CHAPTER 4

Literacies of Play: Blazing the Trail, Unchartered Territories, and Hurrying Up – #TeamLaV's Interview with James Paul Gee

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1   Overarching Questions

1.   What should gaming researchers keep in mind to address the potential critiques of revisiting videogames in education?
2.   How can the next generation of gamers-as-scholars make an impact beyond the traditional academic outlets?
3.   What kinds of research avenues can we consider as we look at the intersection of videogames and second-language learning practices?
4.   Looking at Gee's idea of G/game, what are the ethical challenges that videogames research must consider in the incoming decade?
5.   Gee calls for a full paradigm shift in schools. How should videogames research in the immediate future heed that call?

2   Introduction

#TeamLaV, as part of the Literacies in Second Languages Project research initiative (Mora, 2015), has inquired about the nature of interactions that gamers who are second language users (Gaviria, 2018) engage in as part of their gaming experiences. Since 2014, our team is still inquiring about these different linguistic, semiotic, and aesthetic elements that lead to sustained commitment and success within the game experience. As has been the case with quite a few gaming researchers, one of the first authors we surveyed was James Paul Gee. As one of the original trailblazers in the field of videogames research, in addition to his influence in D/discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) and new literacies (Gee, 2008), Gee's work in gaming and literacy highlights how learners integrate social, culture and cognitive processes to make sense of the world.

Our readings of Gee's work became a source of inspiration for our first study (Mora, Castaño, Hernandez, Orrego, Ramírez, & Castaño, 2016; Mora, Castaño,

Orrego, Hernandez, & Ramírez, 2016), where we coined our evolving framework we have called "Language-as-Victory" or LaV (Hernandez & Castaño, 2015). Our idea of LaV and its current evolution (Mora, Castaño, Londoño-Mazo, Ramírez, Mazo, & Mejia, 2019) stemmed in no small part from Gee's idea that educators (all past and current #TeamLaV researchers are preservice or inservice teachers and Raúl is a teacher educator) need to look carefully at what is happening in videogames today and let some of those lessons permeate our classrooms.

As part of this volume, we had the incredible opportunity to interview James Gee and discuss with him the past and future of gaming research, as well as share our thoughts about our framework to see further inspiration from him as our research moves forward. We created the interview protocol that comprises this chapter, as all the things we do at #TeamLaV, as a team effort, a mission of sorts (Mora, Castaño, Gaviria, Londoño-Mazo, Mejía, & Ramírez, 2019). We created the protocol as an initial conversation between Sebastián, Tyrone, and Daniel (Michael, our second author, was in Egypt for his student teaching at the time). Once we agreed on the questions, Raúl interviewed Jim via Zoom on March 31, 2018. Michael, back from his student teaching, transcribed the interview in full.

We divided the interview into three sections: The first part (Blazing the Trail) revisits Gee's initial work and his one book that arguably broke the field of gaming research open, looking at its genesis and overall impact. The second part (Unchartered Territories) features some specific questions that Sebastián, Daniel, and Tyrone each asked Jim from their perspectives as seasoned gamers. Here, Raúl also mentioned the LaV framework to gain some insights from Jim and his thoughts about what #TeamLaV should consider next. Given that our framework takes into consideration the collective life experience of all researchers as gamers and language learners, we believe introducing this as part of the interview was useful as it can inform readers about the work on videogames taking place in the Global South. The final part (Hurrying Up) collects Gee's closing thoughts as a call to action for education given our current political climate. A closing reflection about the aftermath of our framework after speaking to Jim and some parting thoughts from our researchers bookend this chapter.

2   Blazing the Trail

Raúl A. Mora: *What Video Games Can Teach us about Learning and Literacy* (Gee, 2003) is probably one of the biggest sources for gaming researchers. Most of the chapters in this book cited that book or some of your work.

James Gee: When you are writing a book like this, being first is very important. You know, I was writing that book with no ties to the gaming field. I had gotten into games by playing with my six-year-old and I was sitting there writing that because I had a passion for it, but I wasn't that connected to the gaming world. When we first went to conferences and stuff, we were alone, there was nothing. People were waiting for someone to say it is a new technology and it has all sorts of promise. I was just lucky and then the book sold of course a lot of copies for that reason.

