

GRAB HOLD OF THE PLANCHETTE AND JOIN OUR EXPERTS AS WE INVESTIGATE 125 YEARS OF THE MOST POPULAR METHOD OF TALKING TO THE DEAD: THE OUIJA BOARD



TAKE ME TO THE OTHER SIDE

BY APRIL SNELLINGS

THE 1890s WERE A LOVELY TIME FOR THE MORBIDLY INCLINED.

It was the decade that saw the birth of the gory Parisian stage shows known as the Grand Guignol, often considered the forebears of slasher movies. Robert W. Chambers' eventual *True Detective* fodder *The King in Yellow* was published in 1895, with H.G. Wells' mad-scientist epic *The Island of Dr. Moreau* following in 1896. The next year saw the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; Henry James' classic ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* appeared the year after.

But if you craved a more direct experience with the supernatural, there was a new product that you absolutely had to own: the Ouija board. Ostensibly "invented" in 1890 (more on that later), the Ouija rode the waves of the burgeoning Spiritualist craze – a movement defined by the belief that the living could communicate with the dead – to become a bona fide cultural phenomenon.

The Ouija boards produced by Hasbro today are remarkably similar to the boards that were manufactured by the Kennard Novelty Company in 1891, just a few months after a Baltimore attorney named Elijah Bond filed the original patent in May 1890. For 125 years, Ouija has remained essentially unchanged: a flat, easily portable surface on which the alphabet is printed in two arching rows, with the numbers 0 to 9 at the bottom and some version of the words "Yes," "No" and "Goodbye" placed strategically around the edges. The user interface is also the same: a small pointer called a "planchette" that glides across the board, pausing occasionally to indicate words, numbers or letters. Today you can expect to shell out about \$19.99 USD for a new Ouija board; in 1891, it would have set you back \$1.50.

Your great-grandmother could probably tell you how to use it: place your fingertips lightly on the edges of the planchette, ask the board a question, and wait for it to spell out an answer. Your chances of "contacting the beyond" are considerably higher when two or more people finger up to the planchette; there's a social element to Ouija that has always contributed to its appeal.

Though various people associated with the Kennard Novelty Company are often credited with inventing the Ouija board, the truth is, they didn't; they

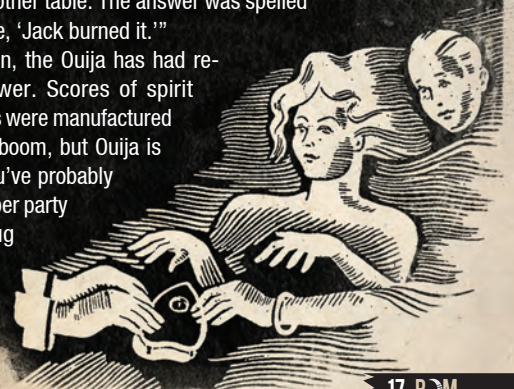
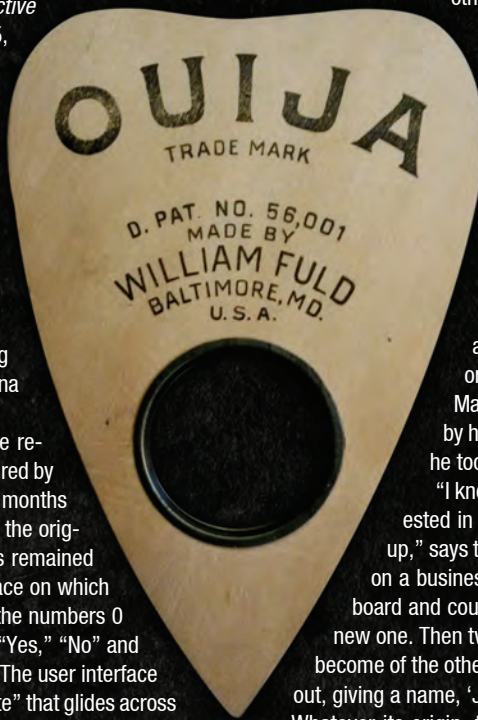
just figured out how to market it. "Talking boards" – or "witch boards" or "spirit boards," if you want to give it some flare – had been around for several years before the company slapped a brand name on them and started selling them as quickly as they could produce them. They were a natural evolution of

other spirit communication methods that were popular at the time, such as table tipping, alphabet calling and automatic writing. [See sidebar.] We don't know exactly when or where talking boards were invented, but, thanks to an article by the Associated Press in 1886, we know that homemade versions of them were all the rage in Ohio several years before the first Ouija boards hit stores.

Even that earliest account of what would become the Ouija board had a dark side, hinting at unhealthy obsession and laying the groundwork for the prototypical Ouija-gone-wrong tale. The article that probably inspired Ouija's creation, which originally appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* on March 28, 1886, told of a man who was so disturbed by his family's preoccupation with a talking board that he took it upon himself to destroy it.

"I know of a gentleman whose family became so interested in playing with the witching thing that he burned it up," says the article. "The same night he started out of town on a business trip. The members of his family looked for the board and could not find it. They got a servant to make them a new one. Then two of them sat down and asked what had become of the other table. The answer was spelled out, giving a name, 'Jack burned it.'"

Whatever its origin, the Ouija has had remarkable staying power. Scores of spirit communication devices were manufactured during the Spiritualist boom, but Ouija is the one that stuck. You've probably never attended a slumber party where the hostess dug out a Braham & Co. Telegraphic Spirit Communicator or a





Princeton Novelty Company Spirit Finger, but chances are you've managed to spook yourself with a Ouija board at some point in your life.

The manufacturing history of the board is a long, sordid tale of in-fighting, family feuds and corporate wrangling. After the first year of the board's production, Charles Kennard, after whom the Kennard Novelty Company was named, and two other founders were pushed out. It wasn't an amiable split; Kennard claimed that he invented the board, and would go on to launch a number of (unsuccessful) attempts to claim a piece of the talking-board industry.

