The Dramaturgy of Videogames: A Dialogue

Mike Sell and Michael M. Chemers

Abstract *Dramaturgy is a time-tested method for approaching the theatrical text as an artifact to be translated and transformed into live performance. In this dialogue, the authors identify key areas of overlap between live theatre and the liveness of videogame play, explore the significance of empathy to the experience of liveness, and describe the videogame player as a cybernetic, improvisational dramaturg.*

A dialogue between Mike Sell and Michael M. Chemers

Mike Sell: The organizers of the *Live Performance and Video Games* conference asked the contributors to consider those terms—live, performance, and videogames—in the broadest sense and in the widest array of possible relationships. During the conference, we saw some contributors speak to the way that live performance functions as part of video game design, others to the challenges of incorporating game technologies into theatre and other kinds of live performance, and yet others to the challenges of designing gameful experiences to promote particular kinds of liveness for audiences.

For me, that diversity of topics was thrilling. But it also struck a chord given my interest in dramaturgy, particularly a conception of dramaturgy that embraces a more systemic approach to performance and a more historically and culturally encompassing approach to the way technology shapes the communal experience of live performance. That's why I wanted to speak with you, Michael, given our recent exploration of these issues in our book *Systemic Dramaturgy*.

To start, I think it's fair to assume that not everyone understands exactly what dramaturgy is or why it's relevant to liveness, performance, and videogames. How would you define 'dramaturgy'?

Michael Chemers: Well, the definition of dramaturgy has never been fully settled. Defining dramaturgy is part of an ongoing conversation among dramaturgs—directors too. The first chapter of my book *Ghost Light* starts with the sentence, 'What

the #$%@ Is a Dramaturg?' And while we can debate the uses of the term in the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Gustav Freytag, Bertolt Brecht…

Mike Sell: …Not to mention Aristotle, Zeami, or whoever wrote the Sanskrit *Natya Shastra* …

Michael Chemers: … or so-called New Media Dramaturgs like Marianne van Kerkhoven. I think the conversation is less about what dramaturgy *is* than what *theatre* is and what it might be.

Mike Sell: Is that a productive conversation—something that drives creativity and critical thinking?

Michael Chemers: For sure. The definition a particular dramaturg might work by depends on what a production needs at the moment. Each individual production, each individual performance requires different kinds of approaches to dramaturgy.

Mike Sell: Each performance genre or medium, too.

Michael Chemers: Yes. But basically, we can boil dramaturgy down to two things. First, when we talk about dramaturgy, we're talking about how we approach the aesthetic architecture of a performance. That might concern structure: is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy? Or something else entirely? That's the practical part of dramaturgy. Second, it can be defined in terms of a special focus on the dramatic text, typically a pre-written script, and how to transform that text into a performance. And this is where the idea of 'systemic dramaturgy' comes into play. That's the critical or reflective aspect of dramaturgy that encompasses all parts and processes of a production.

Mike Sell: But we also need to consider the relationship of the dramaturg to the particular elements of a production. This is where dramaturgy can be considered a systemic form of critical consideration and collaboration. Everyone involved in theatre is doing dramaturgy of some kind. Actors make choices about movement and vocalization, designers about color and line, directors about message and authenticity. Everyone involved in a production is always thinking in terms of structure and significance. Dramaturgy is the practice of making thoughtful, expressive choices no matter what your role in a production might be. Dramaturgy is about helping everyone in a production make those kinds of thoughtful, expressive choices.

Michael Chemers: Exactly. But there are also people who train specifically as dramaturgs. They are experts in the processes by which those decisions are made—and about how those processes can be well integrated. They also bring to the conversation

a sense of history and critical thinking about the material that the other members of the creative team might not have at the ready.

Mike Sell: So, we've got two dimensions of dramaturgy—form and significance—and two kinds of dramaturgs—everyone involved in the work and the specialists. And in some sense, both of these are defined in terms of their relationship to a particular technology of performance, whether it's voice, lighting, design, whatever.

Michael Chemers: Right. We can think about the script as a structure that determines certain choices even before a team gets involved in its production. And we can think about the performer who brings that text to life—not just the actor, but also the lighting technician, the make-up artist, the stagehands, everyone involved in the execution of the performance.

