INTRODUCTION

The professional field of strategic management distinguishes several different schools, among them the prescriptive and emergent approaches (Lynch, 2000). Although theorists distinguish different approaches (e.g., Idenburg, 1993; Mintzberg, 1987), in order to look more closely at emergence in strategic processes we highlight the distinctions between the rational planning and emergent schools, particularly in regard to issues of language and time.

The rational planning school (e.g., Ansoff, 1979) defines an objective in advance, describes “where we are now,” and uses a prescriptive approach in which “the three core areas—strategic analysis, strategic development and strategy implementation—are linked together sequentially” (Lynch, 2000: 24). The emergent approach to strategy formulation has been characterized by trial, experimentation, and discussion; that is, by a series of experimental approaches rather than a final objective. Emergent strategy is undertaken by an organization that analyzes its environment constantly and implements its strategy simultaneously (Lynch, 2000: 26).

We are interested in emergent strategy development, which has been less developed than other approaches, and is linked with Henry Mintzberg (1991), Shona Brown and Kathleen Eisenhardt (1998), and Ralph Stacey (1992, 1996). Emergent strategy, with its acknowledgment that uncertainty is here to stay, has the potential to address the current challenges of organizations. For example, entrepreneurial organizations increasingly rely on emergent strategy development rather than formal planning processes (Fletcher & Harris, 2002). Nevertheless, emergent strategic processes are often maligned as “irrational mechanisms, wishful thinking, ignorance, and conformism” (Idenburg, 1993: 136), claims that we dispute.

In response to Roos and Victor’s (1999) call for more imaginative strategies, we propose that a playful reinterpretation of the Delphic oracle can provide a way to imagine the roles of organizational actors in strategic emergence. Mintzberg’s (1994: 238) disdainful comparison of strategic forecasting techniques with the ritualistic divination techniques of the Delphic oracle notwithstanding, we suggest that characteristics of the Delphic oracle (Morgan, 1990) mirror many of those of both emergence and strategy and, therefore, may offer insight into emergent strategy. Just as von Krogh et al. (1994) ask readers to forget the realities previously constructed in order to rethink the strategy paradigm, we suggest that drawing parallels between emergent strategy and oracle nourishes such a paradigm reconstruction. Oracle allows a degree of estrangement not merely to replace one form of inquiry with another, but to add to our store of approaches to see anew phenomena that we have previously conceived with narrow vision or that have escaped our gaze. Like us, Walker (2003) suggests such a return to Delphi, but Walker— unlike us—seeks a return “sans ambiguity” (2003: 2).

Our article proceeds as follows. We briefly review the literature of emergent strategy and the Delphic oracle, with particular attention to the ways in which the latter reflects current thinking about ambiguity, complexity,
emergence, and strategy. We then take a closer look at the function of different symbolic and temporal approaches to the learning requirements of emergent strategy, and we propose that oracle can be usefully seen as a type of learning. Based on this strategic approach to learning and emergence, we make a series of propositions for future research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Mintzberg, strategy is plan and pattern; that is, “organizations develop plans for the future and they also evolve patterns out of their past” (1994: 24). In addition Mintzberg, an early proponent of emergent strategy, says that a “realized pattern” that was not “expressly intended” can emerge (1994: 25). He defines emergent strategy as “actions … taken, one by one, which converged in time in some sort of consistency or pattern” (1994: 25). For example, Mintzberg (1994) argues that a firm might gradually acquire diverse businesses until a strategy of diversification emerges. Although his notion of emergent strategy is similar to ours, his emphasis on emergent strategy as an “absence of intentions” (1987: 13) or as emergent “despite them [intentions]” (1987: 13) presumes inaction or error in the process of strategic management. We will suggest that strategy can emerge not only from patterns of action, but also from interpretations of meaningful, acausal events.

Like Mintzberg, Brown and Eisenhardt (1998) contrast a prescriptive, lockstep plan with an emergent strategy. They emphasize the improvisational nature of emergent strategy:

> Improvisational businesses typically create products and services that are often successful but also somewhat unpredictable. Their strategies are usually more varied than those of the competition because they can shift their tactics quickly. (1998: 43)

Emergent strategies also rely on the organization’s ability to learn from the actual experiences of employees at all levels (Noe et al., 2003). According to Brown and Eisenhardt, improvisational businesses have “real-time communication”; that is, communication “focused in real time, on the tasks at hand, such as manufacturing operations, customer complaints, and competitor moves” (1998: 47). Real-time communication combined with “semi-structure” (neither too loose nor too rigid) permits strategy to emerge (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998: 53).

What Brown and Eisenhardt acknowledge is that managers don’t know all that will happen and can’t tightly control innovation. To accommodate uncertainty, Brown and Eisenhardt emphasize improvisation and entrepreneurship. While applauding the advocacy of improvisation, we will emphasize interpretation over improvisation and provide a series of propositions that enhance interpretation.

