

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# Discovering by playing: thoughts on the board game ‘Viaje de descubrimiento de la tierra del otro/otra’

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If you can't fly, then run,  
if you can't run, then walk,  
if you can't walk, then crawl,  
but whatever you do,  
you have to keep moving forward.

Martin Luther King, Spelman College Rally Speech, 1960, Sisters Chapel, USA

### 1 Towards the acuerdos de convivencia

The *Viaje de descubrimiento de la tierra del otro/a* (herein referred to as the Game or Viaje) is an art-based board game created to help both young and adult people discover and have direct experience with the beautiful but challenging task of building good relationships, communities, ways to be together and discovering the richness of others. The Game was ideated in the context of the Project ‘Escuela y comunidades inclusivas’ (Schools and Inclusive Communities) in the Chalatenango Department – El Salvador.

El Salvador’s Indigenous art and culture was destroyed by more than 500 years of conquest, colonialism, coup d’état wars, massacres and repression, something that has resulted in extreme impoverishment and violence. Above all, it has been the spirituality and cosmology of the Indigenous people that is closely linked to the care and respect of others and of mother earth that was brutally repressed by the colonisers. Art is therefore vital for cultural and social transformation for people who have experienced more than 500 years of cultural repression.

This particular reality and heritage of people and of the youth and children of El Salvador can be difficult to speak about. Art helps again in that it can speak about or express the unspeakable. The incorporation of art in the concept of the board game seems to offer a unique space to engage with concepts and feelings that may be otherwise challenging to explain or to talk about, such as issues of identity, oppression, conflict, violence or freedom. More specifically, the *Viaje* fosters and asks for an authentic Exodus: from ourselves and our land, to go and meet others.

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It also tries to help to reflect and understand the path that is necessary to do that and the different feelings one can experience during this journey.

According to the document *Guía para Elaborar el Plan de Convivencia Escolar*, promoted and published in 2019 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology of the Government of El Salvador,

Coexistence is an act of togetherness and human interrelation. Coexistence is positive when it is developed in a way that people can stand and feel free from any false and sophisticated attitude or from any kind of hindrance that could prevent the full development of his/her personality ... Positive coexistence is a daily practice of interrelation between people and their social context. It turns out to be an availability toward the others, accepting their diversity in all the forms they come out, fully recognising the right of all the people to care about their faith, conscience, humanity, belief, sexuality, ideology and culture. Everything must be situated in a biological context in which environmental care and defence must not be separated from our daily life (own translation, see original in footnote).<sup>1</sup>

In this context, a real culture of peace cannot be a mere and simple lack of conflict and war. In fact,

A culture of peace, then, is the historical and collective construction to solve conflicts. It is a form of understanding, as well as the establishment of consensus to preserve those understandings in a democratic context, respectful of the dignity of the persons (own translation, see original in footnote).<sup>2</sup>

That is why the Game proposes an 'inclusive cosmovision': the others enter our world and welcome us in theirs. By playing, the players have a chance to learn better, understand and experience law and rules and their meaning: a rule helps us to comprehend the value they indicate and protect (i.e. dignity, respect, loyalty, democracy). Every player is invited to play (and learn by play) the rules, the *acuerdos de convivencia*.

- 1 La convivencia es un acto de coexistencia y de interrelación humana. La convivencia es positiva cuando se desarrolla de manera que las personas puedan estar y sentirse libres de cualquier afectación o impedimento que les limite en el desarrollo de su personalidad ... La convivencia positiva es una práctica diaria de interrelación entre las personas y su entorno, que se convierte en una actitud hacia los demás y de los demás, en la aceptación de la diversidad en todas sus formas, el reconocimiento del derecho de las personas a tener sus propias creencias, conciencia, humanidad, credo, sexualidad, ideología y cultura; todo esto en un entorno biológico en donde el cuidado y la defensa del medio ambiente sea inseparable de la cotidianidad de nuestras vidas.
- 2 Cultura de paz es, pues, la construcción histórica y colectiva de modos para solucionar conflictos, formas de entendimiento, así como el establecimiento de consensos para preservar esos entendimientos, en un ambiente democrático y de respeto a la dignidad de las personas.