Mike Sell: Extending that framework to videogames, we can consider the game as a procedural system that structures and manages the player's activity. And we can consider how the player interacts with the game and finds ways to meet its challenge, experiment with the rules, glitch it, mod it, fill in the narrative gaps with their imagination, tell stories about it, and so on. This suggests that the player is doing a kind of *improvisational dramaturgy* during play, engaging with the game's various systems in an experimental way to produce meaningful experience. This suggests that a player could learn to do it differently, better. The player is both protagonist and prop master.

Michael Chemers: In those terms, we can say that there are three key areas where videogame studies and traditional dramaturgical work overlap. These enable us to think critically, particularly about empathy, which is one of the enduring concerns of dramaturgy.

Mike Sell: Both in the sense that a dramaturg is helping their team devise a production that touches an audience but also in the sense that they model a form of empathetic collaboration for the production team?

Michael Chemers: Yes. But we always begin with the idea of storytelling through dramatic action. And that's where we see what I think is the most durable connection between theatre and videogames. That's what videogames do. That's what plays do. Some videogames and plays are more committed to storytelling, while others might only sketch a narrative while focusing attention on something else: a fascinating mechanic or a combination of gesture and sound. Performance installations are an example of that—a powerful reduction of storytelling to a particular conjunc-

tion or moment of empathetic experience. Regardless of the quality of or interest in storytelling in the sense of character, setting, and so on, we see a common concern between theatre and videogames with the construction of dramatic action that is experientially intense and, to greater or lesser degree, interactive. Of course, there are lots of ways to tell stories—lots of ways to make and experience stories as dramatic action. For the dramaturg, that's the key issue: how to make dramatic action significant for the audience.

Mike Sell: I'm reminded of the distinction Astrid Ensslin makes between cognitive ludicity, the kind of intense analytic, imaginative, affective, and literacy interaction that the mind engages in when presented with a novel, poem, or film, and ergodic ludicity, which encompasses the kinetic, haptic, visual, and other interactions that we associate with playing a game.

Michael Chemers: Second, there's world-building. In plays and videogames, world-building is both imaginative and a matter of nuts and bolts. A stage carpenter and a videogame designer are both world-builders, and so are the actors, who build the world through everything they appear to be and express.

Then there's the third area of overlap between traditional dramaturgy and videogame play, which is a little more subtle and has to do with embodiment. It has to do with the presence of spectators and actors, though also with the total environment of the play experience. The embodied presence of the player in a game is a fascinating and, I would argue, dramaturgical presence.

Storytelling through dramatic action, world-building, and critical embodiment—that's where I'd say dramaturgs interested in videogame liveness would find interesting things to think about. And so you and I would argue, because of these shared concerns and affordances, that we can take the traditional principles by which dramaturgy has been practiced and talked about over the past 2,500 years and apply them to new cultural products like digital media and videogames.

Mike Sell: Let's start with dramatic storytelling. How can a dramaturgical approach help us understand how videogames provide players with a sense not only of liveness but of being an integral part of the dramatic action?

Michael Chemers: Traditional dramaturgy is interested in the psychological process called identification, which is a way of describing how we develop emotional ties with objects and people other than ourselves. The idea is we see some trait or circumstance in the other thing that resonates with us and, before we know it, we are emotionally connected to the other thing. Hypothetically, this provides a foundation for empathy and for the ability to consider matters from a point of view other than your own, and these capacities are critical to the operation of a community.

Let's compare identification in different media. When I go to a movie and I identify with the characters on the screen or to a play and identify with the characters on the stage, I identify with them in a way that is a bit removed from me and my sense of who I am in that moment, even though I might respond emotionally to what a character is experiencing. I can empathize with the character but mostly as another person. And when I think of that moment, I will think of it in terms of the character's experience: of Hamlet's grief when he learns about Ophelia's death, for instance. In fact, I might not even think in terms of the character, but of the actor who plays the character. It's Arnold Schwarzenegger who says, 'I'll be back', right? This is not to say that the experience of identification and empathy that films inspire is not a rich and complex experience, but it's in the third person.

But when I'm playing a videogame, identification and empathy always happen in the first person, regardless of the visual framing of the action. I fell off the cliff. I get attacked by aliens. I get on my horse and ride away into the sunset. Right? The action is in the first person. So, the nature of identification, which is key to the creation of empathy, has the potential in games to be even more intense than in the theatre or cinema.

Mike Sell: Maybe just different? I've had some pretty intense experiences in movie theatres. Again, I think of the similarities between cognitive and ergodic play that Ensslin identifies.