Our propositions will be akin to Stacey’s (1992) steps to emerging strategies. Not prescriptions for strategic direction and control, Stacey’s steps “increase the possibility of emergent strategy” (1992: 191) by managing context. To increase the possibility of emergence, Stacey describes ways to use power, establish self-organizing teams, develop multiple organizational cultures, improve group learning, and create slack resources. His goal is “to establish sufficient constrained instability to provoke complex learning” (1992: 208)—a goal similar to our own.

Despite the work of Mintzberg, Stacey, Brown, and Eisenhardt, the school of emergent strategy is less developed than other schools (Lynch, 2000). This may, in part, be due to the continuing reliance on the “scientific” paradigm of “lineal order, regularity, and stability” (Merri, 1995: 16). In an attempt to counter the reliance on the scientific paradigm, Durand et al. (1996) suggest that sociocognitive (e.g., Weick, 1979) and
Autopoetic (e.g., von Krogh & Roos, 1995; von Krogh et al., 1994) approaches to strategic management are more helpful to managers than are computational and cognitive approaches. In addition, Durand et al. (1996) introduce social and emotional dimensions.

We think that the efforts of Durand et al. (1996), as well as the Roos and Victor (1999) model of strategy as serious play, highlight the problems engendered by conflating natural and social sciences. It is important to remind ourselves that there is a significant difference between the natural sciences and the social sciences and that one cannot simply mimic the other, nor can one be held as exemplar for the other. What we deem to be truth and valid knowledge in the social sciences cannot be judged on the same basis as in the natural sciences.

The basic notion of science is one in which there is transparency over the process through which we come to the conclusions that we hold. Therefore, science identifies the logic, reason, and other mediated pathways used to create knowledge and support truth claims. In the natural sciences the emphasis is on replication and predictability, and where such replication proves unsuccessful, existing hypotheses are modified and new hypotheses formulated. In the social sciences the emphasis is more on coherence as a criterion for validity, and contradiction is the generator of new theory. The natural and social sciences are different genres that demand different approaches. The methods of inquiry employed in the social sciences cannot simply mimic those used in the natural sciences. At best the natural sciences can only ever observe and infer, yet the social sciences can actually ask their subjects and thus discover meaning and intentionality. Such a fundamental difference requires that the forms of inquiry be different.

Many years ago, Horkheimer (1937/1976) put the case well when he argued that generalizations could not easily be made from so-called experiences, because the understanding of experience itself was being fashioned from ideas that were in the researcher him- or herself. The researcher is simultaneously part of what he or she is researching, and caught in a historical context in which ideologies shape one’s thinking. All theories conform to the ideas in the mind of the researcher rather than solely to the experience itself:

> The facts which our senses present to us are socially performed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity, and yet the individual perceives himself (sic) as receptive and passive in the act of perception. (Horkheimer, 1937/1976: 213)

Thus, since knowledge is mediated by cultural, social, and linguistic structures and practices, its truth claims (facts) are inevitably relational.
In recent times, the French poststructuralists, postmodernists, and linguists such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva, and others have drawn our attention to the relativism of knowledge and this notion that we are at arm’s length from the subjects of our gaze. They also make the case that there can be no autonomous agency. These theorists have developed techniques such as deconstruction, playfulness, the clash-of-opposites, intertwining of form and content, metaphoricality, and the like, which are very much like those of the surrealists (see Carr & Zanetti, 2000) and are intent on unsettling us from our conventional wisdom—an estrangement, affording us an opportunity to penetrate and reflect, perhaps anew, on what we have taken for granted. The estrangement provides a vehicle through which the linear logic we have used in the past may become, at least partially, set aside in the search for new affinities previously hidden or unconsidered. It is the juxtaposition that affords us an opportunity to see ourselves in spite of ourselves, or to be decentered from our historical position of privilege (see Carr, 2000). Oracle is a way of knowing whose logic, reason, and mediated pathways are nonlinear, transparent, and coherent. With oracle, we have an opportunity to see ourselves in spite of ourselves.

To date, the field of strategy, particularly the predominant rational planning school (Lynch, 2000), has been built up largely out of the perceived need to reduce uncertainty. But as Van Uden et al. argue, “Complex systems are incompressible, i.e., it is impossible to have a complete account of a complex system that is less complex than the system itself” (2001: 57). Therefore, given that “uncertainty is not a result of ignorance or the partiality of human knowledge but is a characteristic of the world itself” (Taylor, 2001: 115), strategies designed to reduce or eliminate uncertainty are likely to be ineffective at best and may very possibly be a risk to organizational survival.