Mora: Did you expect the reaction to be as it was?

Gee: When I had really gotten into playing and I was writing the book, I had fantasies that I would get invited to the game developers conference, I didn't even really know how to function. So eventually, I did get invited to the game developers' conference. A guy named Eric Zimmerman, a very well-known game designer, got up while he was sitting in the audience at the end of my talk and said, "You know, many of the game designers you talk about are people sitting here in the audience, so why don't we just turn around and ask them if your principles are true". I thought, "Well, this is a true defining moment". He turned around and asked Warren Spector, "are these principles in your games?" And he said, "of course they are". I love that story because if he had said no, we wouldn't be talking; it was an amazing moment.

Mora: Over the past decade the field of gaming research has really grown. Being one of the pioneers in the field, what areas of study do you find have been the most salient?

Gee: Well, you see, in the beginning, we were trying to start this program. So, I started this program in Wisconsin, on games serving the society, with people like Kurt Squire, my student Constance Steinkuehler, and others. I said, we don't want this to be a typical academic area, where you engage in ludic postmodernism stuff, we wanted to keep this about the impact of the technology and the promise the technology has. I think the most promising part of the field is still those people who want to get real communications between academics who want to study games and the developers who make them so this stays in the world.

Mora: How do you see this phenomenon of gamers becoming teachers affecting how we view pedagogy and classroom practice?

Gee: I see today young assistant professors who come out of the gamer generation who don't see technology as something special; it's what you do with it that makes it special. They are good at it, but they want to use it to make an impact, not just for publishing. They want big challenges, they want to work with other people.

So, if we got teachers who were tech-savvy in the sense of being able to mod, not just consume, but being able to understand how to make them, how to use them and modify them to get across problem solving, we would transform teaching. That would be more important than using any game at school.

Mora: How do we deal with the skeptics?

Gee: You just have to get out of the mentality that says it's all about shooting, violence and AAA games. You have to say look, this is the technology. It's going to be as powerful in planning class as the book, but it's a different technology, putting people in new worlds to solve problems in new ways and you introduce them to real games that are not just AAA shooters. You're not pushing the games, but the technology of building simulated experiences where a person has a surrogate body and they enter that experience to see the world in a new way and use tools they've never seen and then come out and be able to work with other people, having the attitude to change the world.

3   Unchartered Territories

Mora: I am going to read the questions from my research team. Tyrone argues that gamers and gaming experiences are no longer in a "sandbox" or a safe environment. Now it's online. So, he is wondering about how that may influence gamers who use English as a second language, and how they can really overcome being in this new gaming environment.

Gee: I've talked a lot about what I like to call the g/Game. The game is the soft one, it's what you bought on a disk or downloaded. The Game is the whole social setting around it. It's what you do with other people, going to the interest-driven sites, modding, discussing. When we design experiences for people, we are designing Games and it's, show me your software and show me the sorts of social settings and activities you built around it and how I can leave the game to do stuff, how I can

do stuff in the game with other people and how I can do stuff out of the game, bring it back to the game. When we see it as a Game that's part of a larger social setting, new dangers arise. You get mad people, you can have a Nazi game, but that's our responsibility. So, people try to build game settings with these social variables around them for Autistic kids, for ADHD kids, for victims of child abuse. So, their responsibility is to go out there and use these principles to build a game and a social setting that is life-enhancing and safe. If it was easy everyone would be doing it. You can't just focus on the shooters, the AAA stuff.

Mora: Daniel says that one of the problems that we have is that the games are repetitive in terms of communicative scenarios and in-game patterns. So, he is wondering about the effect that those situations can have on second language learners using the games to improve their language skills.

Gee: Gaming for language skills is an interesting topic. I would say there is no other topic that people have come to read more about and tons of people are making games for language learning. But, none of them have really taken hold. I don't know if you have ever seen the game the U.S. Defense Department made on learning Iraqi Arabic. It uses voice recognition, you go in as a soldier but you are with a mentor, and you have to talk to the people and learn Iraqi Arabic but in a culturally-sensitive way. So, it's teaching you the culture and the language while you are embedded in it. It's a very powerful concept, we now have it available in other languages, so there is no doubt it will be a great area.