Meanwhile, business boomed for Ouija's manufacturers, who would quickly change their name from Kennard Novelty Company to Ouija Novelty Company and build more factories to keep up with the public's nearly insatiable demand. A young man named William Fuld was placed in charge of production. Fuld had worked for the company as a painter and varnisher, but he was also one of its original stockholders, and the company flourished under his guidance. Fuld brought his brother, Isaac, into the fold, but that relationship would also end badly when Isaac was edged out of the Ouija business, igniting a Fuld family feud that would last until William and Isaac's grandchildren finally decided to let bygones be bygones in 1997.

William Fuld remained Ouija's champion until 1927, when he fell to his death from the roof of one of his Ouija factories. According to legend, the board told him to build the factory, but it apparently neglected to warn him about the faulty rooftop support he would one day lean against while supervising the installation of a flagpole. He fell three stories and died when a broken rib pierced his heart. Fuld's family continued to make the board until the brand was sold to Parker Brothers in 1966; that company was in turn absorbed by

Hasbro in 1991. In some form or



Board Biz: A trade pamphlet for the Ouija board, (top) board manufacturer William Fuld, and (opposite) a storefront display.

other, the Ouija board has been in constant production for 125 years. Millions have been sold, and the boards have become an indelible part of our cultural fabric. In 1920, Norman Rockwell immortalized Ouija on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*; in 1983, poet James Merrill won a National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Changing Light at Sandover*, an epic poem he insisted he composed with the help of a homemade talking board.

But as Ouija's popularity grew, its dark side got, well, darker. In December 1918, a woman wrote to Fuld and told him that an evil entity had reached her through the board. "Night and day the voice of that devil talked to me," she wrote. "I nearly died. No one knew what was the matter and I would not believe the awful things or do the wicked things I was told to do and if did would

be rewarded beyond measure."

Stories of people driven to madness by Ouija boards soon began to pop up in newspapers across America. "El Cerrito Ouija zealots keep woman prisoner in mystery house," read a 1920 headline referencing a bizarre case of Ouija-induced mass hysteria in a small California town. In 1933, a fifteen-year-old girl shot her father to death, supposedly at the board's urging, prompting the headline "When the Ouija board spelled 'D-A-D-D-Y M-U-S-T D-I-E.'" Two years later, a Kansas City woman claimed the board told her that her 77-year-old husband was not only cheating on her but also hiding a fortune from her. She knocked the man unconscious, tied him to a bed, and proceeded to torture him mercilessly until he shot her to death with a pistol left within his reach.

Pop culture, particularly movies, also contributed to the Ouija board's gradual shift from novelty to menace. In 1960, William Castle's *13 Ghosts* featured a chilling scene of a Ouija board apparently predicting a character's death; years later, *The Exorcist* (1973) portrayed the board as a doorway to demonic possession. Other movies, such as 1986's *Witchboard*, 2007's *Paranormal Activity* and 2014's much-derided *Ouija*, have since built on the board's eerie reputation and even contributed new aspects of Ouija lore. (For more on the Ouija board in film, see p.24)

Even more intriguing than its history, though, is the question of why the board seems to work.

Many think the planchette is being moved by entities from the spirit world, while others believe the board works by establishing a telepathic link between users. The explanation borne out by science, though, is that the planchette is being controlled by our ideomotor movements – small, unconscious motions that we can't help making, such as poker tells or moving your fingers when you're thinking about tying your shoes. We make these movements all the time, but our conscious mind cancels the action.

The Ouija board essentially removes that filter, because you can't be sure if it's your own twitches and tics or someone else's that are causing the planchette to move. Your subconscious gets a rare shot at the driver's seat, and before you can say "Captain Howdy" you're well on your way to leaving the lights on for the rest of your life.

But here's the really cool thing about the "mystifying oracle": when

you disprove or discount any sort of supernatural explanation as to why it works, it doesn't become any less fascinating. Some researchers believe the Ouija board could be a valuable tool in helping us learn more about non-conscious thought, and could even have applications in diagnosing neurodegenerative disorders before more traditional methods can detect them. There are legitimate scientific and academic institutions, such as the Inner Intel Project at the University of British Columbia Visual Cognition Lab, that want to use the boards to learn more about the human brain and how it works. Predictably, though, grant organizations aren't lining up to fund any study whose proposal begins with, "Okay, we're going to take a Ouija board..."

So, for the foreseeable future, it seems Ouija is determined to hold on to at least a few of its secrets.

In the meantime, we've assembled a panel of experts to help us pull back the veil and sort out the mystery of the Ouija board: Robert Murch, Ouija historian and chairman of the Talking Board Historical Society; Mitch Horowitz, author of the 2010 book *Occult America* (Bantam); Joanna Ebenstein, founder of Brooklyn's Morbid Anatomy Museum, and famed mentalist The Amazing Kreskin.

Now, light a candle, dim the lights, and think of a question...

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE OUIJA BOARD?

MITCH HOROWITZ: On the surface, Ouija is just a shrink-wrapped game board that gets sold on the same shelf as *Risk* or *Monopoly*. But, in actuality, it is the sole remaining object from the age of Spiritualism – the 19th-century movement that practiced talking to the dead – that remains widely used today.

JOANNA EBENSTEIN: It's a board you can buy as a toy, that most preteens play with at some point, either at a slumber party or in a graveyard, with which you attempt to make contact with the dead or, as I think psychologists would say, with your unconscious mind.

ROBERT MURCH: Ouija is important because it's a trademark, or a brand. It's been in continuous use since 1890, currently owned by Hasbro. Ouija is really just one of many talking boards, and the talking board really leapt out of the Spiritualist community into pop culture in 1886 in Ohio, when a small article is published about a man who's expressing

his frustrations with his family's use of these talking boards and not doing anything else. What they're talking about is a flat surface that has letters and numbers and some words on it – "Yes," "No," "Good eve," "Good night," which became "Goodbye" later on – and another little table on the top that people place their fingers on as they ask a question. And that little table would move and stop, and point out these letters and numbers, thereby answering a question or spelling out some message from the beyond.