ORACLE

Swigart (2002) provides a vivid description of the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi (see also Figure 1):

A long line of supplicants climbs a steep road toward the temple, circles around the impressive treasure house of the Athenians to the sacred precinct in front of the Oracle’s home. The first supplicant submits the burning question of the day: “The Persians are coming, what should we do?” The priest takes the question into the gloom of the temple and offers it to the Pythia, a mantic (perhaps mythic) priestess crouching in a hole in the earth, a hole which may or may not have even existed … She speaks in tongues, and the priest returns with her answer. (2002: 80-81)

Delphi was a sanctuary whose most celebrated feature was its oracle, which has attracted continual discussion and comment since antiquity. “The oracle’s renown and prestige are evident from an early date, and it appears to have been regarded as something special right from its inception,” says Morgan (1990: 148). Although divination was probably a regular feature of everyday life, the Delphic oracle, occurring as it did during a time of political and economic instability and in a relatively neutral territory, was of particular importance.

Although the oracle at Delphi has suffered the reputation of being irrational, for the most part “by modern standards, the Pythia appeared to act rationally, giving straightforward answers to simple alternative proposals, or to a suggestively worded question dealing with past or present circumstances” (Morgan, 1990: 156). Thus,
Ambiguity is undoubtedly one of the most celebrated traits of the Delphic oracle, and even though its extent and significance have been greatly exaggerated, disputes or uncertainties about the interpretation of responses, as recorded in ancient sources, are too frequent to allow us to dismiss it altogether. That is, the oracle’s reputation for ambiguity was always overshadowed by its reputation for truth. (Morgan, 1990: 156)

The medium of divine inspiration was always a woman; her function was to tell the divine purpose in relation to coming events. Thus the consultations were religious in form, and not mere inquisitive speculations on the future or attempts to obtain practical shortcuts to success. The Pythia, before taking her seat on the oracular tripod, had to prepare herself for
Fig. 1: The Temple of Apollo

Source: http://www.arthistory.sbc.edu/sacredplaces/delphi.html
the solemn act by certain ritualistic observances: bathing in a particular spring, chewing the leaves of the sacred oracle, drinking from the spring, and burning laurel leaves and barley meal. She then mounted the tripod (Parke & Wormell, 1956).

For ancient visitors to Delphi, entry to the temple was restricted to nine days in the year and permitted only to those wishing to consult the oracle after they had paid for a preliminary sacrifice. Once inside the porch, the visitor would be reminded of the Delphic precepts (“know thyself,” “nothing too much,” etc.) inscribed on marble herms, or busts (Coldstream, 1985: 96-7). Against the rear wall, protected by a stone canopy, was the omphalos or “navel,” which was supposed to mark the center of the world (Price, 1985: 135), out of which were sometimes said to be vapors that when inhaled caused one to prophesy the future (Price, 1985: 139). Although modern geological examination of the area has shown evidence of neither chasm nor vapors, these characteristics are still important to an understanding of the symbolic and ritualistic processes (Price, 1985: 140).

Certain features of the Delphic oracle are relevant to strategic formulation:

- Both are particularly important during times of challenge, “perhaps owing to some external threat, or to internal change” (Mintzberg, 1994: 154; see also Park, 1963).

- Those consulting the oracle were primarily prominent individuals, rather than states, and they paid for the consultation (Price, 1985).

- Once announced, the oracle carried the weight of authority.

- An important purpose of the oracle was to establish consensus, or alignment, among different groups (see also Dempsey, 1918). As Barry and Elmes (1997) note, an important purpose of strategy is to establish consensus among multiple viewpoints and multiple realities.

- It was assumed to be impartial.

The parallels with current strategic practice are readily apparent. Contemporary strategists respond to external threats or internal change; strategic leadership is usually a top management function; strategic decisions are authoritative; and strategic decisions, even if incrementally, guide actions throughout the organization. Although internal executives and board members are not impartial, external consultants are considered impartial. Further, the oracle functioned in ways that reflect current thinking about complexity and emergence: It admitted ambiguity (Morgan, 1990; Swigart, 2002) and inarticulateness (Douglas, 1966); emerged from the belief in a greater wholeness; embraced intuition; and recognized the role of the “inner” (moral, emotional) as well as “outer” (political and social) life of the seeker.

Socrates esteemed the oracle. In the same spirit, he listened carefully to his own inner voice. Socrates’ disciple Plato believed in a kind of intuitive knowledge quite distinct from the dialectic. For him the gods were always real. Thus the Greeks were paradoxically committed to reason, the chosen guide that they knew to be inadequate, and to their deep instinctive belief in hidden powers. The word “mystery” is of Greek origin. Oracles helped people find their way on earth in the face of an unknown and threatening future. As Ralls and Webb (1999) put it,
We not only need complex, organic views of organizations, but we would benefit from not being put off by either the complexity or its mysteries. (1999: 25)