Michael Chemers: True, but when people talk about going to plays and having life-changing, life-altering experiences that's different. Videogames go to a different place, right?

Mike Sell: For sure, particularly given the layered nature of game play, which we'll get into later. But we're speaking about a difference in context and process more than a difference in the quality of the experience. I'm reminded of Katherine Isbister's *How Games Move Us*, where she speaks to the identification that occurs in videogames as involving multiple kinds of experience and activity: the visceral, the cognitive, the social, and the fantastic (Isbister 2017, 11).

Michael Chemers: Exactly, so we can argue about whether it's a matter of difference or degree, but I'd argue that videogames could possibly be even more transformative than theatre.

Mike Sell: I disagree. Let me push back on that a bit by changing *who* we're talking about when we compare theatrical experience and gaming experience—and get us back to the idea that when we play a videogame, we are involved in a distinctly dramaturgical experience. This is something that's always kind of irked me when peo-

ple—not you, Michael—talk about the difference between theatre and videogames, that difference typically having to do with the difference between being an audience member and being a player.

But it seems to me that the experience of playing a videogame, particularly if we want to consider it a form of improvisatory dramaturgy, is more usefully compared to being an actor or a director in the middle of rehearsals, when the challenges of the script are still being identified or are emerging through iterative practice. This is the moment when the members of a team are trying things out, often doing things over and over to get it right or identify a problem.

Similarly, when we play a videogame, we do a lot of things besides control our avatar through a challenging space or a bit of dramatic action. Games require us to think and act in terms of character creation, user interface, inventory management, strategy, and so on. And we're doing all of that in anticipation of consequences we can't fully anticipate, but which are organically linked to what we're doing right now. And there's a lot of repetition. Videogame play, like theatrical rehearsal, is an iterative process.

Which goes to say that dramaturgical approaches to the videogame should think not only in terms of the narrative and the player's role in the narrative, but the ways in which players are doing the kinds of technical things that, in terms of theatre, we would normally say belong to the director, the lighting designer, the actor …

Michael Chemers: … or the dramaturg!

Mike Sell: And we haven't even touched on the kinds of things that videogame players do in terms of modding, a practice that can alter the text itself to enable a different kind of play experience.

Michael Chemers: Absolutely. And I think shifting our understanding of the videogame player as doing dramaturgy in the way an actor or director does dramaturgy but also as a specialized dramaturg does dramaturgy enables us to bring to bear on the videogame dramaturgical questions that have been honed over thousands of years. We can ask really interesting questions about dramatic storytelling, world-building, and embodiment and get answers that can enable us to have more fun, but we can also ask really critical questions about those same things to address the social, political, and ideological dimensions of videogame play, just as we do for the theatre.

Again, we recognize the two responsibilities of dramaturgs: to help create a meaningful experience and to ask critical questions. For example, I think of the videogame *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), a game I love dearly. It's a wonderful action game that centers you as the star of a classic Western narrative: guys in cowboy hats, dusty settlements, desert landscapes, shootouts, bank robberies, everything a

fan could possibly want to be part of that drama. But the game also allows you to do terrible things to innocent people, right? In fact, in the sequel, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, we can beat a suffragette into unconsciousness or worse, and there seems to be no affordance in the game for us to reflect on that.

We need to think about why the game allows us to do those things and whether or not we, as players, do those things. That has an effect on the way that we move through the world, the real world, right?

Mike Sell: Well, I don't know about that. I get a little queasy when people claim that real-life action is influenced by videogames. Real life is affected by all kinds of things, but we tend to panic when it comes to media that are particularly popular among communities that worry authorities.

Michael Chemers: But we need to argue that it *does*. As dramaturgs who care about the significance of art, we have to argue that theatrical plays affect the way that people move in the real world, right? That plays can increase empathy through the process of identification, and that means enabling us to feel more compassion and sympathy for someone but also the opposite of that, to better understand someone's perspective in order to better understand how loathsome they are.

And so, therefore, videogames do that as well and, arguably, do it more effectively. One of the ways we understand dramaturgy is that it is a form of cultural studies. To create and critique requires us to be tuned to culture, to cultures.

Mike Sell: Yes, I agree, but there is a difference between the movement of a mind or the movement of one's tastes versus the movement of a body or a hand. And empathy is no antidote to violence. The bully is most effective when they truly understand the fears and desires of their victim.