WHY DO YOU THINK THEY WORK?

MH: That's a mystery. The most common answer is that people are unconsciously pushing the pointer, or planchette. But that doesn't cover all the aspects of weirdness associated with the board, including the really personal and oddly timed "messages" that appear to come through it. Conformist opinion be damned, I refuse to categorically rule out metaphysical possibilities.

JE: To be honest, it never worked for me. When I was a kid, we tried all the time, and nothing strange ever happened for me. I also went up to Lily Dale, which is the place where the Spiritualists all practice, and I tried table tipping, I tried spoon bending, I tried doing all the things you're supposed to do, and most things didn't work for me. I think I have the wrong brain for it. I'm too critical or something. Table tipping [a.k.a. table turning, involves users placing their hands on a table and contacting spirits, which reply by tilting the table in different directions.] eventually did work for me, though, and I've had some weird experiences with other things. I don't doubt there are other ways of knowing things. I've played with tarot cards and I've had dreams I write down that come true almost literally, so I know that there are many things I don't understand about how the world works, and our rational ways of knowing, but Ouija boards have not done that for me, for whatever reason.



RM: Scientists believe that when you're playing the board you open a door in your mind, and that your subconscious wants the board to work. So you are pushing the planchette, unbeknownst to you, and that's what's spelling out the answers. And then you have psychics, who would say there's a form of telepathy going on – that the users are reading each other's minds. They don't know it, but the answers are coming from each other. And then there's the belief that's really at the core of what talking boards were made for, and that was to make contact with something outside of the users. Not you, not your subconscious, not other players, none of the people in the room who are living – something that is beyond that. Personally, I believe there is magic to these talking boards. Anyone who's ever sat down and used one and feels the planchette move, knows that something's going on. What is that? Is it possible to talk to the dead? That's a question that just has never been answered. It works because we want it to. That's the real answer.

THE AMAZING KRESKIN: I think it's the unconscious mind. I'm not arguing with people who believe in spirit communication and so forth. But I do believe some kind of paranormal phenomenon takes place where the unconscious is tapped into, because too much has happened through the years where dramatic revelations have come through that are not easy to explain. But I don't really think it's supernatural. I think it's a hyper-acuity, a special gifted, intuitive factor. The truth of the matter is the Ouija board, in a sense, is a glamorous form of intuition.

WHY DO THEY GENERALLY NEED AT LEAST TWO PEOPLE TO WORK?

MH: That's the most common practice but one person alone can use the board. But,

Cont'd on p. 22





TALKING BOARD HISTORIAN AND COLLECTOR
 BRANDON HODGE HELPS US TRACE THE
 STRANGE HISTORY OF THE PLANCHETTE

GHOST WRITERS

BY APRIL SNELLINGS



ON ITS OWN, A OUIJA BOARD IS ABOUT AS MYSTICAL AS A BAG OF SCRABBLE TILES. For all the board's vaguely occult iconography and the off-the-charts creep factor ascribed to it by movies such as *13 Ghosts* and *The Exorcist*, it's just a useless slab of wood (or chipboard, if you're contacting the beyond on a budget) without the planchette that comes with it. For those who believe a talking board is truly a hotline to the beyond, the board simply gives the dead a vocabulary – it's the planchette that gives them a voice.

Though they're mostly known as Ouija accessories today, planchettes actually predate talking boards by several decades, and were once popular spirit communication tools in their own right. In fact, the first known mention of what would eventually become the Ouija board referred to it as "the New Planchette."

Brandon Hodge, an Austin-based planchette collector and researcher, has spent the better part of two decades scouring the dusty corners of weird history for information about the devices. He says we can trace the planchette to June 10, 1853 – nearly 40 years before the first Ouija boards went on the market.

"They were originally invented as a spirit communication device that was meant to facilitate and expedite communication with the dead," Hodge explains.

The key word there is "expedite." By the time planchettes were invented, ghostly communication was already a full-fledged sensation thanks to the Spiritualist movement, which got a jump-start in 1848 when



the Fox sisters in Hydesville, New York, supposedly began receiving messages from the ghost of a murdered salesman via loud knocking sounds, a process that would come to be known as "spirit rapping." Séances became an incredibly popular pastime, and by 1853, a fad called "table turning" or "table tipping" had spread all across the US, Canada and Europe.

Hodge explains the process: "Everyone puts their hands on the table and calls out questions to the ether, and it will rap out responses by lifting or tilting mysteriously and banging on the floor. You can ask affirmative or negative questions. For instance, you can say, 'Is the spirit of my father here? Tap once for yes, twice for no.' Or you could perform something called 'alphabet calling,' which is where you actually call out the alphabet to the ether and then wait for a response to indicate which letter the spirits would like to select."

Whatever method a medium used, the results were often convincing. (You can decide for yourself whether séance sitters were chatting up the dead, or simply being hoodwinked by scam artists or fooled by the same ideomotor movements that likely power the Ouija board's planchette.) But the process could be time-consuming and mind-numbingly boring; by the time the dead spelled out a lengthy message, you were considerably closer to being able to just ask them your question first-hand.

"The most you can get is about 240 characters an hour, even if you know what message you're trying to spell out," Hodge says. "That's less than two tweets in one hour."

There was also automatic writing, wherein a medium would enter a trancelike state and scribble out messages from the hereafter. Again, this produced convincing communications, but the challenge lay in deciphering page after page of barely legible scrawl.

A number of inventors turned their attention to finding a quicker alternative, but it wasn't until 1853 that a spirit communication device would really begin to catch on.