An important issue in complexity theory is how order emerges out of chaos (Goldstein, 1999); this same idea is reflected in oracle imagery by the placement of the Pythia over a representation of the mouth of a chasm (Price, 1985). The edge of chaos is the place where differences are blended or even deconstructed. As Langton illustrated in Lewin’s (1992) interview with him: “Totally ordered over here … totally random over here; … complexity happens somewhere in between” (1992: 10). This “in-between-ness” is the place of interactions, of relationships, and is part of the conversations about, and uncertainty of, complexity. For one, any knowledge contains the uncertainty that is brought about by the interaction between oneself and the rest of the world (Heisenberg, 1958; Jung, 1955; Kristeva, 1986). Second, the split between art (including Greek history and mythology) and science (including organizational science’s adherence to Newtonian assumptions of rationality, detachment, etc.; Lynch, 2000) is less useful, given that the more vague terms of natural language “seem to be more stable in the expansion of knowledge than the precise terms of scientific language” (Heisenberg, 1958: 200).

Also, given that women always proclaimed the oracle at Delphi, we suggest that honoring the feminine is an important addition to theory on emergent strategy. This is a matter that has recently been noted as a crucial issue and oversight in organization theory and social science more generally (see Carr, 2003; Zanetti, 2002).

Despite—or, better, due to—the ambiguity of many of its answers, the Delphic oracle contributes to contemporary strategy through its emphasis on (a) symbols and (b) temporal strategic processes. Stacey’s (2001) comments about symbols suggest an explanation of the oracle’s contribution. According to Stacey,

> A distinguishing feature of human action, both in its public and private forms, is that it is communication in the medium of symbols, which makes sophisticated cooperative activity possible. (2001: 101)

Mosakowski and Earley (2000) argue that strategy researchers generally dismiss *temporal* assumptions or address such assumptions indirectly. We suggest that theories of emergent, strategic, interpretive processes—specifically oracle—address these aporia in the strategy literature; that is, symbols and time.

**SYMBOLS AND STRATEGY**

Stacey (1992) uses complexity theory to develop a strategic approach to the “real management problem”; that is, “managing the unknowable” (1992: 14-15). According to Stacey, managers should provoke questioning, promote organizational learning, develop flexible structures, and accept the resulting anxiety (1992: 15). “The key question is not how to create stable equilibrium organizations, but how to establish sufficient,
constrained instability to provoke complex learning,” he says (1992: 208). He calls reified symbols those that represent abstract frameworks with internal rules; for example, the rules of mathematics and logic. According to Stacey, “Each science, profession, discipline and community of practice has its own frameworks and its own conventions for manipulating and processing the associated reified symbols” (2001: 109). For him, significant symbols, as opposed to reified symbols, are situated in a “real” world context and in experience (akin to what

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Kristeva (1986) called “poetic logic”).

We propose a table of organizational symbols (Table 1), similar to yet different from Stacey (2001). Like Schotz (1990: 240), we distinguish three types of symbols: verbal, action, and material symbols. However, unlike Schotz, we identify the functions of symbols in terms of organizational learning. Because the function of all symbols is to reduce doubts, we propose that different degrees and kinds of symbols are appropriate to different degrees and kinds of learning. The functions of symbols recall Argyris and Schon’s (1996) definitions of single- and double-loop learning.

Single-loop learning is most appropriate in times of minimal uncertainty; it requires changes in degree rather than in kind, and interpretation therefore relies on established correspondences between accepted symbols and their denotative meaning. Double-loop learning focuses on solving problems that are complex and ill-structured and that change as problem solving advances.

The third kind of learning from symbols is what we are calling oracle symbolism, or simply oracle, “the language of images and emotions” (Cirlot, 1962: xxxi). The essence of this third level of symbol is transcendent:

its ability to express simultaneously the various aspects (thesis and antithesis) of the idea it represents … [This] “symbolic function” appears at the precise moment when a state of tension is set up between opposites which the consciousness cannot resolve by itself. (Cirlot, 1962)

Oracle admits the integral uncertainty of complexity, and at the same time it celebrates wholeness and, therefore, the vital participation of every being. An object transmuted into a symbol through its function as an oracle “tends to unite with the all … because if the All can appear within a significant fragment, it is because each fragment restates the All” (Cirlot, 1962). A word, action, or object, by virtue of the power of the totality it manifests, may become a sacred message without ceasing to be its original form as well. That is, oracle is a kind of learning based on the interpretation of a single entity as a representation of the ineffable whole. This, of course, was an underlying assumption in the work of Freud (1900/1988) and Jung (1912/1969), who, while differing in their approaches to the analysis of dreams, suggested that the symbols that appeared in dreams were a shorthand representation of past experiences and inner messages. When decoded, these symbols are a type of picturegram (see Carr, 2001), in as much that they are not merely pictures but carry a particular message and are perspectival, intended to convey a particular message and content.