Michael Chemers: Maybe we can say that texts present opportunities for bridging between art and the world and that videogames present a more complex, engaging opportunity—a dramaturgical opportunity.

Mike Sell: Well, let's say a different kind of complex, engaging opportunity.

Michael Chemers: I wonder if we should talk about that opportunity in more detail, maybe speak to the ways that a player who is playing, say, *Skyrim* (2011) or modding *Skyrim* or watching a livestream of *Skyrim* is doing dramaturgy, either practically or critically, unconsciously or consciously. What are the elements of that 'dramaturgy'?

Mike Sell: A complex, open-world AAA game like *Skyrim* does provide a lot of opportunities to think dramaturgically, whether the nature of the world-building, the

particular ways it represents character growth, the relationship between the human and non-human environments, and so on. And there's no doubt that *Skyrim* has seen a remarkable range of modifications by players who want a different kind or quality of ludonarrative experience. But there's an argument that a smaller indie game can provide a more focused dramaturgical conversation. I think of Anna Anthropy's *Queers in Love at the End of the World* (2013), an interactive-fiction game which lasts only ten seconds. Why does Anthropy give us so many opportunities as players to express our player-character's affections for the other character, but so little time to read? Why does she create a game about the end of the world that can be played again and again. There's a dramatic quality to that storytelling that has an intensity and a construction of empathy that is quite different than *Skyrim*.

Michael Chemers: For sure.

Mike Sell: We might start with dramaturgy as a technical practice—in theatrical terms, what a costume designer or lighting technician or a specialized dramaturg would do. I'm thinking here of a massive multiplayer online roleplaying game like *World of Warcraft* (2004–present). The super-committed, high-achieving *World of Warcraft* player is doing a variety of dramaturgical work. This is a player who, to succeed at the most challenging aspects of the game, will not only have developed their playing skills, but will be theory-crafting, min-maxing, modifying the game's interface, and the like. They will often be doing as much work away from the game as they do in the game. They are doing the kind of homework that a dramaturg does when they've been tasked with providing historical context to designers or for the program. Or we might imagine a player who is less interested in high-level achievement than digging deep into the storyworld of *Warcraft*, exploring the lore in the game and across the transmedia storytelling environment of the game, doing this to enrich their experience of play and the players with whom they play. Whether theory-crafting or lore-digging, the *World of Warcraft* player is tuning their play to embody the ludonarrative possibility space of the game and engage empathetically with their fellow players or the non-player characters in the game.

Michael Chemers: Embodiment is key to that process, right? It's a cybernetic practice.

Mike Sell: Right! But before we dig into that, let's make sure we identify another kind of live dramaturgical practice. We can define dramaturgy in terms of a practice informed by critical thinking, whether the critical perspectives a dramaturg is providing are coming from an understanding of history, or identity, or class, or place—whatever. Videogame performance is always "critical" in the sense that it demands the player not just do whatever the game has them do but comprehend

the system, the rules behind that doing. But there's also a critical practice that many players practice that is more in line with the kinds of things we do as researchers and theorists. You discussed your questions—your discomfort—about the decision of the creators of *Red Dead Redemption* to include a suffragette in their game and to include the option to assault her but not provide any affordances to promote critical thinking about that choice. As a player with an understanding of historical context and feminist theory, you might make a choice in that moment that is informed by principles that are generated outside of the moment of game play: a moral or ethical refusal to act in a way the game invites you to act. In other words, dramaturgy as metagaming.

Michael Chemers: Or metagaming as dramaturgy.

Mike Sell: I think of the sophisticated criticisms my undergraduate students often raise in class about the representation of queer identity, relationships, and pleasure in the games we play—and describe how they implement those ideas during play. To be able to play well, think well, and feel well—that seems like a pretty good mission statement for playful dramaturgy!

Michael Chemers: I would argue that the crux of all of this is empathy and the way that cultural products increase our ability to connect to others in a meaningful way. I don't think we've fully connected empathy with what you're calling 'playful dramaturgy'. And I think we would be remiss as dramaturgs if we did not insist that games also focus on that process. I'm not sure dramaturgy makes much sense without a focus on empathy.

Mike Sell: I agree, though I tend to think of empathy as a structure or opportunity for deeper understanding of the other rather than a particular kind of understanding.

