

Elements about the Emergence Issue

A survey of emergence definitions

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Abstract

Emergence, a concept that first appeared in philosophy, has been widely explored in the domain of complex systems and is sometimes considered to be the key ingredient that makes “complex systems” “complex”. Our goal in this paper is to give a broad survey of emergence definitions, to extract a shared definition structure and to discuss some of the remaining issues. We do not know of any comparable surveys about the emergence concept. For this presentation, we start from a broadly applicable approach and finish with more specific propositions. We first present five selected works with a short analysis of each. We then propose a merged analysis in which we isolate a common structure through all definitions but also what we think needs further research. Finally, we briefly describe some perspectives about the emergence engine idea also referred to as emergent engineering.

Keywords survey, emergence, complexity, levels definition

1 Introduction

Emergence, a concept that first appeared in philosophy [1, 2], has been widely explored in the domain of complex systems [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10] and is sometimes considered to be the “key ingredient that makes complex systems complex” [11].

On March 9th 2005, we made a basic one-keyword Internet search for “emergence” papers on computer science specific engines and generalist scientific engines. We retrieved impressive amounts of relevant documents:

Table 1

Search Engine	Number of results
ACM	648
IEEE	1450
CiteSeer	8257
ScholarGoogle	372000

From these, we chose to survey five works matching the following criteria:

- Emergence definition is the primary goal
- It contains a significantly different (and possibly contradictory) approach from other selected papers

We chose not to give any introductory example or vague intuition here because it might fall out of the scope of a particular approach. Our goal in this paper is to give a broad survey of emergence definitions, to extract a shared definition structure

and to discuss some of the remaining issues. We do not know of any comparable surveys about the emergence concept.

In this paper, we start from a broadly applicable approach and finish with more specific propositions. We first present five selected works with a short evaluation of each. We then propose a merged analysis in which we isolate a common structure through all definitions but also what we think needs further research. Finally, we briefly describe some perspectives about the emergence engine idea also referred to as emergent engineering.

2 Elements from existing definitions

2.1 Detection and emergence

2.1.1 Concept

The first idea about emergence we present is the work of Bonabeau and Dessalles [7]. As the title suggests, the authors give significant importance to the detection of the phenomenon in their proposition:

“We propose here a conceptual framework, based on the notion of detection [...] Then we show that emergence is related to complexity shifts. Lastly, we propose to focus on the observer, rather on the emerging system, in order to show that all characterizations of emergence are implicitly connected to the notion of detection.”

Given the two following notions:

detector defined as “any device which gives a binary response to its input”

relative complexity $C(S|D, T)$ of a system S “where D is a set of detectors and T a set of available tools that allow to compute a description of structures detected through D ” which corresponds to the difficulty to describe the system given T and D .

Emergence happens when between time t and $t + \Delta t$, two events happen:

1. a detector D_k becomes activated
2. $C_{t+\Delta t}(S|T, D_1, \dots, D_{k-1}, D_k) < C_t(S|T, D_1, \dots, D_{k-1})$

This property is likely to happen in a hierarchy of detectors as they point out: “When a detector becomes active in such a hierarchy, the active detectors from the lower level that are connected to it can be omitted from the description.[...] Emergence is thus a characteristic feature of detection hierarchies.”

2.1.2 Discussion

One widely shared feature of emergence definitions is the existence of levels. This definition is interesting because it defines emergence as internal to an observation device, that must be hierarchically organized. The authors do not assume levels *a priori* in the definition but show that this is a condition *sine qua non* for the complexity discontinuity to happen.

No assumption is made about the system under detection, therefore one can apply this criterion on both artificial and natural systems as long as detection is possible.

This defines a *low-to-high level emergence*.

2.2 The emergence test

2.2.1 Concept

The first definition focused on an observer modeled by a detection apparatus. This makes emergence somehow “subjective” as the complexity measure depends on this apparatus. However, once the observer is defined, emergence only depends on the perceived behavior. The emergence test introduces the consideration of the system’s design in addition to its behavior, and therefore moves subjectivity out of the very domain of observation.

Explicitly inspired by Turing’s test for *intelligence* [12], Ronald, Sipper and Capcarrère [13, 14] proposed to define an “emergence tag gun” instead of a formal definition.

