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Monster Love: a clinical metaphor for relationships.

Monster Love: una metafora clinica delle relazioni.

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Abstract

Amour Monstre's proposal is to encourage the use of metaphors to better define relationships in couples, families and supervision groups, as well as any difficulties that may arise. Activating the analogical resources of language and the different stages of the system's life cycle can be very useful tools in therapy. The aim is for the game to act as a third element, through questions and images that illustrate feelings or ideas that are difficult to express. It thus helps everyone to take stock of their relationship. Assessing the relationship is one of the main functions of this game and one of the keys to a successful relationship. In this article, we will explore different contexts in which Amour Monstre can be used to give readers the opportunity to consider all that the game has to offer.

Riassunto

La proposta di Amour Monstre è quella di incoraggiare l'uso di metafore per definire meglio le relazioni nelle coppie, nelle famiglie e nei gruppi di supervisione, nonché le difficoltà che possono sorgere. Attivare le risorse analogiche del linguaggio e le diverse fasi del ciclo di vita del sistema può essere uno strumento molto utile nella terapia. L'obiettivo è che il gioco funga da terzo elemento, attraverso domande e immagini che illustrano sentimenti o idee difficili da esprimere. Aiuta così tutti a fare il punto della propria relazione. Valutare la relazione è una delle funzioni principali di questo gioco e una delle chiavi per una relazione di successo.

In questo articolo esploreremo diversi contesti in cui Amour Monstre può essere utilizzato per dare ai lettori l'opportunità di considerare tutto ciò che il gioco ha da offrire.

Keywords: Floating object, metaphor, therapy, relationship, game.

Parole chiave: Oggetto fluttuante, metafora, terapia, relazione, gioco.

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Introduction

We could certainly consider that the therapeutic game *Monster Love* fits into the script of third-order cybernetics. If a reminder is necessary, here it is:

- First-order cybernetics corresponds to non-linearity, meaning that the professional seeks to understand how the system works in its complexity and circularity; linearity or cause-and-effect logic is not sufficient to make sense of the relational organisation in place or to change what causes the symptoms.

- Second-order cybernetics is that of non-neutrality: we are not neutral, and it would be illusory to think that there is such a thing as a therapist and a family system. As professionals, we are always part of a therapeutic system that influences us and that we influence.

- Emerging third-order cybernetics is advancing with a perspective in which support professionals can no longer avoid integrating social, political, contextual and ethical dimensions into their practice. The therapist is no longer just an observer of their surroundings; they are committed and involved in thinking about inclusion and raising issues that are important to them.

That being said, let's return to *Amour Monstre*. I have been involved for more than two decades in working with migrant families, but also with domestic violence, particularly domestic violence between spouses. The term *Amour Monstre*, the title of Nicolas Sadaune's series of drawings, intrigued me.

Amour Monstre is a character created by French cartoonist Nicolas Sadaune. I discovered his first series of illustrations in 2017 and found the images very inspiring for talking about the ambivalence and paradoxes of romantic relationships. The line between love that does good and love that destroys is sometimes blurred. I immediately saw the value of these images in illustrating certain relationships that I observe or see described in my consultations. A few years later, thanks to my collaboration with Nicolas Sadaune and the combination of emotions, clinical situations, exchanges and various therapeutic contexts, I was able to put together a set of 25 images, alongwith the rules of the game. The 20 initial prototypes were tested by several colleagues, who gave their opinions on the use of the game. *Amour Monstre* was born in Bordeaux, France.

Amour Monstre: more than a name, a definition.

The term *Amour Monstre* was coined by Nicolas Sadaune to describe his series of drawings depicting the controversies of romantic relationships. I wanted to keep it because I find it very inspiring. As mentioned above, *Amour Monstre* captures two dimensions of love: on the one hand, it symbolises the grandiose face of love, giant, powerful, overflowing, and on the other hand, it reflects the negative and damaging dimension of relationships, which can sometimes be monstrous because they are destructive.

Monster implies the idea of a deviation from the norm, both in its wonderful and terrible aspects. Furthermore, the word *monster* comes from the Latin *monstrare*, which means to show, to indicate, to make visible. What could be better for pictolanguage!