Michael Chemers: Sure, but I'm thinking about the videogame as playing a positive role in people's lives precisely by creating powerful play experiences that are intended to generate fellow-feeling. I'm thinking about a game called *Manichi* (2012) by mattie brice. It's a game she created with RPGMaker that focuses on a few everyday experiences of the player-character, a Black trans woman. The game is simple: You just have to get through the day—get ready, go out on the street, avoid the transphobes, order coffee without being misgendered, sit with your friend.

And I know we can talk about the opportunity an actor has to embody someone who's an Other to them, but what brice is doing is something that only a videogame can do. In terms of ready-to-hand opportunities that people have, a play or movie or novel might show you the story of a Black trans person moving through their day. And you could be deeply moved by it. But in a videogame, you actually become that

person. You have that experience in the sense that you're having the visceral, social, cognitive, and fantasy experience that all avatars enable, as my colleague Katherine Isbister tells us. But we're also having that experience because we're able to experience the rules of the game of life—rules that work differently for the Black trans woman.

And those things that happen in that game feel personal regardless of whether we empathize with the character because we're in the game. We have to inhabit that character's subjectivity. I think that this kind of embodied, playful experience expands the ability to feel empathy in unique ways. And this isn't just for those who lack an understanding of the day-to-day life experiences of trans people of color. If you already know what that embodied experience is like, a game like *Mainichi* lets you know that other people understand what you're going through and are doing their best to help you articulate what's going on in your own life. Empathy can also be a gesture of community belonging.

So, regardless of the fact that empathy can enable cruelty, I think that we, as dramaturgs, need to insist that our cultural products entertain us towards positive, progressive experiences of otherness, whether to educate the ignorant or validate experience. Entertainment is an important thing, of course, but I think we have an obligation as dramaturgs to try and heal the world.

Mike Sell: True, though brice and other queer game designers like Anna Anthropy have pushed back on the idea of the videogame as an empathy engine. I think here of merritt k, who withdrew her highly influential game *Lim* (2012) from the public because it became the only thing people associated with her—and it wasn't a game that she was particularly proud of in terms of its technical qualities. In fact, there was something of a wave of indie games that criticized the idea that the first priority of queer designers needed to be empathy. I think here of k's *EMPATHY MACHINE* (2014), which directly asserts that playing a game won't change how a person feels about the other. Anthropy has taken a public stance against empathy as a central goal for queer game designers. In a 2015 interview, she said, 'If you've played a 10-minute game about being a transwoman, don't pat yourself on the back for feeling like you understand a marginalized experience'. Which isn't to say that games like *Mainichi* or *Lim* or Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012) don't create empathy experiences, but that the empathy experiences can be overvalued at the expense of other aspects of the game experience or orientations of empathy that don't align across boundaries but are intended to consolidate the experiences of those within a marginalized and threatened community.

Michael Chemers: That is absolutely true and it presents a problem for dramaturgs who have been focused on empathy for thousands of years. It's a challenging question.

Mike Sell: This speaks to the complex ways embodiment works in videogames as both an experience of play and something we think about as dramaturgs. Videogame embodiment is a multifaceted experience and, therefore, so is the dramaturgy that can inform it practically and theoretically. So, we can look at, say, the videogame avatar in terms of the mechanical agency it provides, the way it translates the movements of our fingers or feet or bodies into the game's procedures. That experience of translation can lead us to questions that are essentially technical ('Why is this so janky?') or to questions that have a more ethical or critical orientation ('Why aren't I allowed to take this particular action?', 'Why can't I adjust this controller to accommodate different ranges of digital ability?')

Michael Chemers: We can also think dramaturgically about the social experience of embodiment in similar terms, right? For example, we might think of embodied experience in terms of a moment of play at a friend's apartment or the rhetorical performance of the participants in a reddit forum or a public performance of gameplay on a livestream or sitting in an arena with ten thousand other people to watch athletes contend for a world Esports championship.

Mike Sell: And it's not at all unusual for a videogame player to participate in all of these kinds of performances, sometimes as the performer, sometimes as the spectator.

Michael Chemers: Yes, so if we understand the videogame player's liveness as distributed across different platforms and composed of multiple kinds of embodiment—social, physical, rhetorical, and so on—then that's going to complicate how we theorize empathy and instill progressive forms of empathy practice in videogame design, videogame criticism, and, most importantly, in the practice of play. I think embodiment is key to that theory and practice.