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## 2 Learn by playing, acting to learn

When I was invited to participate in the Project *Escuela y comunidades inclusivas*, I was asked to help find images and iconography of justice and peacekeeping to foster our research and support our communication with the children and youth who would be participating. I realised very soon that this was an almost impossible task because I knew far too little of the real life world of the boys and girls of El Salvador, their tastes and their inner worlds. What kind of image selection could I have made in this situation that would be meaningful? I felt, therefore, that one possible opportunity for the Project might have been to support the children and youth (and adults too) to be themselves the main protagonists of our proposal. It is only by playing and having direct experience of the Game and what we wanted it to convey that learning and acting could be brought together.

'Playing is itself a therapy,' Donald Winnicott argues in his last 1971 book, *Playing and reality*, the year of his death. Playing, which cannot be dissociated from creativity and a sense of 'enjoyment', is an 'intensely real' experience that has intrinsic therapeutic virtue; that is to say, it is capable of promoting 'self-healing'. In *Playing and reality*, Winnicott (1971: 54) observes:

It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.

So what needed to be promoted and encouraged, then, is creativity and every discovery that is possible in the act of playing. The act of play is fundamentally aimed at promoting the possibility of a new experience for the persons involved. While experiencing something new and a new relationship to the world and to oneself that was hitherto unknown, the discovery can give the taste for further discoveries, in particular, hopefully, the *descubrimiento de la tierra del otro/otra*.

## 3 A practical description

The Game combines the verbal with acting, movement, song and unexpected elements to conjure spontaneity, awaken creativity, invite children to use their talents and encourage a movement towards the symbolic and the imaginative and away from literal realism or the seriousness expressed by the idea of rules and laws. These unexpected elements, creativity and the playfulness, seem to prevent the play [and therefore also rules of conviviality] from being heavily linear, settled and unimaginative.

The Game consists physically of two boards/tables: one is the main board, and the other is the Map of Feelings. The main board consists of 63 squares. The first squares (1 to 3) and the last ones (58 to 63) must be run one after another, without rolling the dices. Every player must go through them.

If the group is small, below ten participants, the Game is played individually. If there are ten or more participants, it is necessary to form small teams (3-4 persons) that, at the 13th square, turn into larger teams, about 7-8 persons (it is better not to be more than 4-5 teams). Every team has a small paper boat as a placeholder.

The teacher plays the role of an objective mediator: he or she must facilitate good participation of all the players; must encourage the shy ones and harmonise with other players, the boisterous or the lively ones; must valorise everything personal or sensitive (feelings, memories...) that could emerge by playing the Game passing through the different tests and trials.

The players, set up in teams, move ahead square by square, passing through and getting beyond obstacles, unexpected tests, shared dynamics and rewards, as in the pattern of the Chutes and Ladders game. Every square is linked with a particular moment of the Game. Some squares ask for different activities (action or reflection, personal or group activities). Others are necessary to pass through. Following the track, the teacher finds the matching voice for every square, which specifies the request (if any) for that square.

Some squares – numbered in red – are binding and required for all: every team must pass through them and perform the required test. Even though the rolling dice gets over those squares, the team must be stopped, and they must get back to the red binding square to carry out the request.

**Figure 1** Board game main table



Along with the 63 squares path of the *Viaje*, there is a *Map of feelings*. It runs through the exact route of the Game but is thought to give a complete and plain vision of the different feelings: from joy to fear, from anger to trust, from hope to violence. So, looking at the *Map of feelings* – mainly when the Game is over and the