About repetitiveness, what you want to do is not make people quite aware that they are doing a lot of repetition because they are motivated for a higher goal and they are integrated. Another thing I would love to see with people in the MOBA games and the other platforms like augmented reality is using each other as language teachers. Now we are able to do something, whether we use it to help each other in other languages. You can use the social aspect to make up for the lack of voice recognition. And you can get people doing stuff learning language under the guise of operating with other people, engage in all sorts of language help and language exchange. There will be ways to do language teaching through voice recognition and being embedded in worlds, but also there will be ways to

do it by networking people socially for a task. Teenagers are doing that, learning each other's languages because they have a shared passion for anime or anything else.

Mora: I just wanted to share a little bit of our work. What we are doing right now is we are analyzing different genres of videogames, looking at how language, English in this case, becomes a communicative resource for gamers with one very particular purpose, to win the game. We coined a concept and we presented last year at LRA called Language-as-Victory...

Gee: I love it, I love it.

Mora: ...which refers to the different ways in which gamers, or second language users reach out to the language, depending on the genre and the moment in the game and even in the sense of network, which you talked about earlier, and how that helps them to develop and improve their position in the game, with the ultimate goal of winning or succeeding in the game.

Gee: I think that's great, it leverages social collaboration and I hope that as you do that as the people using English as a resource they do see images and actions connected to the words not just definitions. To really learn a language, you have to know how it applies to the world. It's like reading a game manual with no game. You know if you read a game manual, it makes no sense if you've never played the game; when you play the game, the game gives meaning to the manual right? Every word the manual has refers to an image or an action or some dialogue in the game. It doesn't refer to a dictionary. So, language learning does require language to get married to action, image, dialogue; and what you are doing should be great for that. You have to start associating [words] with images, action and dialogue. I've got like a power up, I've got to see what they look like, I've got to see what they do if you really want me to remember what it means.

Mora: I have the final question from Sebastián. He is looking at videogames as storytelling devices, transcending game mechanics and problem-solving to engage with the narratives of videogames as central to both the learning process and the student. So, in that sense, he would like to know, how feasible and how possible, or what is the potential for an analysis of videogame stories in English classrooms along with traditional literature.

Gee: That's a very good question right now. You know when I first started this and it was just getting going there was a massive

war among designers on whether story should be in a game. That debate is over because almost all modern games including AAA games have very elaborate stories. However, there is a new genre of games now that intrigues me which I call *walk around games*. [where] you walk around and discover. And you do stuff, but the emphasis is on walking around and doing stuff in order to patch the story back together, to live the story. I think that's a very powerful genre. And those are being made in large volumes, there are dozens of them now. In the *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) series where you are a teenager, not only do you enact a story and discover one, but at any time when you make choices you can unravel the choice and see what would have happened had you made another one. So, we have settled the debate about stories in games. And now we are moving on not only to have better stories in commercial games but to make some games' primary motivation to is the story, and there are many of them.

4   Hurrying Up

Mora: From your point of view, as a research community, as a teaching community, as teacher educators, what can we do to help take literacies of play seriously?

Gee: By explicating play in terms of what are the identities we use, what are the skills we use, what are the norms we use, how do we actively modify it. In other words, let's talk about the literacy of play, the literacy of gaming, that is your knowledge of the values, skills, norms, activity, practices, ways of being in the world of a gamer. Ultimately the literacy of gaming is me introducing you to the identity of a gamer, a gamer researcher. So, what we are talking about today is getting people to see themselves as learners in an entirely different way, to see a learner as someone who is proactive, someone who mods and not just consumes, who participates in collective intelligence with others and doesn't do everything with others. You know we are talking about a new type of person. A type of person who engages in collective intelligence, a person who wants to take challenges that are hard, that wants to work with other people to really solve problems and wants to be a lifelong learner and teacher of themselves. That's what we are trying to

talk about, a modern human being that can change this shitty world we've got and to do that we have to make that identity compelling.