The types of symbols—verbal, action, and material—accommodate a range of strategic symbols. Single-loop learning utilizes conventional symbols, or in Stacey’s terms reified symbols, those that represent a constant, denotative correspondence, such as is seen in mathematic equations (Stacey, 1992; Cirlot, 1962). That is, when an organization’s strategy is to make minor adjustment to an accepted process, single-loop learning is enacted by means of interpreting denotative symbols, which may take one of three forms: verbal, action, or object. An example of a singleloop verbal symbol is a financial “statement”; an action symbol may be an assessment of the “track record” of the organizational members; and a symbolic object used for single-loop learning might be a physical representation, such as a model or prototype, or new technological hardware.

Double-loop learning involves questioning assumptions, utilizing different perspectives, developing innovations. When Stacey talks about Sony questioning the assumption of the size of radio, he provides an example of double-loop learning (1992: 115). That is, when an organization’s strategy is to innovate, double-loop learning is enacted by means of interpreting verbal, action, or material symbols as ways to uncover assumptions: one’s theories-in-use. Sony questioned the size of an object. Strategists could question the idea of

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a budget based on prior-year numbers (verbal), sales targets based on prior-year targets (verbal), executive retreats (action), planning meetings (action), or design of manufacturing facilities (material). Any type of symbol—verbal, action, or material—can function in any of the ways available in our table.

We add to the functions of symbols a dimension called “oracle,” which is closely related to Gagliardi’s (1990) description of the dimension of pathos: the neglected aesthetic, sensory dimension that calls attention to different ways of knowing. By aesthetics we are referring to a “language-like” quality that has emotional content and can be considered as being encrypted with feelings. Burgi and Roos (2003) address the aesthetic dimension in their study of strategic images. Oracle includes “inner” phenomena of feelings and aesthetic senses and moral codes, as well as the “outer” realm of wholeness. The symbols are not mutually exclusive: Different symbols may repeat or converge with different items of evidence (Gagliardi, 1990: 27). Thus a story about strategic planning could function to encourage single-loop or double-loop learning and also function on the dimension of oracle; that is, on a sensory, emotive, or aesthetic level.

STRATEGY AND TEMPORAL ASSUMPTIONS

The rational planning school assumes an objective, linear progression of time so that simple assumptions of cause and effect and control can be maintained. Even Mintzberg (1987) includes strategy as pattern that emerges from past actions. Mosakowski and Earley (2000) are among the few strategic researchers who discuss assumptions about time. They suggest that subjective views of time, such as shared views of strategy or idiosyncratic perspectives, “might alert individuals to entrepreneurial opportunities” (2000: 800). In their emphasis on different time rhythms, Brown and Eisenhardt (1998) come close to a subjective view of time. Barry and Elmes (1997) also approach a subjective view; to them, emergent strategy is fictional because it enacts “fictional futures from creative interpretations of the past” (1997: 432).

Oracle, too, embraces a subjective view of time, one that involves an interpretation of the present moment. All events are connected by virtue of the present moment, as in Bohm’s (1980) implicate order, rather than by a causal link between past and future. With oracle, the present moment is an interweaving of all moments. Oracle can encourage strategy to become increasingly attuned, with humility, to the here-and-now. With oracle, we surrender control of the future and gain an ability to respond in the present.

THE PROCESS OF EMERGENT STRATEGY FORMULATION

The model used is an adaptation of the learning model, in which cycles of events are characterized as an ongoing process of experience, reflection, interpretation, and action (Kim, 1993; Kolb, 1976). Learning has been linked to organizational effectiveness; indeed, to the very survival of organizations. De Geus (1997) observed that long-living companies are sensitive to [the feedback provided by] environment … The essence of learning is the ability to manage change by changing yourself … to remain in harmony with a changed environment … This gives us an entirely different imperative for corporate success. A successful company is one that can learn effectively. (1997: 20)

Learning requires a willingness to admit to multiple, even challenging, meanings on a regular basis. The more
that a dominant coalition forces a singular meaning, and the action implied therein, the more likely it is that there will be situations in which that meaning doesn’t apply, and so the more likely it is that a severe crisis will be created (Sitkin, 1992).

Our model of learning in emergent strategy through the use of oracle posits that both emergent strategy and oracle engage in the following steps:

1. Sense a possible threat or opportunity.
2. Choose a symbol system.
3. Decide on a model.
4. Draw out the symbols.
5. Reflect on the symbols.
6. Interpret the message.
7. Decide on an action.
9. Repeat cycle after acting.

In addition to restating the stages of learning, we propose that the degree of uncertainty encountered calls for different kinds of learning. In particular, the experience of a crisis—“a temporary state of upset and disequilibrium, characterized chiefly by an individual’s inability to cope with a particular situation using customary methods of problem-solving and by the potential for positive or negative outcomes” (Roberts, 1995: 9-10)—may require the use of oracle symbolism. In this way, the main concern of oracle is the concern with meaning, in particular with the issues of finding meaning by being in communication with a greater wholeness. This is the domain of intuition, emotions, images, and synchronicity (Durant, 2002). Our propositions offer access to this domain.