This *emergence* test involves a system designer and a system observer (both of whom can in fact be one and the same). Then if the following three conditions hold, the emergence tag is conferred:

Design The system has been constructed by the designer by describing *local* elementary interactions between components in a language L_1

Observation The observer is *fully aware* of the design, but describes *global* behavior and properties of the running system, over a period of time, using a language L_2

Surprise The language of design L_1 and the language of observation L_2 are distinct, and the causal link between the elementary interactions programmed in L_1 and the behaviors observed in L_2 is *non-obvious* to the observer, who therefore experiences surprise. In other words, there is a cognitive dissonance between the observer’s mental image of the system’s design stated in

L_1 and his contemporaneous observation of the system's behavior stated in L_2 .

They describe this question as reposing on how easy it is for the observer to bridge the gap between L_1 and L_2 .

2.2.2 Discussion

We think we can consider Bonabeau and Dessalles' D and T as words and syntax of an observation language L_2 .

The introduction of the design language L_1 has two important consequences:

1. Emergence happens between the design and the observation. This defines a *design-to-behavior emergence*.
2. Existence of L_1 restricts the application of this criterion to artificial systems i.e. designed by the human hand.

Emergence happens when observation and design appear loosely coupled to the observer. Therefore, the result of ones "tag gun" might differ from another, and the resulting emergence is highly subjective.

This corresponds to Baas' *deducible emergence* [15] where two disjoint levels are linked by a computational process. Indeed, Baas defines Obs^2 (similar to L_2), the "new observational" mechanisms with respect to the observation mechanisms Obs^1 (that are part of L_1) used in the dynamics.

In the field of decentralized artificial intelligence, Demazeau and Müller [16] have made a similar distinction between *internal* and *external* descriptions of agents where internal description refers to the real architecture of an agent and external description refers to its externally perceived behavior.

2.3 Simulation emergence

2.3.1 Concept

Making the parallel between intelligence and emergence as subjective notions defined by tests can lead to controversy. One answer could be to consider that emergence happens when a large number of scientists agree that it does. Another answer is to make the definition objective. Simulation emergence is such an attempt, focused on the simulation domain.

In Darley [17] we find this definition:

"A true emergent phenomenon is one for which the optimal means of prediction is simulation."

The author defines two means of prediction depending on n the size of a system:

- $s(n)$: the optimal “amount of computation required to simulate a system, and arrive at a prediction of the given phenomenon”.
- $u(n)$: stands for “deeper level of understanding”, the way we try to avoid computation by “a creative analysis”, $u(n)$ is the amount of computation required by this method.

Then the system will be considered as emergent iff $u(n) \geq s(n)$ i.e. direct simulation is optimal relative to the “amount of computation” measure. When decomposed into “steps” the amount of computation is defined as the sum over steps of Kolmogorov complexities.

We link this definition with the *weak emergence* from Bedau [18, 19]:

“A macro-state P of S with micro-dynamic D is weakly emergent iff P can be derived from D and S ’s external conditions but only by simulation. [...] for P to be weakly emergent, what matters is that there is a derivation of P from D and S ’s external conditions and *any* such derivation is a simulation.”

2.3.2 Discussion

First, Bedau describes a new relation namely the *micro-to-macro* one, the macro-level being composed of micro-entities. We believe we can join this *micro-to-macro emergence* with the low-to-high one (cf 2.1.1) without a loss of sense.

The key issue is to understand what a simulation is. Among all the ways to derive the phenomenon in a computable manner, some are simulations, others are “shortcuts”. Then optimality of simulation is equivalent to the absence of “shortcuts”, this is why we decided to present the two definitions together.

Interpreted in the $L_1 L_2$ framework, this states an irreducible gap between the language of design L_1 and observation L_2 which is optimally filled by going in every details of the system’s evolution (i.e. simulation). We note that the emergence “tag gun” used the size of the gap (“ease to bridge”), here the size itself does not matter.

An interesting point is that both authors address the question of emergence’s decidability:

- In Bedau’s formulation: “One might worry that the concept of weak emergence is fairly useless since we generally have no proof that a given macro-state of a given system is underivable without simulation.”

- With Darley’s words “Can we determine, for a given system, whether or not it is emergent ?”.

Darley suggests that: “for any complex system which is capable of universal computation, we know that the best (only) means of prediction in such a situation is to *run the program* i.e. perform the simulation”. Bedau notes that we usually “possess substantial *empirical* support” to assess it is so. Then, even if we have gained in objectivity, we might have encountered an undecidable criterion based on the simulation’s definition.