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Amour Monstre is therefore the funny and endearing little character illustrated on all 25 cards in the game, which is used as a therapy tool to discuss relationships from different angles. His various expressions are marked by good humour and a touch of naivety. Each card in the game does not represent the partners, but rather the relationship, its image and its definition.

Amour Monstre has no gender or skin colour; it is not a real animal or plant. It is both unique and universal. It embodies a new representation, since it is a character created by human imagination, not by AI, and this is important to me: it is human sensitivity that attempts to give meaning, form and appearance to emotions.

The character's original characteristics encourage free projections and associations of ideas in their most unique expressions. It can be used in individual, couple and family therapy, but also in the context of supervision and training.

I invite you to play...I invite you to play a game.

This is how the invitation to take the time for a game in the therapeutic space comes about. In a playful and creative perspective that encourages a change of pace, it provokes a certain surprise and astonishment at key moments that may be the beginning of therapy, a moment of high tension or doubt, or even to close a stage, take stock, or express what is happening in a different way.

Although the game was created to address issues around marital relationships in couples or individual therapy, it was quickly adopted in couple's therapy training, in a supervisory context, and by non-therapists to discuss different relationships with those around them in a relaxed setting.

In this text, we will present these various uses, which we will illustrate with examples.

The game will be offered and conducted as a real game, with between three and six questions each time, and only at the end of the game will we discuss it. There will be no interpretations, no interventions from the professional, just the time to play, to soak it all in, to let yourself go with the projection, to mobilise emotions and humour.

In the game *Amour Monstre*, there are no winners or losers. It is the relationship itself that will be the focus of attention, with a desire to nurture bonds and communication, and perhaps that is where the victory lies. Of course, this varies depending on the time devoted to the game and dialogue.

One of the main functions of this game is to take stock of the relationship, redefine it, clarify it and illustrate it. Many couples or families come for counselling at a late stage, when their relationship is already severely compromised. When there is tension or disagreement, the game offers an opportunity to assess the situation, talk about it using the cards, and work together to find new ways of looking at the impasse. Playing encourages communication and allows difficult subjects to be addressed in a light-hearted way with a touch of humour, thanks to the character and his various illustrations.

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The game acts as a third party, through questions and images that illustrate difficult feelings or ideas that can be expressed. We have found that Amour Monstre also enables us to highlight the moments when the relationship is positive and favourable by helping to define and describe it in a positive way, and not just what is painful and conflictual. The magic of the game probably works thanks to a playful interaction that allows players to see the positive aspects of the relationship in its history. Amour Monstre acts as a mediator in the relationship, a third party, an external reflection projected onto the cards.

Theoretical inspiration

Amour Monstre is definitely a floating object, as defined by Philippe Caillé and Yveline Rey in 1994.

"The floating object has its own communicative power, a magic different from that of words. It is a framework that introduces a time and space in which the family and therapist must invent new behaviours and discover themselves. The floating object does not necessarily float in water. It can be conceived as a hot air balloon that lifts the dialogues of repetitions and attempts at manipulation from the initial phase." (1994:12)

The project is metaphorisation, the transition from an idea or emotion to an image, an analogical language that translates thoughts and feelings in a different way.

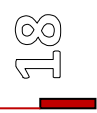
This game works like a photo language: the cards represent the different answers that players can use to best describe how they feel in their relationship and how they define the couple, family, siblings, work, illness and various relationships. The game encourages metaphors, emotions and a meta-vision of the relationship. It is a creative, lively and facilitative support tool that acts as a kind of third party in therapy.