**STEP 1: SENSE A POSSIBLE THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY**

In the first step, a firm approaches the identification of salient features of the environment in either a long-term, relational, or an issue-by-issue, transactional basis so that the necessary influence is available when issues arise (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). Long-range planning may at first appear paradoxical to an emergent approach in which opportunities are identified on an on-going basis. The difference between the two approaches is the value placed
on the relational. In our view, the edge of chaos is only stable via relationships. Therefore, instead of trying to reduce uncertainty by holding fast to ideas, particularly ideas about what is desirable or unwelcome, emergent strategists could benefit from finding stability in relationships and flexibility in interpretations. As Kohn (1989) pointed out, “Opportunities are missed when novel, unexpected, and nonparadigmatic discovery is ignored” (1989: 1). Thus,

Creativity often involves semantic re-definition—that is, the ability to shift the function of an object or of its part and to use it in a new way, an ability called by Koestler bissociation—connecting previously unrelated levels of experience, or frames of reference, or thinking on more than one plane of experience. (Kohn, 1989: 172)

Proposition 1a: Firms able to take advantage of emergence will be steadfast in their relationships, both intra- and inter-firm.

Proposition 1b: Firms able to take advantage of emergence will be flexible in their interpretations, particularly in their willingness to reinterpret a threat as an opportunity.

After a firm selects a general approach, it must choose a symbol system.

STEP 2: CHOOSE A SYMBOL SYSTEM

A symbol system is a code and may be in numbers or in symbolic images. Market indices, such as the Dow Jones and S&P, are codes. Different codes are relevant in different contexts. Typically, the rational planning model of strategy has sought to exclude variability as much as possible, relying therefore on rigorous quantitative formulae. In oracle, on the other hand, “nothing is meaningless or neutral: everything is significant” and “nothing is independent, everything is in some way related to something else” (Cirlot, 1962: xxxvi).

Proposition 2a: Firms able to take advantage of emergence will look to stories, coincidences, accidents, and other emotionally engaging events as symbols.

Proposition 2b: In firms able to take advantage of emergence, day-to-day events will not be treated as random variations from an ideal, but rather as clues to further progress.

Proposition 2c: Firms able to take advantage of emergence will be open to a variety of both types and functions of symbols.

After strategic management has decided how to evaluate the environment and has chosen a symbol system, a decision model must be specified.

STEP 3: DECIDE ON A MODEL

In the more prescriptive models of strategic planning, the causal path is considered to be linear, sequential, and ideally closed from random events. Such models rely on specified objectives. For example, the model may pre-specify a critical price level or index level with a related action. In addition, the advocates of a particular policy
may offer direct personal incentives, such as financial inducements or promises of future contracts. Further, the dominant metaphors (themselves a form of picturegram) are military, and the overarching goal is competitive advantage.

Basing one’s future on a linear model in a nonlinear world leads to inflexibility and therefore an inability to capitalize on unforeseen opportunity. Also, the rational, prescriptive model assumes perfect rational knowledge of the future. If the forecasting is wrong, then the firm finds itself in serious trouble.

Emergent models are open system models (Katz & Kahn, 1978), which assume equifinality, unforeseen opportunity and challenges, and the usefulness of constant monitoring of feedback. Also, due to the recursive nature of open system models, the strategist is considered to be integral to the model, rather than standing apart. That is, the way people behave is crucial to the outcome of the firm.

Proposition 3a: Firms taking advantage of emergence will posit an open systems model.

Proposition 3b: The complexity of the model will depend on the past experience and the maturity of all members of the firm.

Proposition 3c: The firm and its actors in an emergent context will attend to their own interpretations, feelings, and impulses, and to the quality of their interactions with one another and with the whole.

**STEP 4: DRAW OUT THE SYMBOLS**

The prescriptive model holds that resources, including people, have specific contributions to make to the firm’s objectives. Therefore, the assumption is that acquiring and controlling the resources to a limited end will lead to success for the firm. What this means is that drawing out the symbols is a straightforward process, best left to experts. Accountants and marketers are therefore directed to get certain numbers, as if the firm knows in advance what it needs.

Emergent strategies, on the other hand, encourage experimentation and multiple points of view, because such firms assume uncertainty. Emergent firms allow themselves to be metaphorically located at the edge of chaos. There are objectives, however symbolically they might be represented. And there is a steadfastness to relationships, which requires humble and constant attention to the “other”: environment, other firms, other individuals, stakeholders, and so on. Using relationships as the relatively solid ground, and future opportunities as the unknown component, members of emergent firms continually draw out symbols in their attentive interaction with a variety of others, not least of which are their own bodies and their consciences.

Akin to Freud’s (1900/1988) view of symbols in dreams, we would argue that to some extent we might say that the symbols are manifest content; to draw out the symbols is to reveal latent content. Both manifest and latent content reside in the data; however, they represent different levels of reality (see Brenner, 1982; Carr, 2001).

