts and habits, treating them as obstacles to creative work rather than as its building blocks. Such disengagement looks for surprises not by superimposing new and unexpected materials onto existing ones or by interrogating them, but by removing materials and trying to experience the world with an unpremeditated, child-like wonderment. It tries to undo rather than to do, freeing itself from what Mouzelis (2010) calls the 'tyranny of purposiveness'. This approach, which can be found in many religious traditions, recalls Jung's method of 'active imagination', a form of 'introspection for observing the stream of interior images. ... These visions are far from hallucinations or ecstatic states; they are spontaneous visual images fantasy' (1968, p. 190). It gives a voice to the unconscious, not as a Freudian cauldron of dangerous excitations, but as a source of creative energy seeking out its own original expressions. This can be a solitary and dangerous course, almost entirely devoid of any playful element. Unlike the Princes of Serendip, it ventures into the unknown without company and divested of all the reassuring trappings of existing knowledge and power.

As a lifetime choice for inquiry, this approach demands the kind of courage (and perhaps suspension of reason) that few people are capable of. Some would describe it as a sure avenue to destitution and madness and maybe they are right. Few scholars would be willing to risk everything in pursuit of such a solitary undertaking, though there is no shortage of narratives celebrating the experiences of individuals (the Buddha, Diogenes, Nietzsche and various religious ecstatics) who opted for precisely this. All the same, shorter-term ventures into disengagement and detachment may not be so uncommon to researchers who navigate the terrain between managed and unmanaged inquiry, pursuing academic careers by playing various academic games more or less competently, but also pursuing serendipity through temporary disengagement from reassuring assumptions. Some researchers are known to do good work while lying on their back and staring blankly at a ceiling, others while walking in the countryside and yet others while they are in a quasi-hypnotic state in which they seek to exercise no active control over their thoughts. Longer sojourns into unmanaged inquiry may be the privilege of a minority whose reputation and record have earned them that right, or of free spirits who remain unconcerned about academic plaudits and careers. The latter are sometimes viewed as interesting eccentrics, and can find themselves marginalised by their peers or drawn back to managed inquiry. The majority, however, take calculated risks of failure and disappointment, at least for some parts of their life, by taking periodic holidays from the strict routines and practices of managed inquiry. This may well be the time that spawns some of their best ideas that, subsequently, are developed and domesticated in a more methodical and systematic manner.

Before concluding, I should make it clear that, in spite of standing up for surprises and serendipity, I do not seek to disparage 'boring'. Boring work can be a very significant complement to interesting work and a vital step towards it. Apprentices for the Japanese tea ceremony were known to spend many years doing the most mundane tasks of preparation, cleaning and assisting, before rising to becoming masters of their trade. Concert pianists have to spend long hours practising their scales before being able to offer their own interpretations of great pieces of music. In a similar way, it is probably true that

most researchers, too, have to spend long hours honing their craft by doing repetitive mundane tasks before they can feel confident enough to venture into unmanaged inquiry and make all they can of it. I do not, therefore, seek to valorise unmanaged inquiry at the expense of managed inquiry—they both have a part to play in the pursuit of knowledge.

This essay was prompted by the sense that surprises are a vital element of our experiences in the course of our research inquiries and in life as a whole. Surprises are indeed the spice of life and also a vital element in generating new knowledge. Seeking to eliminate surprises is both futile and counterproductive. As imaginative researchers, we must generally discover our own compromises between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, between adventure and method, between standing on the shoulders of giants and finding ways to exercise our peripheral vision and let ourselves see things other than those right in front of us. Pursuing surprise for its own sake may be as self-defeating as adhering to the dictates of method and established practice. Managed and unmanaged terrains both have a right to exist in research, just as they have in other spheres of human activity.

Yiannis Gabriel is Professor of Organizational Theory at the University of Bath. He has a PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley. Yiannis is known for his work into the psychoanalysis of organizational and social life. He has written on organizational storytelling and narratives, leadership, management learning and the culture and politics of contemporary consumption. He has developed a psychoanalytic interpretation of organizational stories as a way of studying numerous social and organizational phenomena including leader-follower relations, group dynamics and fantasies, nostalgia, insults and apologies. He has been editor of *Management Learning* and associate editor of *Human Relations* and is currently Senior Editor of *Organization Studies*. His enduring fascination as a researcher lies in what he describes as the unmanageable qualities of life in and out of organisations.

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