Mike Sell: And of course, the fact that videogames are built around this kind of distributed embodiment is what makes them both compulsive as a performance experience and a source of anxiety to those who want bodies to work in only one way—as productive bodies, especially. Recently, I've been reading a remarkable, and mostly forgotten book by the late Martin Amis, *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, which he wrote back in 1981, when the arcade was the center of videogame culture. It's a fascinating document that mixes together the kinds of things one would find in a tips-and-tricks guide alongside a kind of ethnographic travelog of arcades around the world and a bracing account of Amis's journey through addiction, which for him was at once moral and social, private and public.

I cite Amis's book because, first, it is a valuable, perhaps crucial historical document of a particular time and a particular set of spaces in which videogame per-

formance occurred. In other words, it's a work that can enrich our understanding of the videogame as a historical, social, personal, and regional practice. It's fodder for dramaturgy.

Second, *Invasion of the Space Invaders* can be read as a work of videogame dramaturgy, an account of arcade culture that describes the particular historical social, personal, and regional practices of players from an equally particular critical perspective. Amis's book is brilliant in that fashion—providing a particular vantage point on the performances and performance cultures of his time and place. It's a perspective that goes against the grain of ignorant journalists, moralizing authorities, and, perhaps most importantly, those who have failed to account for how diverse the arcade community was.

Michael Chemers: That's interesting. It reminds us that videogames have always been something most people do while others are watching.

Mike Sell: Absolutely. As someone who spent a fair amount of time in arcades in the 1980s, I remember vividly the experience of crowding around a player who was playing well—and the anxiety and thrill of playing while others crowded around me, a consistently unskilled player. We'd watch to pick up tips and tricks and we'd watch for the thrill of high-level performance.

Michael Chemers: The representation of videogames as a solitary and isolating experience is a stereotype—and that stereotype undermines our ability to comprehend the nature of videogame performance. Notwithstanding the fact that some players desire or get stuck in solitary, isolating experience …

Mike Sell: I think of Tom Bissell's *Extra Lives* as a story of exactly that kind of experience: isolated, addictive, almost hopeless.

Michael Chemers: Yes, but videogames have always been built in a way that players perform for others.

Mike Sell: For sure. And I think of how Bissell's account of his addiction to games and cocaine is very much oriented towards others, whether his girlfriend or his reader.

But back to the question of videogames and live performance—and how important it is to fully comprehend the varieties of videogame play. One of the things I like to do with my students is have them write stories about their most significant videogaming experience. Many of them write about watching siblings or parents or friends play and how important that was as a bonding experience. Unlike the empathy experience we discussed earlier, where the game provides the player an op-

portunity to extend empathy beyond their experience, here we have a pre-existing empathetic relationship enriching the experience of liveness.

Michael Chemers: Right. We need to understand that the activity of videogame play is an activity that exists as much for those around the player as for the player themselves. Not only does that complicate the notion that videogames are isolating, it also complicates the idea of videogame liveness.

Mike Sell: And, therefore, of the dramaturgy of videogames.

Michael Chemers: Yes. Let's get back to the 'distributed liveness' we discussed before. Maybe it's better if we think in terms of networked liveness because, when we play games, we're almost always involved in some kind of a networked experience: networks of players, networks of game distributors, networks of writing.

Mike Sell: And all of the networked infrastructure that enables those networks: wireless networks, cable, corporations …

Michael Chemers: One of the dramaturgical ideas that we develop in *Systemic Dramaturgy* is that the experience of liveness is not one thing, that liveness depends entirely on the technology that enables that liveness to be experienced.

Mike Sell: The idea that technology is not some aberration of or threat to liveness, but essential to it.

Michael Chemers: Technology is the original problem of theatre, right? So, we have a kind of distributed, networked liveness that is not the liveness that theatre critics valued in the early 1900s when movies started to disrupt the economy and values of the bourgeois theatre. And it's not the kind of liveness that theatre historians like Philip Auslander wrote about as digital technology started to disrupt the economy and values of theatre and other kinds of live performance in the 1990s. Sarah Bay-Cheng probably captures it best when she writes that in the digital context, 'people do not participate by being there; people are "there" by participating' (Bay-Cheng 2010, 130).