"The story goes that the spirits in a séance in France suggested to the sitters to go into the next room and get a basket, turn it upside down and thrust a pencil through it," Hodge explains. "Then the spirit supposedly told them, 'Now everyone place your hands on the basket instead of the table, and I'm going to write out messages for you.' So that's the invention of the planchette on June 10, 1853 – it's literally the spirits saying, 'Let's hurry this up.' It takes the movement of the tipping tables with the concept of automatic writing and merges them into a small device. In that case it was a basket, but by the 1860s, we have a cottage industry that's going to spring up producing these planchettes."

Planchettes were popular with Spiritualists for the following decade, but they would leap into mainstream culture in 1867, following the appearance of a sensational article in a British publication called *Once a Week*. That article would be reprinted in the US in 1868, and soon planchettes were everywhere.

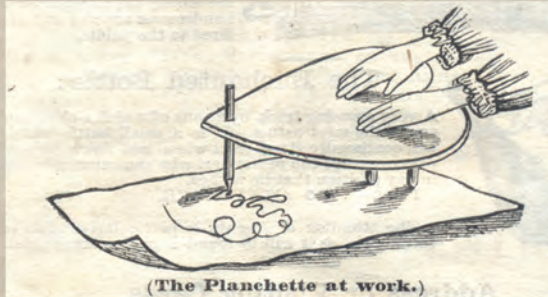
"Keep in mind, we've already got a long history of planchettes at this point," Hodge notes. "They've been around for fifteen years, but only in Spiritualist circles. We have evidence there's a cabinetmaker in France who's making them through the 1850s. We know that an artificial-limb manufacturer in the UK started making them in 1858. And we also know that they were available here in America. ... But they just sort of languished until that sensational article sparks this incredible desire for people to own these things. It really does become the must-have gift item for that season, like the yo-yo or the Hula Hoop. One manufacturer, Kirby and Company, claimed they sold over 200,000 planchettes in the holiday season that year."

As sensational as the planchette may have been, there was also a sombre undercurrent to its appeal. The device enjoyed its first big surge in popularity just a few years after the end of the Civil War, which claimed more than 620,000 lives in America.

"The end of the Civil War in 1865 marked the greatest period of bloodshed in our country," Hodge says. "So, just three years in its wake, you've got a lot of people who have lost a lot of family members not long before. When this article comes out claiming that you can speak to the spirits with this device, that's going to have an incredible effect on the desire to acquire one. We will find throughout the history of spirit communication devices, whether it be the Civil War or WWI or WWII, that the loss of life is going to go hand in hand with the popularity of these devices. Their great surges come in the wake of great conflict."

The popularity of the planchette would wax

What is the most of you - the joy of the spirit's urban & fabulous the good it has done, to years of this world's pleasure - -
J.E.T.



(The Planchette at work.)



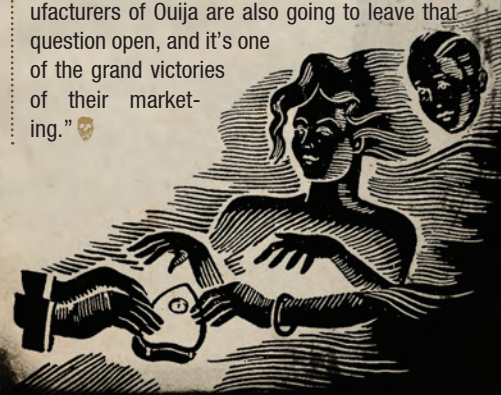
Talk Through The Hand: (clockwise from top) Early automatic writing specimen from May 25, 1853, printed in Judge John Edmunds' *Spiritualism*, George Blackie & Company's "Mysterious Planchette," Norman Rockwell's illustration for the May 1, 1920 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*, a manipulated séance photo, and George Blackie & Company's illustration of its planchette.

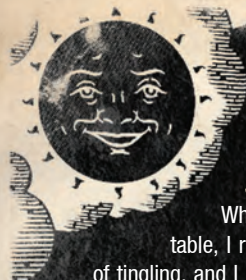
and wane for the next two decades, but it would remain the most iconic spirit communication device on the market until 1891, when the first Ouija boards began showing up on store shelves. With the invention of talking boards, the planchette made what appears to be its final evolution: as a pointer rather than a collaborative writing device.

So the planchette became an indispensable part of the Ouija-board package, but Hodge thinks the device played another important role in helping Ouija catch on: the board's manufacturers took an important cue from the makers of planchettes, who were clever enough to be ambiguous about what makes the device move.

"You oftentimes just see it marketed as 'Planchette' with a capital P, the same way we

see 'Ouija' with a capital O," Hodge points out. "It's a proper noun: ask Planchette. It's stripped largely of its Spiritualist connotations, and so it has a broader appeal to those who might see séance activity as not particularly wholesome. If you can just ask Planchette a question, it's the 'mysterious oracle' rather than something that requires you to fully commit to the belief that you're breaching the veil of the dead. The manufacturers of Ouija are also going to leave that question open, and it's one of the grand victories of their marketing."





please, just forget I said that on the next rainy, lonely afternoon.

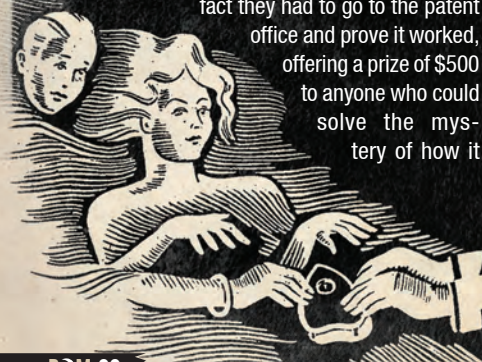
JE: I've done table tipping. When I had my hand on the table, I remember feeling this kind of tingling, and I pulled away – it made me uncomfortable, which is probably why these things don't work for me, so I pulled my arm away and it stopped. But then, when it did it again, I let myself feel it, and that's when it started to work and the table started to move. Maybe there's just some energy that happens that we don't understand, from all these people touching this thing. I don't know.

