

# Authoring for Curationist Emergent Narrative

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**Abstract.** We propose to examine the unique challenges of authoring for *curationist emergent narrative*, as proposed by Ryan et al. We will survey the difficulties of authoring for emergent narrative systems in general, discuss how the curationist approach shifts authorial leverage, and closely examine the affordances of authoring (especially the authoring of *story sifting patterns*) for a number of recent curationist systems, including Ryan’s *Sheldon*, Garbe’s *Dwarf Grandpa*, and Kreminski et al.’s *Why Are We Like This?*

**Keywords:** Emergent narrative · Story sifting · Curation.

## 1 Authoring Challenges in Emergent Narrative

A recurring challenge in interactive narrative, sometimes referred to as the “narrative paradox” [7], involves the incorporation of unpredictable user or player actions into a coherent story. *Emergent narrative* approaches to interactive narrative attempt to address this problem by framing narrative as an emergent consequence of interaction between a human interactor and a cast of virtual agents [10, 13]. The goals, emotional states, and other simulated aspects of these characters form a systematic model of character behavior, on which the interactor can act (through game mechanics) to influence the direction of the story.

From an authoring perspective, the emergent narrative approach is unusual because it distances authors from the consequences of their decisions. To author for emergent narrative is to define “action tendencies, goals and emotional parameters” for characters, as well as other aspects of the *simulated storyworld*, in an attempt to construct a storyworld from which the kinds of stories you want interactors to experience will naturally tend to emerge [8, 9].

As a result, two key difficulties with the emergent narrative approach appear. First, when narrative is primarily emergent rather than scripted, the space of possible narratives that the interactor might experience can very quickly become unboundedly large. This limits the extent to which the authors of the storyworld can predict the outcomes of their decisions, as well as the ability of the computer system to understand and respond to the narratives it’s producing.

Second, emergent narrative approaches demand a radically different skillset and mindset of content authors, who must learn how to think procedurally and decompose stories into collections of recombinable content units, rather than

scripting relatively fixed storylines whose content units will reliably be encountered by the interactor in a particular sequence. Writers who are used to producing content for non-interactive or lightly interactive stories may face particular difficulty here, but even authors with experience in creating branching or templated narrative content may struggle to adapt to the atomized and deeply procedural nature of writing for emergent narrative.

## 2 Authoring for Curation

Recently, Ryan et al. proposed a reframing of the challenges of emergent narrative in terms of *curation* [14]. Ryan hopes that, by creating narrative systems that can automatically *sift* the vast quantities of narrative material that simulations produce, some of the fundamental challenges of emergent narrative—especially that of enabling narrative systems to understand the emergent stories they’re producing—can be addressed [15]. This approach, which Ryan terms “curationist emergent narrative”, was successfully employed in several systems prior to Ryan’s introduction of the term [12, 1, 11], and has since been incorporated into several more [2–4].

Curationist systems so far have relied on sizable libraries of “story sifting patterns” to identify narratively potent material within large chronicles of simulation events. Each sifting pattern defines a single emergent microstory: an abstract sequence of events that the narrative system is capable of recognizing and responding to in appropriate ways. Structuring content in terms of sifting patterns helps streamline the process of authoring for emergent narrative—both by allowing authors to distance themselves from some of the particulars of simulation implementation (since sifting patterns operate on events without regard to how exactly these events came about) and by restoring the ability of authors to think about content in terms of structured (albeit abstract) sequences of events.

However, in Ryan’s own work to date, sifting patterns were authored as blobs of procedural Python code. This makes them somewhat difficult to write correctly and acts as a barrier to entry for content authors with limited programming experience. Since then, Kreminski et al. have attempted to make the authoring of sifting patterns more approachable to a wider range of potential creators, both with the domain-specific declarative story sifting language Felt [5] and the sifting pattern authoring tool Synthesifter [6], which allows users to specify story sifting patterns by presenting the system with example sequences of events. Though limited, these early efforts have produced promising results in enabling relatively naïve authors (including high school students) to produce well-formed sifting patterns.

Altogether, we believe that the curationist perspective productively reframes many of the challenges that have traditionally presented themselves in authoring for emergent narrative. However, curationism also brings its own set of unique authoring challenges to the table. Through study of existing curationist and non-curationist emergent narrative systems, we propose to investigate how curationism shifts authorial leverage.

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