If we reformulate as “the global behavior is optimally obtained by running a system made of interacting micro agents”, it provides a natural way to apply the definition to multi-agent based simulations.

This definition might not apply out of the simulation domain¹.

2.4 Downward causation and emergence

2.4.1 Concept

Bedau has defined *weak* emergence with respect to the *strong* emergence based on *downward causation*. This view is illustrated by Timothy O’Connor [20]:

“to capture a very strong sense in which an emergent’s causal influence is irreducible to that of the micro-properties on which it supervenes; it bears its influence in a direct *downward* fashion, in contrast to the operation of a simple structural macro-property, whose causal influence occurs via the activity of the micro-properties which constitutes it.”

In [21], Sawyer notes that:

“In MAS and Alife social simulations, the emergent pattern is fully explained by the microsimulation; that is, reduced to an explanation in terms of agents and their interactions. Such reductionist assumptions imply that higher-level emergent patterns do not have any causal force.”

In order to achieve *downward causation*, he proposes that:

1. “as in blackboard systems, the emergent frame must be represented as a data structure external to all of the participating agents”

¹perhaps an adaptation to problem solving could be: emergent problems are “optimally” solved (resp. derived) by a decentralized system (resp. micro-dynamics’ simulation)

2. “all emergent collective structures must be internalized by each agent, resulting in an agent-internal version of the emergent.”
3. “This internalization process is not deterministic and can result in each agent having a slightly different representation.”

2.4.2 Discussion

The question here is the possibility of *downward causation*.

We believe that L_1 and L_2 are of significant interest to clarify this issue. It sounds natural to us to consider that everything with causal powers in an artificial system lies in the L_1 design language as it must live within algorithm. Thus even if a data structure exists out of the agents at a macro level, it belongs to the design language. Then L_2 to L_1 causal power is impossible.

Until here we might have mixed design/observation with micro/macro as it is often the same: We conceive agents and we are very happy to show their collective behavior to colleagues. However, it can be interesting to distinguish the micro/macro from design/observation.

Sawyer’s definition is based on the existence of a macro entity external to micro agents. This existence might provide causal powers to this entity on agents. Therefore it allows a *macro to micro causation* we can consider as *downward* as scale decreases. However, this is different from O’Connor’s view as agents do not constitute the macro entity.

Existence of micro as well as macro entities implies they are part of the L_1 which makes the definition based on design only. This makes Sawyer’s definition contradictory to Ronald ad al.’s emergence test as L_2 vanishes.

2.5 Grammar emergence

2.5.1 Concept

This last definition of emergence is specific as its scope is limited to systems expressed in a particular grammar model. This model provides intuitive definitions for micro/macro and design/observation levels.

Kubik [22] has proposed an approach based on “the whole is more than the sum of its parts” as inspiration and *Isometric Array Grammars* [23] as a modeling tool.

The key idea is to define a “whole” language and a “sum of the parts” language. From an initial *array* configuration, a language is obtained by rewriting using *isometric* production rules. For a given set of rules P_i , the corresponding language is noted $L(P_i)$.

We can sum up the proposal as follows:

$$\underbrace{L(\bigcup_i P_i)}_{Whole} \supset \underbrace{superimposition_i}_{Sum} \underbrace{(L(P_i))}_{Parts}$$

More

We do not give the definition of the *superimposition* operator here.

Emergence is the case of an array being in the whole language but not in the sum of parts. The first is obtained by putting all parts together and deriving configurations, the last by deriving configuration for every part separately and putting results together afterward. Putting together is the way we get a macro entity from micro ones, and derivation is the way to get the language (L_2) we observe from the rules (L_1) we designed.

2.5.2 Discussion

When someone hears “the whole is more than the sum of its parts”, he or she might reply very fast that a system *is* composed of its parts and therefore cannot be more. To go beyond this triviality, Kubik’s elegant idea is to switch micro/macro with design/observation. This makes things comparable as Kubik defines his gap between two set of arrays (similar to L_2 and a L'_2), at the observation level. Unfortunately, the definition is not so homogeneous as putting together is different for arrays and for rules. There is another drawback: Without restrictions on rules, it might be impossible to determine if an array is emergent.