RM: When you do it collaboratively and you have a group of people playing, it's interesting. Just like any group of people you throw together, it starts to figure out who's the leader. Whose subconscious is stronger? That's what scientists believe. And that's why in the beginning it's very jerky and doesn't move very smoothly, but it works itself out.

TAK: Understand that in the case of some individuals, it does work very well with one person. But we're not used to detaching our conscious thinking and adjusting our activity to an unconscious level and tapping into it readily, and I think part of the reason is given away in my performances, when I'm reading the thoughts of strangers in the audience. It's a two-way situation. It seems that the twosome has a reciprocal relationship or collaboration that reinforces the phenomenon. No question, I would not advise most people to play around with the Ouija board alone, because they're only going to frustrate themselves when it doesn't work. But when you have someone else, their input helps it to work. I think that's the key.

THE OUIJA BOARD WASN'T THE FIRST TALKING BOARD. WHY DID THE ONES THAT PRECEDED IT FADE OUT, WHILE THE OUIJA CAUGHT FIRE?

RM: Ouija's success is really kind of interesting because we know a company called the W.S. Reed Company in Leominster, Massachusetts, made a "witch board" in 1886 that they described exactly like the talking board that also comes up in 1886, and they sent it to President Grover Cleveland in the White House as a wedding gift. But why doesn't it take off like Ouija? The makers of Ouija take this talking board, branding it with a name, using the fact they had to go to the patent office and prove it worked, offering a prize of \$500 to anyone who could solve the mystery of how it



All Hands On Deck: The Swami Mystery Talking Board in action in the mid-1940s, and (opposite) Milton Bradley's Kreskin's ESP Ouija-like game from the 1960s.

worked – all of those things were brilliant. And they didn't pigeonhole it as a way to talk to the dead. You would address it as "Ouija." "Ouija, tell me this." So you could talk to the dead, you could ask psychic questions, you could do anything you wanted to and that was okay with the people who made it, as long as you bought it.

EARLY INSTRUCTIONS SPECIFIED THAT A "LADY AND GENTLEMAN [ARE] PREFERRED." WAS THERE AN IMPLICIT SEXUAL ANGLE, AND COULD THAT HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE OUIJA BOARD'S POPULARITY?

MH: Many occult practices have some kind of a sexual charge around them. This was true, for example, of hypnotism, or Mesmerism as it was called in the late 1700s and much of the 1800s. Bodily closeness, a trance state, evening time, a darkened parlour – much of the traditional occult setting is sexual, and this was true for Ouija, too. The manufacturer subtly promoted this view on its vintage boxes by showing a man and woman using the board knee to knee.

JE: What that makes me think of is how a lot of the most important Spiritualists were women, and I've always thought there was an unspoken erotic element to that. There was an exhibition of spirit photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art called The Perfect Medium, and it was amazing. One of the things you really get is this kind of eroticism. A lot of the women end up naked or somewhat unclothed. And it was also one of the few places in which a woman could be a powerful figure. So I think there is something there, but it would be hard for me to pinpoint exactly what it is. But I think there is a sexual charge. Maybe they were playing on that as a parlour game, because it was a selling point to have a man and a woman sitting together with their knees touching in a

situation that's also charged emotionally because you're waiting for these messages from the beyond. Whether that's just a promotional tactic or whether things are more likely to happen when there's that sexual attraction, I don't know.

RM: The Ouija board broke many Victorian rules. In Victorian times, you're not supposed to be alone with a woman. You're not supposed to be touching them. And to be sitting together with your knees touching and fingers touching on the planchette, and you're playing at night with candles – this is like date night. So the guy's playing it because he wants to get with the girl, the girl's playing because she wants to be with him, but she also wants to make contact with the other side. Norman Rockwell, in May of 1920, captured that scene in pop culture forever. You see her looking up to the ether, and he's got a smirk on his face, maybe kind of looking at her blouse. Humans never change, right? It's always the same thing.

TAK: One of the appeals of séances and what have you, which were tremendously popular in the 1800s up until about the 1920s and '30s, is that it was one of the very few social phenomena that allowed people to sit in a darkened room and touch each other. That is one of the main reasons for the popularity of spirit séances.

KRESKIN, YOU PUT OUT YOUR OWN VERSION OF A TALKING BOARD IN THE 1960S. CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT IT?

TAK: I always like to think that I'm given some credit for history repeating itself, because I simplified the phenomenon and borrowed from the past, and in the late 1960s and early 1970s Milton Bradley put out the *Kreskin's ESP* game. While it dealt with how people could test each other for telepathy and what have you, I included a pendulum in the game where people could hold it between each other and

get “yes” and “no” answers depending on how it moved, which is an offshoot of the Ouija board. It had the entire alphabet in a circle around the board, so that when a person held the pendulum, it could swing in the direction of letters and also numbers. So people could say it was a modification of the Ouija board, but it actually was easier for people to handle because it was just holding a pendulum on a chain. It was a great success.

IF THERE IS A SPIRITUAL REALITY, DO YOU THINK THE OUIJA BOARD COULD POTENTIALLY BE USED TO ACCESS IT?

MH: Believers in every quarter of our mainstream spiritual culture employ objects to get in touch with the ineffable, whether it is holy water, saint relics, amulets or the red Kabbalah string I’m wearing on my wrist. So, for believers, I don’t think there’s any case to be made *against* the plausibility of a spirit board. But I’m not trying to dodge your question: My simple answer is yes. There is absolutely no disproof of an unseen aspect to life and, as a friend of mine likes to point out, “Something only has to be a little bit true to change everything.” I personally consider Ouija “a little bit true.”

JE: They’ve never done anything for me, but if they’re giving someone something, I think they’re great tools. I feel the same way about tarot. Something happens when I play tarot. Does it say anything about the world beyond myself? I don’t know. But it’s a great tool, and if someone told me tomorrow that all it’s doing is channelling my unconscious, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference to me. I don’t know what it is; I just know that it helps me find realizations I couldn’t have found in another way. It’s an indirect way of accessing what’s hidden from us, whether that thing that’s hidden from view is the spirit world or the unconscious.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A STRANGE EXPERIENCE WITH A OUIJA BOARD?