The underlying message is that we can discover the 'others' and their absolute individuality, which we can approach and get closer to only in a fully respectful way: so the challenge is to do it together by playing and experiencing it. By playing and sharing the Game, the players are allowed to discover, create and re-create their identity. Our identity is given by our narration, by the acquired capacity of our storytelling. The Game offers a chance to build a personal narrative, wake up memories and grow up with a sense of wonder at discovering the unknown 'land of the other'. Remembering is not just bringing something (maybe hidden) to light but also finding a meaning or deep sense in it. That is the real adventure of the Game, going together through the challenge and having the opportunity to share it. At the first level, the communication required from the players is to say something about persons, facts and stories. The second level is more demanding for them: it asks them to associate memories with feelings and share them with confidence. The third level consists in associating facts, feelings and personal mood and ideas with an ethical attitude, a deep understanding of the sense of rules, and taking pleasure in a creative coexistence.

Through this dipping from life, to art, to history, to cosmology, to personal story, the art of the Game here is both to deepen a sense of self and expand the sense of community. It combines therefore two things that are often presented as being opposite to one another but that go absolutely hand in hand: a sense of self-determination and a sense of interdependency. It invites children to develop a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility towards and with others. It also involves the desire to communicate and to share this exploration and understanding with others.

## 5 Ways of moving (and discovering)

In line with Martin Luther King's quotation cited at the beginning, in our Game too, there are a variety of ways in which one can move about. Players are asked to move forward, step by step, sometimes going straight ahead, at other times going back or staying still, waiting on standby. One can be asked to write down a letter, draw or sketch, take a picture and act like someone else (being in others' shoes). Mostly – and this is one of the Game's primary goals – players are asked to listen to how they feel and try to imagine and find out how the others feel.

For example, on square n. 48 players are asked to take a good step to get out of the labyrinth of violence, prejudices, ghosts and enemies. In doing so, they realise that the others are in the same kind of labyrinth too; they are each other's mirror: in gazing at others, one can see him/herself. That is why, at this point, the proposal is to get through the experience of the 'Game of Mirror'. Indeed, players are asked to stay in front of another person, acting like him or her and the way round. Then, as soon as one is out of the labyrinth, on square n. 49, feeling the others again, he or she is asked to write to him or her a concise 'message in a bottle' – not more than 25 words – to keep in contact again, to rebuild and to re-establish the communication.

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## 6 Landscapes, lands, symbolic places

Besides actions, moves and emotions, there is also a variety in the Game that extends to landscapes to pass through – gardens, rivers, seas, mountains and sources, forest, icebergs... – and different suggestions that emanate from deeply symbolic places. Such places have been inspired by Mayan culture and art, which occupied, as is well known, a vast area covering south-east Mexico and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. Some examples follow:

*Monster-Temple of Chicannà, Campeche (zoomorphic facade) – Guatemala:* This temple of Chenes-Chen (a Maya-Yucatecan word that means ‘well’) style has facades that present figures of zoomorphic masks with a threatening wide-open mouth and unhinged jaw as a doorway. Among the Maya, the representation of people coming out of the mouth of a snake or other similar animals is quite common. The use of masks in decoration was highly important, and we have evidence of this in the profusion of Chaac faces and faces of other gods that cover the Mayan architecture entirely. This obsession is not merely formal but rather the expression of a deeply rooted ideology.

In the Game, it represents fear and a threat, a mouth ready to swallow, a personification of fear towards other people, particularly the fear of being gobbled up by others. Usually, along with the Game’s squares, it appears as a dream or a nightmare instead of being real. It is the Monster-God that reigns at a deep level of our inner world, and it sits on the throne of fear, suspicion, prejudices and threat. It must be identified and won by trust, courage and positive memories (which the Game tries to foster and sustain).