Proposition 4a: Firms using emergent strategies will have an infrastructure that supports and rewards communication at and among all levels.

Proposition 4b: Firms able to make use of emergent strategies will allow multiple representations of reality to coexist simultaneously.

Proposition 4c: Firms able to make use of emergent strategies will encourage and facilitate the telling of stories, particularly stories about their members’ experiences with things not going as planned.
STEPS 5, 6, AND 7: REFLECT ON THE SYMBOLS, INTERPRET THE MESSAGE, DECIDE ON ACTION

Steps 5, 6, and 7 transform ambiguity into information. To paraphrase Ashby (1963), we would say that a set of possibilities is filtered through relevant constraints until the variety in outcomes is sufficiently limited for the information to be identified. In prescriptive strategic approaches, which rely primarily on financial or market data, the symbol system is ostensibly objective. According to Brooks (2001), the rational and analytic approach “demonstrates an organization’s belief that it can predict the future well enough to examine what will be happening in its sector at a specific point in time” (2001: 2). This is a way to reduce the anxiety of not knowing via control, but in fact in today’s world it is foolhardy to expect to be able to predict and control the future in a complex world. By attempting to factor out emotions, rational planning systems simply push emotions beneath the radar of awareness. Eventually, the restriction of range on feelings and information requires an extreme amount of resources to maintain, thus robbing the firm and its stakeholders of energy to accomplish tasks and build relationships.

Emergent strategies require the intuitive and emotional capacities of individuals. The variety in the message is thereby matched by the complexity of the receiving instrument: the human being. Emergent strategists can learn from oracle seekers who welcome not only objective but also subjective data, for the art of crafting strategy is subjective. Further, emergent strategists can learn from oracle seekers the value of welcoming so-called spiritual sources of information.

Stacey suggests that organizations are complex adaptive systems, which are most creative at the edge of disintegration (Stacey et al., 2000). This location is likely to generate discomfort, and in the short term it may appear to increase anxiety. Given that everything is potentially significant, emotions are essential to the selection and interpretation of symbols. That is, rather than being factored out as in the rational model, increased emotional arousal is a cue that greater meaning and creative movement are possible. In this way growth, individual as well as collective, requires risk taking and trusting one another even while experiencing the discomfort of not knowing. Acknowledging one’s weaknesses to each other is a step toward disintegration, but it is also a step toward relationships and creativity. In a similar manner, Brown and Eisenhardt (1998) argue that organizations function best on the edge of chaos because that is where you can have amplification, as well as the ability of small changes to create large effects.

**Proposition 5a:** Successful emergent strategies will encourage meta-awareness among the firm’s members: of one’s own physical, mental, and emotional responses.

**Proposition 5b:** The awareness stage is supported at the collective level: feelings and observations are invited, accepted, and reflected on.

**Proposition 5c:** Intuition is valued.

**Proposition 6a:** Successful emergent strategies encourage risk taking.

**Proposition 6b:** Successful emergent strategies accept shortcomings as inevitable, and as opportunities for relationship building.

**Proposition 7a:** Firms employing emergent strategies support both integration and differentiation through empowerment of both collective and autonomous decisions.

**Proposition 7b:** Firms employing emergent strategies invite and support communication about the strengths and
weaknesses of the decisions made.

**STEP 8: ACT**

The process of interpretation of an oracle calls for an imagination process in which associations are made among different elements: the symbols, the question, the “objective” conditions. Thus, action that follows from interpretation is undertaken in full awareness that at least as much remains unrevealed as has been revealed. It may be that successful strategists will adopt a posture of humility, reverence, and gratitude. In this way, actions taken are recognized to be limited and appropriate: “The best one could do at the time, given what one knew.”

*Proposition 8:* Firms employing emergent strategies invite and support communication about the strengths and weaknesses of the actions taken.

**STEP 9: REPEAT CYCLE AFTER ACTING**

Once action is taken, the world is transformed and new causal factors become significant (Waldrop, 1992). Any system in interaction with the environment creates a new, transcendent, complex system. New systems continue to emerge “as if from a spirit force that transcends matter” (Waldrop, 1992: 34). Emergence contains the unexpected, and therefore is supported by a sense of humor (Kohn, 1989):

Humor [like creativity] depends on an unexpected, sudden change of frame of mind for two situations that are fully plausible in their own context, but become incompatible in a change frame of reference. This sudden switch at the end of a plausible story is the key to laughter … The ability to operate such switches as in humor or mystery stories helps the scientist to look from a different perspective at a set of facts so they may lead her to a discovery. (1989: 172)

Operating at the edge of chaos, emergent strategies “willingly enter the state of being betwixt-and-between, which is generative and speculative” (to paraphrase Turner, cited in Hyde, 1998: 130), and therefore will proliferate new structures, symbols, metaphors, and even products (Hyde, 1998). The ingredients of moments of the unexpected and uncertain—surprise, quick thinking, sudden gain—suffuse them with humor, not tragedy: “The sense of sight enjoys being surprised … It’s the same law which governs humor. Only the unexpected sally makes you laugh” (Hyde, 1998: 131, citing Picasso).