Kubik’s idea is close to an informal definition of emergence from [24] stated in the VOWELS framework [25] for multi-agent systems (MAS). This framework suggests a description of such systems as agents (A) in their environment (E), using interactions (I) forming an organisation (O). Then the pseudo equation from [24]:

$$MAS = A + E + I + O + Emergence$$

can be seen as:

$$\underbrace{L(MAS)}_{Whole} \supset \underbrace{\sum_{v \in vowels}}_{Sum} \underbrace{(L(v))}_{Parts}$$

More

with VOWELS as an alternate micro partition of a macro MAS.

3 General framework

3.1 The minimal setting

We chose to survey very different works. However, the following setting is shared by most of emergence definitions:

1. something appears, it is a candidate to the title of *emergent*
2. it happens within the dynamics of a system
3. at least 2 levels/languages are distinguished
4. it satisfies a criterion that makes it an emergent

The first two points describe a system where something pops up, usually called a phenomenon.

The last point describes a criterion that defines the emergent subset of the larger set of things that pop up (we said the *phenomena*), this criterion uses the notion of levels (third point).

3.2 Open issues

Any precise definition requires refinements about the minimal setting. Most of the time, the refinements concern the definition of levels and what kind of criterion we define between them. We come back on these two points but first we want to clarify a prerequisite: The observation of the phenomenon.

3.2.1 Observation

The possibility to perceive the emergent phenomenon is not clear. Actually, we have to consider two issues, perceive the phenomenon and perceive its “emergence-ness”. We here focus on the phenomenon itself as its “emergenceness” depends on the chosen criterion.

If we consider a phenomenon P , we can wonder what ways we have to observe it. Bonabeau and Dessalles suppose we have a detector. For Ronald and al. the emergent phenomenon is the word of the L_2 language. Sawyer describes agent internalization which seems to be a way for the agent to perceive the phenomenon. Finally, Kubik’s phenomena are words.

We can wonder what happens to computability. For example, can we consider that a phenomenon is a computable property of the system’s trace? Furthermore, we might wonder if Church-Turing thesis makes the space of “any device which gives a binary response to its input” (cf 2.1.1) equivalent to the space of Turing machines.

Unfortunately, observation is not always clearly defined. This is important if we consider that emergents are a subset of observable phenomena.

3.2.2 Levels and downward causation

One of the main issues about emergence is to clarify what are the different levels in the system. We identified two principal conceptions:

- Design/Observation distinction [13] (close to internal and external descriptions from [16])
- Micro/Macro or Local/Global levels possibly structured into a hierarchy [7, 21]

In the following table, we summarize how these two distinctions are expressed in the presented works:

Table 2

Author	Micro/Macro	Design/Observation
Bonabeau and al.	Hierarchy	Observation only
Ronald and al.	L_1/L_2	L_1/L_2 ($L_1 \cap L_2 = \emptyset$)
Darley	Agents/Phenomenon	Agents/Phenomenon
Bedau	Micro-dynamics/Macro-state	Micro-dynamics/Macro-state
Kubik	Parts/Whole	Rules/Configurations
Sawyer	Agents/Emergent	Design only

One might ask: “Do we always design micro and observe macro?”. The definition from Bonabeau and Dessalles do not deal with design. Sawyer claims a macro entity must exist but it is not clear if it must be artificial (and then designed). Kubik makes the distinction between the two relations but still the whole system is designed micro (as the union of rules) and observed macro.

Then we have a macro phenomenon. Based on where observation takes place, Müller [26] distinguished:

Strong emergence: “when the observer of the phenomenon is inside the system, endowing the phenomenon has causal powers.” This is very close to Sawyer’s emergence and certainly related to the idea of internal description, as the observation mechanism must be inside the system’s entities.

Weak emergence: “when it is not, making it an *epiphenomenon*”, which corresponds to Ronald and al.’s L_2 language excluding all the design and also to Forrest’s definition of *emergent computing* [27].

Internal observation allows causal powers and we are back to the question of causation. Many philosophical works about emergence have stated “downward” causation has a key feature [28, 20]. The impossibility of such a feature is sometimes used to exclude emergence from the ken of artificial systems.

We have seen the definition of Sawyer's downward causation from a macro entity to micro ones. All these entities are part of the design language. Müller [26] suggested that this macro entity where macro phenomena leave their prints might be called the environment. This provides a multi-agent formulation where agents with reduced action/perception (micro) fields interact with a shared environment (macro).