Another definite theoretical contribution to Amour Monstre is Robert Neuburger's work on couples, from a perspective that includes the notion of the couple and the family as a closed unit built around an irrationality in the relationship that is quite indescribable and indefinable. In Neuburger's view, the therapist's job is to help couples uncover this irrationality from the outset, which forms the basis of their unique relationship with each other. (Neuburger: 1988)

Of course, the theoretical model I have developed around the couple's place and the places of the couple in terms of territoriality, the geography of the relationship and the logic of metaphorisation to which it invites us are significant foundations for this clinic in which this game takes place. (Daure:

The use of images describes the photolanguage method, here picto-language, since the images are exclusive and are drawings rather than photographs. This approach, which consists of giving meaning to images, was created in 1965 by a group of psychologists from Lyon, Claire Belisle and Alain Baptiste. Photo language was initially developed to facilitate expression among young adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds who had difficulty communicating about their experiences. The idea of offering these young people images from different photographers so that they could express themselves in a

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group was initially purely intuitive. The effects of the method exceeded expectations and it quickly spread to the fields of adult education, facilitation and clinical psychology, both in France and around the world.

Expressing oneself through images helps many people in difficulty to address certain subjects or to tap into their emotions. The image acts as a support, helping the subject to think and making it easier for them to express their personal experiences. It is not uncommon for people to express surprise at what has been said and at the fact that they have been able to express their feelings in a new way.

Individual therapy: Work is the context.

Judith (All individuals have been anonymised) is a 33-year-old woman who works as a paediatric emergency doctor and is very committed to her job. She is in therapy for issues related to her romantic relationships. Judith loves women, which is difficult for her to accept. She has just broken up with her current partner over this issue, namely Judith's reluctance to come out to her family and her heavy workload, which led her partner to leave her.

Judith's therapy is going well. She is reliable, attends her appointments, is committed, capable of self-reflection and has remarkable reflective abilities. Judith is sad but she is moving forward. She knows that she will have to change in certain areas and is currently taking a break from romantic relationships.

A concern arises with a change of boss in her department and new guidelines on administrative taxes for doctors, putting additional pressure on her schedule. This combination puts Judith under a lot of stress and raises the question of whether she will continue working at the hospital. She appears worried, unsettled and anxious. We decide to schedule more frequent appointments and play the Love Monster game.

The following instructions will be given: *"Given the unsettling situation you are going through and the questions you have about your professional future, I suggest we play a game. Approaching this issue differently may help you see things more clearly and perhaps consider things from a different perspective. You'll see, it's very simple. We'll lay out some images on the table and I'll ask you a few questions. Each time, I'll ask you to answer the question using a card."*

ID: *"Which card represents your relationship with your work at the beginning of your medical career?"*

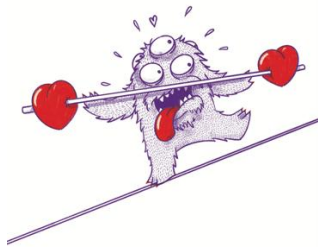


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Judith: *“It was difficult, but I was very enthusiastic. Everything was new, including the atmosphere at university. I wanted to be there; I couldn't imagine doing anything else.”*

ID: *“Which card represents your relationship with work during your internship?”*



Judith: *“I was happy, I was getting closer to my goals, but I had to juggle a lot of work, a very tough boss and complex situations in the emergency room, but I really enjoyed it. The two hearts balance me out.”*

ID: *“Which card represents your relationship with your work at the hospital when you took this job?”*



Judith: *“I told myself that I was in the right place. It was really what I had wanted to do since I started my training, and twelve years later, I was there. I loved everything about it: the work, the people, my colleagues, and the atmosphere. I was truly fulfilled.”*

ID: *“Which card represents your relationship with your patients, the children you care for?”*



Judith: *“For me, it's always exciting, always very interesting. I made the right choice. I really love my job. I have no doubts about my work with this group of people; it's the hospital, the institution, that's my problem.”*

ID: *“Which card represents your relationship with the hospital?”*

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Judith: *“I am very disappointed with the hospital, with the institution that crushes us, that does not value caregivers and does not give us the opportunity to do our job well. It's unbearable. I can't stay any longer, even though that was my plan. I have to give up the idea that I was made for the hospital and that the hospital was made for me.”*

ID: *“Which card represents your parents' relationship with work?”*



Judith: *“Work is everything in my family. It's an extremely important value, even too strong, too central. It's burdensome. Work has always been very important in my family, for my parents.”*