Mike Sell: When we say in our book that technology is the original problem of theatre, we want to spur dramaturgs to think of technology in an expansive way. Like Douglas Adams, we want to get away from thinking that technology is only what was invented after we were born, what is new and strange (Adams 2002, 95).

Michael Chemers: The *deus ex machina* is a technology. Limelight is a technology. The *bunraku* puppet is a technology. Make-up is a technology. Language itself, and gesture, these are technologies.

Mike Sell: Right. We would define technology as any tool that enhances or amplifies or enriches or makes amazing the experience of live performance. And a technologically astute–systemic–dramaturgy understands the fluid, evolving, situational relationship between technology and performance. But when we say technology is the original problem of theatre, we intend that, at least in part, to be understood as a challenge to how we think about *play*. Theatre's power is generated by the interrelationship of the text, the technological systems of whatever performance space is being used, and—crucially—the playfulness of the actors and directors and designers. You'll recall that, as we wrote *Systemic Dramaturgy*, we spent a lot of time talking and writing about play, hoping to develop a concept of play that enables us to think in sensitive ways about the relationship of play, technology, and the power of theatrical performance.

It's no accident that the emergence of an expansive conception of theatre and performance in the 1980s was driven in large part by an expanded conception of play. I'm thinking here of Richard Schechner's writings, which still haven't received adequate attention from outside the performance studies community, notwithstanding the work of Clara Fernández-Vara, Rose Biggin, Barbara Büscher, Jayemanne Darshana, Réjane Dreifuss, Daniel and Sidney Homan, Marleena Huuhka, Juliane Männel, and others, including many of the speakers at this conference.

Michael Chemers: And we've learned that, if we want to understand that live performance in videogames is happening in a range of ways—in terms of the cybernetic and cognitive interaction with the game, in terms of the way interaction with a game can be both distributed and networked—then a useful way to organize all of that activity conceptually is to think in terms of play.

Mike Sell: Is technology the original problem of play?

Michael Chemers: Well, I don't know. Maybe?

Mike Sell: That's certainly what the poststructuralists have argued. I think of Derrida's seminal essay 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'. (1967). His argument that the essential relationship between sign systems and consciousness is a relationship of free play, of improvisatory invention with the tools at hand (which he gets from Claude Lévi-Strauss), suggests that what we see as the essential problem of theatre is also the essential problem of play. And I think of Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* where she speculates that, because games are artifi-

cial systems, 'situations with guidelines and procedures' is how she puts it, that they can be thought of as a technology (Flanagan 2013, 7). One of the challenges of defining play is positioning it in respect to the material and instrumental conditions that provide structure and purpose. And Flanagan notes that '[s]hifts in play have historically mirrored shifts in technologies' (Flanagan 2013, 8). We might reverse this idea and argue that, as play technologies shift, players have to learn new ways to comprehend their systemic nature, both to successfully engage with those systems but also to create, criticize, and modify them.

I don't want to get lost in the theoretical weeds here, but I mention this to underline the idea that play is a systems-oriented activity, a way of moving and making decisions in rule-based structures. And when we speak of more complex kinds of rule-based structures like videogames, which overlap and intersect with other rule-based structures like language, culture, social interaction, storytelling, and so on, we're speaking to more complex forms of play. And that means more complex practices of empathy—whether hardwired into the game text or implemented by the player.

Michael Chemers: Absolutely. I mean, that's what dramaturgy is all about. It's understanding the way different systems are put into literal play to produce the performance event. And to return to how we defined dramaturgy at the start of our conversation, we see dramaturgy informing that performance event in several ways—at least potentially. One, we've got the systems put into place to enable the event to be live: sound, lighting, blocking, scenography, and so on. Two, you've got the systems in play during the live event that are put in play by the performers and technicians. And three, you've got the audience doing the kind of interpretive and perceptual and social things that happen during a performance.

Mike Sell: And we can speak of a dramaturgy of liveness that concerns both the practicalities of production—of translating the text into a moving, memorable event—and of a dramaturgy of liveness that concerns how we reflect on and evaluate the live experience.

Michael Chemers: And we can work to understand and improve both dimensions of that dramaturgy to enable better creation and enrich the live experience, right? Those systems are heuristic. They're hermeneutic. They are physical, they are economic, historical, social, political, even spiritual. And they all go into the creation of a moment of engagement between creators, creation, and an audience member. They're all playful in nature—and can be made more playful through the application of creative and critical perspectives.