MH: I haven’t had any green-soup vomiting, bed-levitating, lights-going-out experiences with Ouija, but some of my friends have. The weirdest thing that happened to me is years ago, when I was first thinking of writing about Ouija, I was considering experimenting with the board – which I told no one about. One day, out of the blue, a

stranger emailed me saying, “I get the sense you’re considering playing around with a Ouija board and I want to warn you against it.”

RM: I’ve played the Ouija board thousands of times. There are times when it’s obviously coming from the users’ subconscious, and then there are times when I’ve shared an experience I just can’t explain. Is it a psychic experience, or something more? Who knows? I’ve never had that experience that’s made me feel absolutely that the Ouija board allows you to talk to the dead, but I’ve had enough weird experiences that I keep talking. And I think I represent most people when I say, I want to believe. I want to believe the short time I have on this earth continues in some way afterward.

DO YOU THINK THERE ARE ANY REAL DANGERS ASSOCIATED WITH ITS USE?

MH: Absolutely. By whatever mechanism the board works – whether someone is pushing the planchette or it’s Aunt Mary on the line – a lot of people report frightening, deeply discomforting experiences. There are few happy endings associated with Ouija. The poet Ted Hughes wrote, “Always bad news from the Ouija board” – the board had predicted the death of his estranged wife Sylvia Plath, or so he wrote.

JE: I don’t know. I’ve never heard a story of someone getting messed up from it, but I suppose if you were a person who had a tendency already for mental illness, this could catapult you somewhere. If you want to look at the psychological model and say that you’re channelling voices from within yourself, maybe that could be dangerous if you’re the wrong kind of person.

RM: I did a long, long, long interview with Lorraine Warren, the godmother [of paranormal investigation]. I love Ouija boards; she hates Ouija boards. We really agreed on one thing, which is, if there’s danger, there’s equal danger in all of these devices because what you are doing is conjuring. You are calling something to you to answer a question. You are initiating this contact. Whether you do that through tarot cards, crystal balls, EVP recorders, whatever – we don’t make the rules.

MITCH, IN OCCULT AMERICA, YOU WRITE, “ONE OF THE MOST NOTABLE

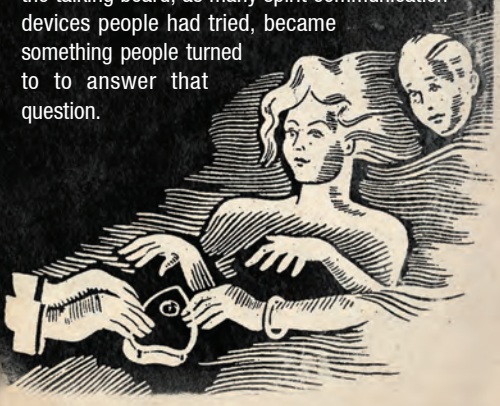
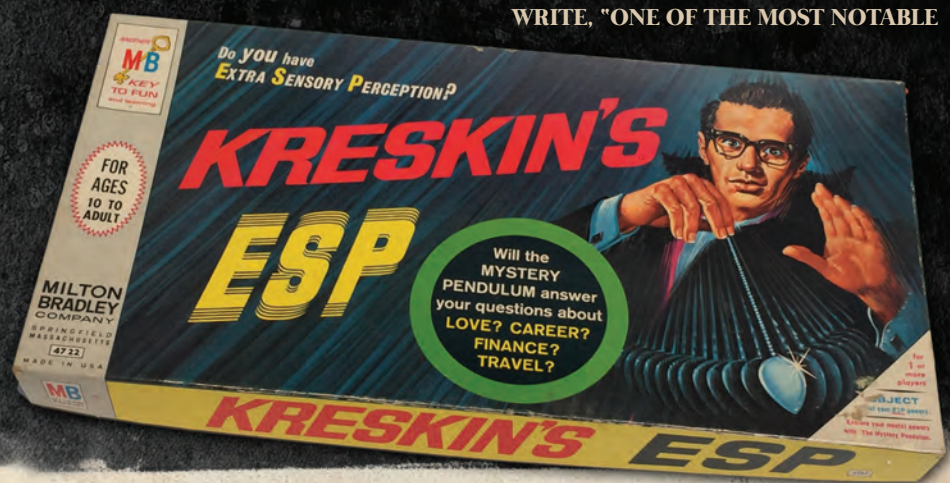
CHARACTERISTICS OF OUIJA LORE IS THE VAST – AND SOMETIMES AUTHENTICALLY FRIGHTENING – HISTORY OF STORIES REPORTED BY USERS.” IN YOUR OPINION, DO THESE ACCOUNTS SUGGEST THAT SOME PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE GENUINE PARANORMAL EXPERIENCES USING THE OUIJA?

MH: I don’t think the question of the paranormal can be discounted if one is committed to examining all the possibilities, and not crossing something off the list in a pro-forma manner. Another possibility is that we harbour gremlins and hostilities in our subconscious that we do not like to face – just look at the hostility that pours out on social media. It’s more frightening than anything else, in a sense. Ouija could be a mechanical, if unconscious, duplication of that same phenomenon where, stripped of personal accountability, people let loose with all kinds of hatred and anger.

OUIJA RESEARCHERS OFTEN CITE A CORRELATION BETWEEN SOCIAL UPHEAVAL AND THE POPULARITY OF THE BOARDS. WHY IS THAT?

MH: What they’re referencing is Ouija’s spike in popularity during periods of war, which is true. Sales grew during the First and Second World Wars. People were suffering from terrible losses and grasping for ways to make contact.