ID: *“Which card represents your relationship with self-employment?”*



Judith: *“It's a leap into the unknown. I never imagined I would go and work in a private practice in the city. I'm scared, but I tell myself that I'm still a paediatrician and that's the most important thing. I'll be less protected by the system, but I hope I'll be able to do it. I will be the only one in my family to leave the public service. Both my parents are civil servants, as are my brothers. I don't mind not following in their footsteps, but I'm afraid that this difference will create a distance, as if I no longer share the same values as them.”*

ID: *“I suggest we stop there for now. How did you find the game?”*

Judith: *“It went by very quickly. I enjoyed it and had a good time. I found that choosing the cards helped me realise that, for me, leaving the hospital also*

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means leaving behind a strong family commitment to the civil service and its missions.”

We could have continued the game, but it is interesting to note that Judith made some interesting associations thanks to her choice of cards, which gave her the opportunity to think about the crisis she is going through in a more complex way, leading her to reflect on her loyalties to her job, her promises and her family. Putting the crisis she is going through into perspective is certainly a resource for finding solutions.

Couples therapy: New commitments.

Lila and Jean come to couples therapy referred by Lila's therapist. They both agree to this step and want to reflect, with the help of a professional, on their future commitments or possible future commitments.

They have been together for eight years but still live in separate homes. They have changed flatmates several times but have never lived together in the same place, and for some time now the question has arisen of whether they might live together under the same roof without other flatmates.

A few years ago, the couple had tried to take the plunge, but this had caused a lot of crises and tensions. They couldn't agree on the criteria for their new home, and both felt insecure about the project, wary that living together might take away their freedom and lead to the end of their relationship.

During the first session, the question of being a couple, the stability of the couple, arose, and for the first time, I suggested playing the game *Amour Monstre* at the first meeting. It was interesting to dare to do something that the couple found difficult to dare to do. They found the suggestion amusing and a little surprising.

ID: *"Based on what you've told me about yourselves, your relationship, and your history, and in order to better understand your relationship, I'd like to suggest a game. Would you be willing to play?"*

Lila and Jean: *"Yes, yes. You're the expert."* Laughter, amused looks.

ID: *"Which card represents your relationship at the beginning?"*

Lila: *"It was a leap of faith. I didn't want to get attached. I didn't think I was cut out for serious, long-term relationships, but with Jean, I think we both took a risk, because he wasn't used to long-term, exclusive relationships either. He was on several dating sites. Yes, we both took the plunge."*



Jean: *"I pretty much agree with Lila. Well, I chose this card because I think that our relationship was a discovery at the beginning; we turned out to be*

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romantic. (Laughs) We had a new desire to discover each other beyond just one or two evenings. You could say that we came out of hiding."



ID: "Which card represents your relationship today?"

Jean: "I think we're doing well, that we're in a good phase of love and understanding, and that's what I'm sometimes afraid of ruining with the house hunt, if it turns out like last time. It would be a shame if this project caused conflict. I hope not, and I don't think it will, but I do have a slight apprehension."



Lila: "I think we're in a wonderful period, like we're on cloud nine. We get along well, but we're still trying to move forward and take the next step in our relationship, and that worries us a little, which is why the monster has this ball on its head like a ball of yarn, and it doesn't look very happy because it's a little worried. I think we came here because we have fears about our life together and we don't want to make a mistake."



ID: "Which card represents the relationship you never want to have?"

Lila: "I can't stand the idea of doing everything together. I don't think that kind of relationship is a good thing. I wouldn't want to feel that just because we live in the same house, we have to do everything together all the time. I have friends, I have activities that I like to do alone sometimes. I wouldn't want my life to be reduced to work and my relationship with Jean."

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Jean: *"I think this card really illustrates the kind of relationship I don't want to have, a relationship that, in the name of love, prevents you from moving forward and being free to make progress. I don't think either Lila or I would like that kind of relationship. It's a love that's too overwhelming and gets in the way."*



Other questions were asked, but we won't cover them all here for practical reasons related to the length of the text. Here is another one: *"Which card represents the relationship you want to have when you live together in the same home?"*

The couple made comments during the game. For example, Lila was very surprised by Jean's choice of card for the third question, but after his explanation, she understood better. They found that their cards, and especially the reasons for their choices, were quite similar, and they were quite pleased to see their complicity and the shared nature of their desires.