Chance operations can change the mind because they circumvent intention. “Everyday life is more interesting than forms of celebration,” Cage once said, adding the proviso: “*when* we become aware of it. That *when,*” he explained, “is when our intentions go down to zero. Then suddenly you notice that the world is magical” (Hyde, 1998: 145, citing Cage). The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chugyam Trungpa commented that “magic is the total appreciation of chance.” We are more likely to appreciate chance if we stop trying to control what happens, and one way to do that is to cultivate non-intention. To do this totally is to realize how fully the world is already happening inside us and around us, as if by magic.

*Proposition 9:* Practicing awareness, acceptance, humor, and nonintention increases the opportunities available via emergence.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The science of complexity adds a different theory of causality, one in which creative systems are subject to radical unpredictability, to the loss of the connection between action and long-term outcome. The purpose of the theory and the research propositions above has been to suggest how conditions might be established within which spontaneous selforganization might occur to produce emergent outcomes. This radically different focus on system dynamics has major implications for the practice of management and the design of organizations. What we have hoped to do with this exploratory linking of oracle and emergent strategy is to broaden the understanding of both. Further, it has been our aim to expand the range and complexity of research itself:

Although most mainstream social scientists have taken it for granted that there is only one legitimate overarching scientific method, that we know what it is, that the vast majority of scientists readily agree on what it is, and that there really is no other method that can come even remotely close to giving us valid and reliable knowledge about the world … there are in fact other legitimately scientific ways of apprehending the universe apart from the Newtonian one. (King, 2000: x)

In today’s complex and postmodern, postindustrial world, one in which material resources are inequitably divided and struggle over which threatens planetary survival, entropy is the enemy. It may be that, as mythologist Marie Louise Von Franz (1992) claimed more broadly, two classes of energy behave differently: Whereas physical energy breaks down through entropy, images are negentropic. Therefore, in suggesting that oracle can inform emergent strategy, we are attempting to engage in a poetic discourse. Poetic logic does not debate a monological truth, but rather seeks to represent a wholeness with the “best possible formulation of a reality that cannot adequately be described in any other way because the facts of the situation [lie beyond our comprehension]” (Whitmont, 1979: 32). The question is not about what is true, but rather what enframement gives us the greatest possibility of meaningfulness. In science, such terms include “a limited universe that continues to expand, … or the concept of a particle of anti-matter or pure shape without matter” (Whitmont, 1979: 32).

Drawing on the psychoanalytical tradition as described by Whitmont (1979), we propose that the day-to-day occurrences of a firm be seen as symbolic, as working models or manifest content that represent a subject matter that defies comprehension in accustomed rational categories (Whitmont, 1979: 15). Thus, a symbol is precisely the tool called for when unimaginable complexity must be represented by useful information:

In accepting the images that present themselves as adequate “as if” representations and in accepting that they are adequate, though insufficient representations of a reality that has existence and transcends what we can think, we may acquire the ability to comprehend a different dimension of existence and of functioning. This is a dimension that is certainly no less, and is perhaps more, real than our familiar world of directly observable, classifiable objects.

Like the energy of the atomic nucleus, the energy of the psychic “nucleus” of the [spirit world] constitutes a dimension of so far unfathomed and terrifying elementary energy potential, equally
capable of destroying as well as of aiding us, depending upon whether we become its victim owing to our continuing lack of comprehension or whether we acquire the capacity to relate to it adequately and turn its energy potential to our benefit. (Whitmont, 1979: 33)

New systems continue to emerge. We recommend that students of strategy reflect on the lessons of the ancient Greeks and those of modern physics in order to create the sustainable synergy that enriches our world. Oracles require sensemaking, and, as Atlan asserted, “Randomness is a kind of order, if it can be made meaningful … and the task of making meaning out of randomness is what self-organization is all about” (cited in Taylor, 2001: 136). Attention to oracle expands the range of symbols relevant to the functioning of the firm to include the individual and collective psyche. Since Heisenberg, we need to account for the mutual inter-implication of observer and observed; “knowledge of the object is conditioned by the subject” (Taylor, 2001: 115). The spiritual implication of oracle suggests a wholeness, an entity greater than but not beyond the interactions of its members, or, as Taylor puts it, perhaps a “nontotalizing system that nevertheless acts as a whole” (2001: 65).

What we learn from oracle is the need to find a way to include an understanding of ourselves in our strategic processes, the value of using the aesthetic in communicating, a deep respect for the wholeness that nourishes and sustains us, and an appreciation for the feminine.

References

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