Mora: Our final question for you is: How do you see these ideas we have talked about, and how would they intertwine with issues of educational policy?

Gee: That probably changes from country to country. In America, there is a big debate, should we change our schools in an incremental way, you know make them better but basically keep schooling as the paradigm we know, which is the view of the Gates foundation, or should we completely change the paradigm of schooling? I argue, that just tweaking the model we have, keeping the traditional grammar of schooling, keeping schooling as we have known it for over 150 years is not going to work. We must change the entire paradigm of school.

That means getting people in multiple worlds, virtual, real, collective intelligence, networking multiple technologies to be a producer and maker and not just a consumer, participating with others across the globe in interest driven sites and affinity spaces is passion. You know, leveraging passion for challenge. It's a big task, and we don't have 100 years to do it. You know we just elected a clown as president. An absolute clown. And we have enough nuclear weapons to put the rest of the world completely out of business. So, we should be not afraid and not pessimistic, we should just be in a hurry.

5   Conclusion

We have to admit that interviewing James Paul Gee was thrilling and inspirational. Although Raúl is more aware of his work beyond videogames, for all past and present #TeamLaV researchers, Gee's work on videogames has been influential to construct our homegrown frameworks. Interviewing Gee has inspired us far beyond this chapter. During the second semester of 2018, we drew from this interview to develop an interactive educational experience encompassing all our ongoing research at the Literacies in Second Languages Project, "Doers, Makers, Modders: The Future of Language Education in the Fourth Industrial Revolution". Those three words were the words that Gee used in this interview to describe the future teacher roles. Through our interactive experience, four of our current researchers (Walter Castaño, Carlos Andrés Gaviria, Julián

Londoño-Mazo, and Sebastián Ramírez) shared with high school students what the LaV framework might look in practice through a multimodal experience that approached students to the framework itself through theory and practice.

Beyond this experience, Gee's thoughts about our LaV framework have informed our current research (also including two other researchers, Juan Camilo Mazo and Carlos Sánchez), as we have further expanded our framework as an expanded experience that encompasses, as stated in the introduction, linguistic, semiotic, and aesthetic elements that are part of the entire gaming enterprise. However, Gee's interview also helped us interrogate what the LaV framework means beyond exploring videogames. Our team past and present has included gamers who are hardcore (i.e. extensive game time and active participation in communities), semi-professional (Michael, Juan Camilo, Carlos), or, as in the case of Julián, professional. Looking back at the last section, we realized that their background as gamers who are becoming teachers, rather than a source of conflict, was an opportunity to help transform teaching from within. A major consequence of this interview and our ongoing work has been giving a closer look at the idea of *gamification* (Eusse, 2017). We are revisiting the idea of gamification on two levels: On the one hand, we are looking at how gamification may actually help reshape our entire research design (Mora, Castaño, Gaviria, Londoño-Mazo, Mejía, & Ramírez, 2019), from how we (re)organize ourselves as a team and how we (re)design our research methodology for this project. On the other hand, we want to revisit how our gamer-researchers turned teachers may begin to infuse gaming elements in their practice, a project we have labeled the *LaV Gamification Initiative* (Mora, et al, 2019a, 2019b) and which we intend to share with the world in full in a few years.

We end this chapter with a collective vignette from the younger authors of this chapter, Sebastián, Tyrone, Daniel, and Michael,

> Education is outdated because nowadays there are multiple worlds where the youth feels comfortable enough to indeed, face the challenges they are encouraging and proposing worldwide through videogames, and somehow, they feel passionate about it until the point to, leave everything behind and that is a huge red flag to modern society, there is something that we are doing completely wrong.
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> We should not be afraid to propose new approaches to knowledge because, currently we are in a hurry to fight against a mighty enemy and we should not be afraid of that at all. We now have a big change to greatly transform the actual teaching paradigm. It will not be an easy quest, but with effort and constant work we feel confident that we can develop those skills and find the perfect equilibrium between gaming and learning.

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