Lila and Jean talk about feeling reassured about their plans to live together. A few interviews later, they announced that they had started looking for a house, which they found fairly quickly.

Lila and Jean moved at their own pace, using different methods, and felt very good about this new beginning in their life together. From time to time, they played the Amour Monstre game to take stock of their relationship and discuss certain topics outside of the sessions.

Family therapy: the grieving process.

This is the therapy of a family that is reconnecting after several years. Initial follow-up took place when their son, then aged 8, was diagnosed with a recurrence of cancer. Louis had already battled the disease a few years earlier, and now it was back. The family was in a very bad way, and Louis was very hard on his little sister, who was born between the two periods of illness.

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The parents were quite helpless in the face of their son's distress and his very aggressive behaviour towards his sister. We met for a few sessions at the time, but Louis's situation quickly worsened, and the family wanted to stop the sessions to focus on Louis's care. The parents returned twice shortly after Louis's death and brought their daughters with them once. After that, the mother said she could not return to this place, which reminded her too much of Louis. And the therapy faded away again.

Another attempt was made seven years after Louis's death, for reasons related to the girls' schooling, their limited commitment to school, and the parents' desire to talk about what they had been through.

The sessions resumed and soon the suggestion to play the Monster Love game was made, which they all accepted with great enthusiasm. In turn, the family members were asked questions about their relationships: the parents with each other, the sisters with each other, and the eldest with her mother, the youngest with her father, and so on. To keep this brief, we will report only one of the questions here.

ID: "*Which card represents your relationship with Louis?*"

The reader will understand that the question is asked in the present tense, so it is assumed that the relationship still exists.

Marie (eldest daughter): "*Louis is my little brother. I have fond memories of him. I think about Louis from time to time, but I feel that my memories are fading a little, and sometimes I need to talk about him with my parents and Zélie. It's like checking my memory.*"



Zélie (the younger daughter): "*I would like to have good memories of my brother. It was difficult; I feel like he didn't love me. I'm sad that he's not here, but for me, our relationship today consists of my attempts to remember good memories of him, and it bothers me that I don't have many. It's as if I was the only one in the family he didn't like.*"



Benjamin (father): "*We know that one day we'll be reunited. I'm a believer, so I tell myself that he'll be waiting for us up there. I talk to him sometimes. Don't*

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worry, he doesn't answer me (laughs), but I talk to him from time to time. We go to the cemetery a few times a year. I feel like I'm maintaining a connection that doesn't weigh on me. It's light and it makes me feel good."



Astrid (mother): *"I chose this card because often when I think of Louis, I feel a pressure in my throat, a tightness in my chest that suffocates me. I'm afraid to cry, and sometimes it's not the right moment, and sometimes I don't even want to cry, but I feel this physical pain inside me. I feel that we are connected, and being a believer contributes to that. I feel close to him, even though he is no longer physically here."*



Zélie has the courage to address the difficulties with her brother, who has probably been untouchable for a long time given everything he went through during his illness and his death. This is revealed by her father, who adds at the end of the game that he thinks Zélie never knew her brother as he really was and that she always had to deal with a sick brother who was not always kind to her.

The therapist adds his memories of these moments and returns to Zélie.

"Do you remember when you first came here, (Zélie nods) you were a very, very cute little girl with a charming smile? I say this not to diminish what you are expressing, but to confirm how I imagine you felt misunderstood and unjustly treated by Louis' reactions, which may still be true today. So you were a very beautiful and friendly little girl, people wanted to come up to you and you were interested in people. You haven't changed, but I'm talking in the past tense to go back to that time. (Everyone laughs). This was in stark contrast to your brother, who was weakened by illness. He had lost his hair, and even though we could still see the pretty little boy that Louis was, the scars of his illness were strong, and he was in pain. He often had the tense expression of someone who is in pain or angry. Perhaps you represented for him the horror of a carefree little girl who had everything going for her and was loved by everyone. Seeing you was probably like being confronted with everything he could no longer be because of his illness and chemotherapy. However, it was not your fault, and you played a very gentle role in

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your family. I think it was very positive for everyone to share in your vitality and the joy you radiated. Thank you for your courage in revisiting what you have been through and what you are going through. I think we all understand here that your memories are coloured by the tension you experienced with Louis."