*Lintel 25 from Yaxchilàn – Chiapas, Mexico:* Yaxchilan is a place where many ‘scribes’ have been identified. These scribes were sculptors in charge of creating monuments to narrate the history of the ruler of the city. In the origin, Lintel 25 was set in the House G, above the central doorway. The house is dedicated to Shield Jaguar II’s wife, Lady Xook, who is shown on the bottom right of the composition. Kneeling before a double-headed serpent deity, wearing sophisticated earrings and bracelet, she is carrying out a bloodshed ritual. Even though the inscription names the figure coming out of the serpent’s mouth wearing a shield, spear and war helmet as Shield Jaguar II, his identity is still undefined and ambiguous. Bloodletting ‘was a common ritual among elites and it is one of the most frequent subjects in Maya art. A ruler or other elites (including women), would let blood to honour and feed the gods at the dedication ceremony of a building, when children were born, or other occasions. Rulers needed to shed blood in order to maintain order in the cosmos. The ruler was believed to be a descendent of the gods, and the act of bloodletting was of critical importance in maintaining their power and order in the community. Bloodletting was also an act related to rebirth and rejuvenation’.<sup>3</sup>

*Flowers from floral motives of the western wall of House 1 of Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico:* Palenque – like Yaxchilàn, Piedras Negras – in the late classic period, from VII to VIII A.C., was at the top of its splendour. This House 1 is a unique example in

3 See [www.khanacademy.org/](http://www.khanacademy.org/).

the Mayan World: a painted wall in white animated by several rows of flowers with four petals, birds and stylised animals. This House, as it also shown by the iconographic programme, had a very special function linked to the subterranean world: it's actually the main entrance to this mysterious world.

*The backrest of the throne from the Amparo Museum, Puebla:* Figures of the sculptural complex of a throne similar to the one found at Piedras Negras, Guatemala. Dated between 747 and 799 A.C. Classic Period, Usumacinta Valley, Mexico. Sitting in an oriental way, the ruler has his face turned to his right side, facing those who are sitting with him: maybe a reception of tribute or a vassal paying honour and tribute. Especially during the Classic Period, the Mayan rulers were shown accompanied with the main attributes of the gods: even the posture of their bodies were shown as resembling those of the god. At the centre, with a smaller size, a winged deity (maybe a messenger of the god Itzamnaah), on the left, a woman with rolled locks hair bound with a ribbon. A continuous frame of anthropomorphic faces intertwined with signs *tun* ('stone'), vegetable elements and glyphic texts closes the scene.

*Glyph for 'trap' and 'to trap' (from Madrid Codex):* In Mayan scripture, linguistic and artistic forms, taken together, generate the meaning. To fully grasp the message, imagery and script cannot be separated.

*Detail of Atlante:* Calcareous stone, Chichén Itzà-Yucatan, Mexico. One of the 15 anthropomorphic supports of a bench of the Jaguar Temple, these kinds of figures are interpreted as bacab, creatures that had the task of maintaining and preserving the separation between heaven and earth. The Maya had a complex religion with a massive pantheon of gods. In the Mayan worldview, the plane on which we live is just one level of a multilayered universe made up of 13 heavens and 9 underworlds. Each of these planes is ruled by a specific god and inhabited by others. Hunab Ku was the creator god, and various other gods were responsible for forces of nature, such as Chac, the rain god. The serpent is more than a common motif in Maya art. It is virtually an all-pervading theme that recurs in a great variety of contexts and assumes many different forms. During the Classic Period, the serpent is treated as a transcendental genus.... However, these features are freely combined with purely imaginative improvisations or anatomical details peculiar to other forms of animal life. In many cases, the identity of the serpent is lost in that of a fantastic monster.

## 7 A final thought

This Game takes time. The players (and the teachers or facilitators with them) will probably need more than one dedicated moment. Time is another silent, yet decisive, element of the *Viaje*. Time to dedicate to the Game but, above all, to the players. Hopefully, in getting over all the squares and while the *Viaje* is accomplished, the players will become more confident and more open. Maybe distrust, fear, suspicion, even shyness will have left a bit the fields of the player's inner world, and openness will have taken their place. Hopefully, then, the Game will have contributed to creating new ties among them. Maybe, even without being fully



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aware of that, they will have 'tamed' one another. So, as the Fox reveals to the Little Prince, at the end of their intense meeting, everybody will be more responsible for the one he or she will have tamed.

## References

Winnicott, D. (1971). *Playing and reality*. New York: Routledge.