Dramaturgy is all about understanding the interplay of those systems. And as those systems change, as new technologies emerge or old technologies are adapted

to new uses, that means we change our understandings and practices not only of creation, but of being live.

Mike Sell: So, is a dramaturgy of videogame liveness ultimately a dramaturgy of fun? I've been reading Bernard De Koven's *The Well-Played Game* (2013), and I think that, without intending to do so, he provided a thoughtful way for us to frame the dramaturgy of videogame play. Which is to say, for us, to frame the particular kinds of technical and experiential activities that enable empathy. He writes that, when we achieve an optimal state of play, 'We are having fun. We are caring. We are safe with each other. This is what we want. We are playing well together, even though we can't name the game we're playing. We are having a good time. We trust each other. There's no doubt at all about our willingness to play […]. We are who we want to be, how we want to be, where, here, now'. As dramaturgs of play, we want to ensure that everyone who has the opportunity to play a game has the kind of fun they want to have.

Michael Chemers: The notion of a dramaturgically informed activity of play, of being in live interaction with the videogame in all of its parts and across its networks, is a notion of dramaturgy that maximizes the possibility space of a game. The creation of all of those elements that we've talked about are not ludic until creators engage with them and present that engagement to others, whether other members of the team, an audience, or even some other way of thinking. The liveness of videogame play is necessarily about the liveness of community and creation; especially, the establishment of empathic connections.

All of this ultimately concerns the engagement of creative and critical practices to enable the cooperative creation of a dramatic story …

Mike Sell: The cooperation of creator and digital technologies, the cooperation of the game and the player, the cooperation of the different faculties of the player, and the cooperation of the player and whoever is watching them …

Michael Chemers: So, the more dramaturgically informed each of these moments of cooperation can be, the better the experience of live play can embody and communicate the values of the community.

Mike Sell: Once again, I think we'd want to underline that this is one dimension of videogame performance—the one that emphasizes the construction of the live event. Complementing that is the dramaturgy of critical reflection, of critical play. You and I want to see more and more players who are able to go in and play games with the knowledge of the game's production, the way a game's systems work, and the ideological implications of the play experience that is shaped by that production

and those systems. And we want them to be able to put their values into play with all of that so they can be fully conscious of when the experience of play is being shaped in a way that is troubling or offensive or victimizing.

Michael Chemers: So that they can see better the ways that videogames shape play and the ways that play can shape a game—and to understand that play involves so many different things besides the game itself and the player. Again, the liveness of videogame play is always multifaceted, distributed, networked, and is composed of so many different interactions, so many different kinds of community. And when players are conscious of that and have the skills to put that consciousness into play …

Mike Sell: Then we're having fun. And so therefore we're talking about the ways that critical making and critical thinking can imbue play with a deep sense of liveness of the kind De Koven describes.

Michael Chemers: And for dramaturgs, fun means the creation of community. And that's where we find the most enduring relationship between the liveness of theatre and the liveness of videogames. Since time immemorial, live performance has worked to create and sustain community.

Mike Sell: And that can be done on a stage wearing a mask or sitting on a couch with a controller in our hands.

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Biographies

Mike Sell is Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a member of the faculty of the Graduate Program in Literature & Criticism. He is co-author with Michael Chemers of *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age* (Southern Illinois University 2022), editor of the 1960s volume of *Decades of Modern American Drama* (Methuen 2018), and co-editor with Megan Amber Condis of *Ready Reader One: The Stories We Tell With, Around, and About Videogames* (Louisiana State University Press 2024). He is the founder and co-director of the Digital Storygame Project, a public digital humanities project that supports K–16 and university teachers in the integration of game design and decision-focused storytelling in English Language Arts and other curricula.

Michael M. Chemers is Professor and Chair of the Department of Performance, Play & Design at the University of California Santa Cruz. He is co-author, with Mike Sell, of *Systemic Dramaturgy: A Handbook for the Digital Age* (Southern Illinois University 2022). He is also the author of *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* (Southern Illinois University 2010, 2nd edition 2022), *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness* (Routledge 2017), and *Staging Stigma: A Critical Examination of the American Freak Show* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). He also served as editor of Luis Valdez's *Theatre of the Sphere: The Vibrant Being* (Routledge 2021). He was the Founding Director of the Bachelor of Fine Arts in Production Dramaturgy Program at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Drama from 2007–12.