

The World of Ouija Board Revealed

There is nothing in this world more misunderstood than the common Ouija Board. A simple piece of pressed board and a plastic pointer, this novelty has been the center of controversy for well over a century. Today, I will attempt to demystify the Ouija and other simple divination devices and move them from the realm of the ungodly back into the parlor where they belong.

The Ouija Board is a patented game currently held by the Milton Bradley Company of Salem, Massachusetts, who purchased the rights to the design in 1960. The original patent holders were Charles Kennard and William Maupin of Baltimore, who filed a patent for the board in 1890 as the Kennard Novelty Company, which later found its way to the first plant manager William Fuld, who named the device the Ouija Board around 1917. This was not the first Ouija board of course; there had been handmade versions around long before the Kennard device. The earliest records show that the concept was first patented by Adolph Wagner of Berlin in 1854 and was described simply as, "A psychograph," without any mention of a paranormal application. But it was Fuld who gave the game its name, explaining at one time that it had named itself when Kennard asked it what it would like to be called. Later, Fuld corrected himself and stated that the name was created from the French and German words for "Yes." Either way, the name stuck and was an instant success.

The history of the device before its patent is a little sketchy. It was definitely in use in the early days of the Victorian era, when a simple round table top was embellished with letters and numbers along the edge and a glass was used to move from letter to letter. The earliest board that I found while doing a Ouija Board study in the early 1970s was true folk-art, a heavy block of wood, similar to a butcher's block that had been lettered by hand and finely polished. The pointer or planchette was fashioned from wood, with the bottom covered in cloth to make it slide more easily. Other early devices had a planchette with tiny wheels or casters affixed to the bottom and there was even a round board that fit on a tabletop with letters along the circumference at one time.

The handmade wood-block style board is hard to pin down in age, but it was purchased by me in an upstate New York antique shop for \$15 and I later sold it at an auction for \$1600. At the time the provenance was questionable, but the dealer maintained he had received it in an estate lot from the nearby Lilly Dale community, the American home of Spiritualism. Of course there are all sorts of tales about this kind of divination device, some claiming that a rudimentary system was in existence for hundred of years before the 19th century craze. Logically, the board's forerunner was a circular plate or piece of paper that had numbers and letters, where a pendulum was used to spell out messages, one of the oldest divination devices to be found in the history books.

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This brings us to the point of my 1972 study of the Milton-Bradley style board, utilizing college students as test subjects. The group was initially small, about a dozen subjects and the board was used by teams of three, two who actually manipulate the planchette and a third to take notes. These teams would rotate, so that an almost infinite number of subjects using the board was possible.

During these tests, I found that the teams did make contact and received messages. One in particular involved a small boy, who said he was killed by a passing street car at the turn of the century in the area known as Madison Square Park, bordering 14th Street and Broadway in Manhattan. The subject gave some facts about his life and death and I was later surprised to find that such a child did exist in that time frame and appeared on the census records. There was even a small clipping from the New York Times about the accident in which he died. According to the team who made contact with him, none considered themselves “psychic” in any way and none had used a Ouija board before the testing began. While trickery was possible, someone could have researched accidents within that time frame, the subjects did not show the telltale signs of hoaxers and the female member of that team became emotional in later sessions, whenever the child would “come through.”

Several variations were tested in this study, male/male, female/female and mixed teams were utilized. The board was more forthcoming to some operators than for others, for instance the “little boy” seemed to come through only for the young woman who first contacted him, no matter who her partner might be. While admittedly the study did stray into rather bizarre territory at one point, it is also true to say it was studied in every variable we could think of, in a classroom, on a beach, in the woods, in the middle of a city and in a secluded cabin with the nearest neighbor being over three miles away. Various clothing was tried to see if there was any connection whatever with how many layers of clothing the operators were wearing, ranging from extreme cold weather gear in the woods with several thick layers of clothing, down to wearing nothing at all. This was tested based on the old wives tale that practicing witches could only perform magic “sky clad” or naked. That was found to have no effect, except for the obvious interaction between the partners in some cases. The boards worked, or didn’t work under any circumstance.

At the end of this study it was decided that the Ouija was not a magic oracle but rather more closely aligned to the original patent information found on Adolph Wagner’s application. The planchette moved due to the subconscious interaction with the user thus the board is truly, “An apparatus for indicating person’s thoughts by the agent of nervous electricity,” and in no way was it to be construed as mystical or in any way a medium for communications with the departed in or of itself.

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This of course does not address the popularity of the board, or some of the more outrageous claims made for it. The board craze first hit the United States at a time of war, when families who were already mesmerized by the Spiritualist movement and wanted the board to become a communications tool with their missing or departed sons. World War I was the first “modern” conflict, with hundreds of men left listed as missing and thousand dead in the trenches and on the battlefields of France. While the makers made no claims for the board in this way, the purchasers had all heard the stories and were willing to fork over a dime (the original retail selling price) to try to reach their love ones.

Unfortunately, there have been entire books written about the Ouija Board craze, underlined with high drama and sometimes death; some people would blindly follow the board’s directions and several murders were reported as a direct effect of board use (see Fortean Times #249 for a short list of the more horrifying case histories.) Otherwise rational, middle class families were drawn in and entire towns were overcome with Ouija Board hysteria and that is exactly what it was, HYSTERIA. People wanted to believe and so they did, with church elders, community leaders and politicians chiming in to denounce the evil board. There a cases where towns held board burnings as part of a religious backlash. The only thing more outrageous than the claims of some users, were the reactions of some religious leaders, but in reality, it is just a board and a piece of wood or plastic moving across its surface, sometimes manipulated by the users subconscious.