RM: Today, if you walked into a house and saw a bunch of people playing the Ouija board, you might think, “What the hell is going on here?” But if you walked into a séance or any spirit communication session in the mid-1800s, it would be commonplace. And not just because it was the rise of Spiritualism in America and not just because it was a fad, but if you just looked at what was happening, which was this massive death in America. Disease was rampant – people would have many children and half of them would die. And then you throw in the Civil War, when everyone lost a father, an uncle, a cousin, a son, a grandson, and these people didn’t just die, they went away and disappeared. So there were all these questions. Where did they go? What happened to my loved one? And there was nothing that could answer them. And then the talking board, as many spirit communication devices people had tried, became something people turned to to answer that question.





FOR NEARLY A CENTURY, MOVIES HAVE SHAPED THE WAY WE SEE TALKING BOARDS AS A WICKED GATEWAY TO THE SPIRIT WORLD

CINEMA OUIJA

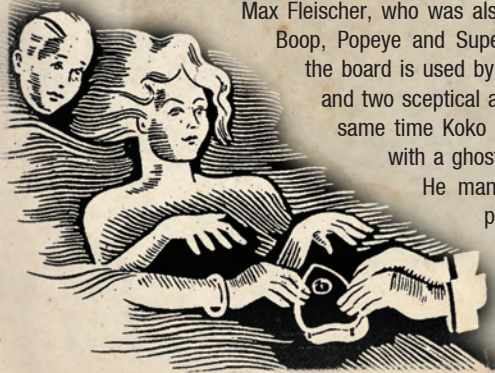
BY RONNI THOMAS



SINCE THE TIME WHEN OUIJA BOARDS WERE PRODUCED AS A CONSUMER NOVELTY,

speculations as to their demonic and potentially dangerous influence was shared by both religious fanatics as well as members of the New Age. The myth about the ominous, mystical powers of the boards was reinforced by Hollywood throughout the ages, going back to the silent era.

The board's first appearance was most likely 1920's *Ouija Board*, a part live-action, part animated short featuring Koko the Clown. (It's easy to find on YouTube.) Part of the *Out of the Inkwell* series, it was created by Max Fleischer, who was also known for his Betty Boop, Popeye and Superman cartoons. Here, the board is used by a superstitious janitor and two sceptical animators, while at the same time Koko is drawn into a scene with a ghost-filled haunted house.



He manages to jump off the page into the real world, where he crawls under the planchette and shocks the users

by making the board speak without them even touching it. Though farcical, it sets the tone for the board's reputation as a harbinger of bad omens.

Then, in 1944, the Ouija board makes a particularly memorable appearance in the haunted house movie *The Uninvited* (pictured above). This film presents it not as a novelty board but a series of letters written around the table with a glass used as the planchette. It's the centerpiece of a séance performed by siblings, played by Ray Milland and Ruth Hussey, to communicate with the previous owner of their new home. Interestingly, they use the board in its original incarnation: a tool to converse with the dead during Spiritualist séances. Here, no demon is unleashed, the board simply helps them – though chillingly – to make contact with the distressed spirit that seems to be “haunting” the recently purchased house.

The Ouija board's demonic connotations were cemented in 1973, with a chilling appearance in *The Exorcist*. The board, considered by most at the time to be a children's party game, is used by Regan (Linda Blair) as she communicates with “Captain Howdy.” Oddly, though Regan's mother is suspicious of the strange board, she makes no overt connection between it and the horrors to come. However, audiences recognized it as the conduit that allowed the demon Pazuzu to possess the girl, and from this point on, the board is seen both in film and pop culture as something genu-

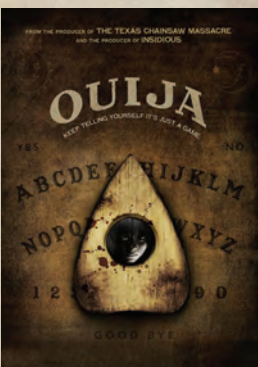


Board Games: In *The Exorcist* Regan (Linda Blair) summons "Captain Howdy," while her mom, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), looks on, and (top) Koko the clown hops on a board in 1920's *Ouija Board*.

inely dangerous. Thrill-seekers caused Ouija sales to skyrocket after the film.

The board itself finally became the focus in 1985's *Witchboard*. Here, it's capable of channelling both spirits of benevolent helper ghosts and malignant evil spirits – specifically the demon Malfator. Throughout the film, Linda (Tawney Kitaen), who begins her relationship with the board in a positive light when it helps her find a lost ring, becomes increasingly more possessed by the demonic entity breaking into our world. She's eventually overcome by the spirit and fully possessed. For the movie's premiere, *Witchboard*-themed Ouija boards were even handed out to attendees. Malevolent spirit board antics continued in two sequels, *Witchboard 2: The Devil's Doorway* (1993) and *Witchboard III: The Possession* (1995).

In addition to these movies, the Ouija board had made cameos in many other horror films over the years, including William Castle's 13



Ghosts (1960) and *Paranormal Activity* (2009). The past decade or so has seen numerous low-budget horror titles from all over the world focused on the boards and people invoking evil forces through them, including 2003's *Ouija* (from Spain), 2007 Filipino film *Séance* (a.k.a. *Ouija*), the 2006 Egyptian release *Ouija* (seeing a pattern here?), the 2009 British movie *Ouija Board*, the 2011 American indie *The Ouija Experiment* and its 2015 sequel *Theater of Death*. The highest profile of the bunch was this year's widely released *Ouija*, despite scathing reviews. Distributed by Universal, it earned more than \$102 million worldwide (on a \$5 million budget) and a sequel is already in the works. Curiously, it was produced by Ouija copyright holders Hasbro, demonstrating that the company wants to ce-

ment the board's reputation as something evil. You don't have to ask the board to know that when it comes to Ouija boards and cinema, supernatural evil always sells. 🐼

DESCRIBE THE IMPACT OF THE EXORCIST ON HOW WE THINK ABOUT OUIJA BOARDS.