Mother: *"I think Ivy Daure is right. We were aware of this and tried to prevent Louis from being unpleasant to Zélie, because he could be harsh. We always reprimanded him, but we may have let certain things slide because of his illness. You are right to express yourself, Zélie, and we understand you."*

Father: *"Yes, it's obvious that you've been through some difficult times, with your brother's illness, Marie too, and then you both saw your parents sad, very sad and less available when you were little. We did what we could, but we know that your early childhood was very different from Marie's, precisely because of our mental availability and the violence of what we were going through."*

Team supervision: Playing to get out of the doldrums.

During a supervision session with a group of professionals working in a CADA (Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers), we arrived with the game to announce its publication with the simple intention of communicating the information. The team was reduced in number: the head of department had left and two colleagues were on sick leave.

There were three of them left, and one of them talked about the difficult times the CADA was going through and the gloomy atmosphere they were in, adding, *"Wouldn't you rather we play than discuss clinical situations? It might do us good to play."*

The game could then be an opportunity to talk about themselves at work, their missions and their relationships with users.

Here, I will present a few of the questions that were asked and, for one of them, the answers given by each member of the group. We cannot go into great detail about this part of *Amour Monstre*, which lasted a good hour, and the following hour was spent debriefing on their feelings about the game and this shared experience.

ID: *"Which card represents your relationship with the audience you work with?"*

JC Educator: *"I choose this card because this is an audience that interests me greatly. I am always curious to discover them, but at the same time, it sometimes unsettles me, and I think it unsettles them too, so for me it's a relationship where there is curiosity, but it destabilises us a little."*



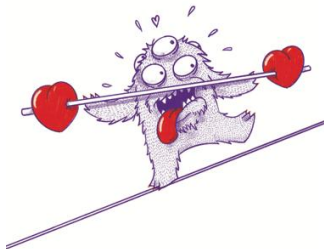
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LF Educator: *"I find that I have a relationship of kindness, but also of caution and modesty. I proceed with delicacy, and I believe that this is important for the people we support. Not being rushed, taking the time to reveal oneself and talk about oneself in a safe environment. This card describes this feeling well."*



CG Social Worker: *"It's a relationship in which we are in balance; the steps we take and the timing often hang by a thread. It's not always easy. We have to balance ourselves a little, and sometimes it's uncomfortable, other times it generates a good dose of adrenaline, but when we succeed, it's cool."*



Other examples of questions I asked the group on this occasion:

- Which card represents your relationship with your colleagues on the team?
- Which card represents your relationship with government policies on migration?
- Which card represents your vision of this profession when you first started practising?
- Which card represents the view of those around you regarding your work?
- Which card represents your relationship with your superiors?

In conclusion

This article has provided an opportunity to present the game Amour Monstre and explore it in various contexts. Readers have been able to understand how using the game in the context of therapy, supervision, and also training (not discussed here but easy to imagine) is an unconventional and relaxed way to address sensitive and painful subjects. Light-hearted and relaxed exploration is an equally relevant approach which, thanks to the atmosphere of the game, creates a fun tone and a joyful mood that are also powerful clinical levers. (Daure: 2017)

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Before concluding this text, I would like to outline the eight functions of play that are worth remembering.

- The pictogram is another third party, introduced by the therapist.
- It helps to think about the relationship and not the partner.
- It metaphorises and creates dialogue based on what is said.
- It encourages projection into the future.
- It creates a break from tensions. Playing also means reconnecting with creativity, fun and light-heartedness.
- It means thinking of new meanings.
- Hear the other person in a different way.

Have a good game!

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