Much of the hysteria of those days has carried over to the next generation; the Ouija boards popularity once again peaked in the 1960s as part of the counter culture movement. The Milton Bradley Company cashed in on the new wave, which it still is riding today. The Ouija is still a top seller by the game board giant, selling as many Ouija sets as they do their primary game, Monopoly! The game offers a person a chance to encounter the paranormal, although MB will never be quoted as saying so, the inference is still there and the claims of danger or demonic forces only heightens the desire to see for one’s self. Overzealous fundamentalists only add to the flames of popularity and it is reasonable to say that almost every American has their impression of what the board is and can do.

Ironically, throughout the last century or so, some have made equally fantastic claims for other divination devices, from the old standby the pendulum to the Frank’s Box. All offer the chance to communicate with the dead, some are very basic while others are more high tech. Depending on your pocketbook, you can go from the primary Ouija board for under \$20 to an electronic wonder like the Ghost Box for \$500 or more and all imply that they are the key to otherworldly communications. The lower priced Ouija Board is the most popular, possibly due to price as much as reputation and today Milton Bradley offers several versions of the Board, including a glow in the dark planchette model.

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So let's take a peak under the hood so to speak, and see what makes all of these devices so fascinating. While my study 40 years ago did not address the actual mechanism for the movement of the planchette, a quick look at later studies did consider the "how" of the Ouija Board. In order for the mechanism to work, you need the subconscious motor skills of the user; again simply put, the operator moves the planchette from letter to letter subconsciously. Whether the movement is defined by the user via some sort of clairvoyance, as in the case of the little boy scenario, or not is another question, but the actual movement is based on digital vibrations, the slightest movement of fingertips to spell out the message.

I think it is interesting to note here that the original planchette appeared in France long before the associated board and had a small hole that could grasp a pencil. The device was used just like the Ouija, but instead of pointing to numbers and letter, the planchette would "write" words on a piece of blank paper below the pointer. By all reports it worked, but why? That is simple, the planchette allowed the subconscious of the operator to spell out words on paper; it was simply automatic writing that utilized the planchette to hold the pencil. This allowed the subconscious to communicate through a medium that he or she supposedly did not control, thus they were not seen as seers or clairvoyants, but rather as ordinary folk who simply provided the human touch to make it work. If the same person were to pick up the pencil directly and start scribbling messages, they would most likely be discounted, but when the planchette was used, it offered a shield to the user.

The problem with the earliest planchette was that the pencil might slip, stop writing because there was not proper pressure applied and so, somewhere along the line, most likely a long time before the entrepreneurial genius of Adolph Wagner, the idea of having the pointer move over a table top with letters was hatched.

The subconscious mind is a beautiful thing! As noted in earlier lessons, the mind can fill in the blanks of words not heard in common conversation, interpret bits of music so the listener can make sense of it, allow you do see complete sentences where only fragments are visible and yes, receive messages from the departed. The common term for the minds ability to fill in the blanks, as you already know, is called "matrixing." But there is another faculty at work sometimes, and that was studied at Duke University decades ago, clairvoyance. By definition clairvoyance is having the power of discerning objects not present to the senses and when matched with something like the Ouija Board through subconscious manipulation, can lead to some fascinating results, like the little boy hit by the street car in our original study. This may be a stretch for some, but I am convinced the young woman who made contact with that boy via the Ouija Board was most probably a very talented clairvoyant.

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How can you test that theory? Let's go back to the pendulum; if it is simply the device that is delivering the message, swinging from a chain or string, then it should work if suspended over the letter board by a simple hanging device. But that of course does not work, we tried it; hanging a small stone pendulum from a "Banana Hanger" from my kitchen, the pendulum will eventually move slightly due to the Earth's rotation and gravitational pull, but it spelled out nothing. But if a "sensitive" simply touches the wooden base of the hanger, the pendulum moves far more than without the human touch. Finally, when held directly by the subject, it begins to spell out simple words and messages. In the Ouija Board study, we tried blindfolding the subjects and the device still worked when a suspected clairvoyant was controlling the planchette. While not yet tested, I surmise that the same would be true of a blindfolded clairvoyant and a pendulum. We shall see.

Testing of such a theory is rooted in science, not mysticism. I have heard a lot of talk of late warning me about the "dangers" of using a Ouija Board or a Pendulum as a divining device because they are intrinsically evil. My thoughts are that the testing of any device be it the Mini-Box or an IR sensitive camera is pure science and nothing more. Would someone suggest that shooting Infrared photos in a reported haunted location is dangerous? The same answer has to apply to the use of a pendulum or a Mini-Box. They are simply tools. The box is filled with wires, diodes and solid state devices that allow the unit to receive radio signals; there is no mystery there, it is a radio, but one that has been attributed to some fascinating claims in spirit communication. If you don't believe in spirits that would suggest something else is going on, if you admit to hearing the box speak in coherent sentences.

When the Chinese invented the forerunner of the Ouija Board in the Ming Dynasty, it was used to talk to departed relatives, setting in motion the entire concept of spirit communications. Obviously, when any device delivers a message that is meaningful to the subject, something is going on, but it is not necessarily spirit communications, although many want it to be so. That is the entire driving force for the modern paranormal investigator, to study without prejudice the mechanism of communication as well as the message and offer a theory about what is happening in that situation. I am not rushing to judgment when I hypothesize that the Ouija Board is being manipulated subconsciously or that the messages from a Ghost Box are more often than not simple matrixing. I am simply offering a challenge to other investigators to prove otherwise.

Our job is not to sit on the fence and just observe and report, but rather we are expected to offer some rational explanation for such phenomena. That is the job description of a paranormal investigator!

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