However, this definition is weaker than O'Connor's who required the macro entity to be composed of the micro ones to assess downward causation; In this case we have one single system which can be seen as composed or as a whole. This small modification makes the levels completely different; it results in a radically different notion of emergence. Indeed "downward" causation depends a lot on what we mean by "up" level, "down" level and then "downward".

3.3 Criterion

We have some phenomena generated in a multi-level framework. Some of them are said emergent, according to a defining criterion. We have jointly discussed bidirectional causation and levels because of a direct dependence.

Bonabeau and Dessalles define emergence as a sudden concision of the system's description given by a detection apparatus. Their criterion is explicitly based on a complexity measure and emergence is an irregularity in this complexity's evolution during the system's activity. Ronald and al.'s criterion is surprise. We think we can reformulate this as "how complex it is to describe what we see with respect to some information", i.e. design information. This is interesting because Bonabeau and Dessalles describe emergence as a shift of such a complexity. Both definitions make emergence close to the notion of relative (to some information) descriptive complexity.

For Bedau [18], two criteria for emergent phenomena are:

- "Emergent phenomena are dependent on underlying processes."
- "Emergent phenomena are autonomous from underlying processes."

This autonomy seems difficult to define, especially for artificial systems, because the system runs as designed and its design is available. Autonomy for Bedau is the need for simulation, as simulation is the only way to predict. The terms "algorithmic effort" [18] or "amount of computation" [17] suggests that optimality is relative to some kind of time complexity. Therefore, they make emergence close to relative (to simulation) time complexity.

Kubik gives an alternative to such complexity considerations with a criterion based on a gap between languages. Although, his definition as a whole system

more powerful than the sum of its parts can be considered as a difference of generative power between systems, for a specific phenomenon (array), emergence is a binary criterion.

Finally, Sawyer's definition is based on the presence or absence of downward causation that is hardly a complexity issue or a gradual criterion.

The following table summarizes some properties of the criteria we have seen:

Author(s)	Criterion	Binary/Gradual	Complexity
Bonabeau and al.	Complexity shift	Binary	Explicit
Ronald and al.	Surprise	Gradual	Implicit
Darley	$u(n)/s(n)$ Balance	Gradual	Implicit
Bedau	Simulation optimality	Binary	Implicit
Kubik	Set difference	Binary	No
Sawyer	Downward Causation	Binary	No

One problem is how far we can decide whether a given phenomenon is emergent or not (satisfies the criterion). For an observed phenomenon, can we decide of its *emergenceness*?

Bonabeau and Dessalles: The criterion is decidable as far as we have access to the complexity measures before and after a detector's activation.

Ronald and al.: No decidability assumption is made about surprise.

Bedau and Darley: Optimality of simulation might be impossible to decide; usually, empirical support exists.

Kubik: No assumption made on decidability for the two languages.

Sawyer: Causation of a macro phenomenon on micro entities might be decidable if the micro/macro is well defined and causation is given a decidable definition.

4 Conclusion and perspectives

With this survey, our goal was to identify a "computer science" emergence definition (the reader interested in a more philosophical approach might consult [29, 30, 31]). We have isolated a minimal setting, small as definitions are significantly different. These differences might fit more or less your intuition of emergence.

By going through these definitions, we have noticed that emphasis is usually put on the criterion proposed. However, for a computational definition, we think the following points should be refined:

- How do we apply levels on existing systems?
- Can we tag a phenomenon as emergent in a computable way?

We might also explore to what extent a specific definition of emergence is linked with definitions of self-organization or complexity and other terms we usually meet in the field of complex systems.

Nonetheless, the reason we wanted a computer definition is the “much from little” idea that Holland has associated to emergence [32]. Then a lazy computer engineer would certainly be emergentist to work little for a great result. Moreover, if little is all we can do, emergence could be a way to go beyond our limits. Thus emergent engineering sounds like an appealing research track.

This idea is already present in [13] and [26]. We can also refer to the “New Emergent World models Through Individual, Evolutionary and Social learning” (NEW TIES) project, the idea of “Emergent Intelligence” from [33] or the ADELFE methodology [34].

In the future, we hope to progress in this direction by using insights provided by definitions and mechanisms suggested by widely accepted emergence examples (social animals, markets), and Holland’s inspiration as a goal.

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