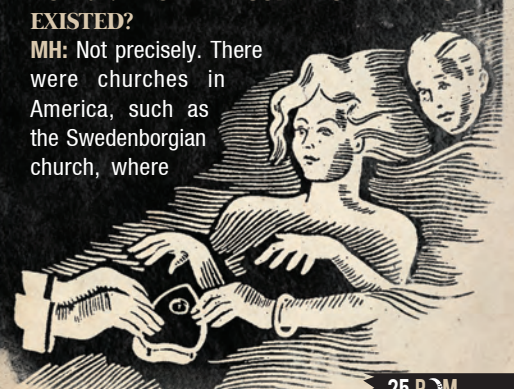
MH: For most people, *The Exorcist* remains probably the most "real" horror film ever made. Many people saw it as a dramatization of truth. It touched a religious chord in many people. The fact that Regan opened a forbidden door with Ouija left viewers with an indelible impression that Ouija was a portal to darkness, which added to its already frightening reputation.

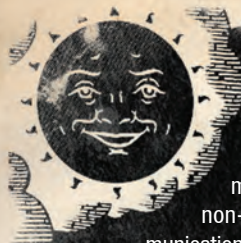
JE: I see that as being more a function of the fear of devil-worshippers than really being about the Ouija board. I don't see the board as being instrumental to that, as much as just the idea that everyday life can lead to possession. It's like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Poltergeist* – it creates the perfect, mundane reality, and then this thing happens in this situation we've already accepted as normal, and it turns everything on its head. I think, in the case of *The Exorcist* and the Ouija board, it was an expression of something people were already worried about.

RM: If we track the Ouija board through movies and music, going all the way back to sheet music and silent movies, we watch it go from being something funny, to something a little darker. There was always a segment of the population who thought Ouija boards were bad, that it was bad to talk to the dead. It's just that the overwhelming public didn't share that opinion. And then a movie comes along in 1973 called *The Exorcist*, which is based on the real story of a boy that was believed to be possessed by a demon. There had been many rumours the boy had used a Ouija board, and so William Peter Blatty, in his book and then the screenplay, integrates that into a very small scene. It's very innocuous. All we know is Regan uses the Ouija board alone, that she's talking to someone named Captain Howdy, and then she becomes possessed. I think *The Exorcist* did something unique to the Ouija board – something very much like what Alfred Hitchcock did for the shower. It took something that everyone does, that everyone can relate to, and made it frightening.

TODAY IT'S COMMON FOR RELIGIOUS GROUPS TO FROWN UPON THE OUIJA BOARD. HAS THAT CONFLICT ALWAYS EXISTED?

MH: Not precisely. There were churches in America, such as the Swedenborgian church, where





mediumship and séances were defended as valid manifestations of non-physical communication. An ancestor to the Bush presidential clan, the Rev. George Bush, held a Swedenborgian pulpit in the mid-19th century in New York City from which he defended the plausibility of channelling and mediumship. Many 19th-century occultists considered themselves Christian. This was true of Renaissance occultists, too.

JE: I don't really know, but I would have to guess it's newer, and it became a big deal once it became a thing kids played with and wasn't just a tool used by adults. To be a Spiritualist doesn't mean you're not a Christian, but to fuck around with something that might let the Devil in is different.

IN OUR INCREASINGLY HIGH-TECH, DIGITAL WORLD, ARE OUIJA BOARDS MORE RELEVANT OR LESS RELEVANT THAN THEY WERE 125 YEARS AGO?

MH: We have so few tactile experiences at this point in the digital age – we “experience” things at a remove; we hold in our hands fewer and fewer objects, such as photos, records or printed matter. We play chess, *Monopoly* and video games online. And I won't begin to address the sexual questions. Ouija is a rarified rubber-to-the-road experience today.

JE: I think people use them differently now. I think they're less relevant. When they came out, I think people really thought of them as a tool with which they could communicate with their dead loved ones and solve the questions of the universe, and now they're a children's toy. I don't think they're taken very seriously. I know people who are doing all sorts of woo-woo stuff, and they're doing spirit circles and things like that. It's a very niche, outsider group that's doing it right now. And the thing that's

so interesting to me about Spiritualism in the 19th century is,



40TH year of national popularity

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TOYS and NOVELTIES—February, 1946

it was a huge group. It was not a niche, outsider group. This was a large, progressive movement. So I think it was much more relevant and people were more open-minded to it then. There were families gathered in parlours trying to contact the dead every night. I just think that's fabulous.

RM: The Ouija board is still relevant today because people are still dying. If you stop dying, no one's going to care about the Ouija board. Because we're still dying, and we're still experiencing this common thing, it's very relevant today. We still experience loss and the unknown.

TAK: When they were first manufactured, they were relevant in the sense that they were awakening a culture. You had everybody from politicians to royalty to people who had a tough day-to-day job [using them], and it was awakening them to the idea that there's information there that we don't have the answer to, that we can't anticipate, that's coming from a source we're not clear on. And you know what? Today, with all the electronic devices, with all the sophistication, with all our business, we can't seem to stop the world and get off. This could be an opportunity for a respite, for a breather, and tapping into oneself. And for that reason, I think it's appropriate today as well.

ULTIMATELY, WHAT'S THE REAL MYSTERY OF THE OUIJA BOARD?

MH: The mystery is: “Who is behind the curtain?” Materialists will tell us the users are moving the pointer, consciously or unconsciously, and that's that. But that's a lazy person's answer – it's repeated by rote. This doesn't mean ghosties are moving the pointer, either. But the terms we use – unconscious, spirit, ghost – do more to obfuscate the world than illuminate it, because they bind us to perceived categories. They induce us to select rather than to think. In a world where waves collapse into particles and particles simultaneously appear in multiple places, we haven't the first idea of what's going on during a Ouija session, unless we tautologically cling to the “humbug” answer. But if that kind of thinking

gets too broadly applied we will slowly stop asking the core questions of life, such as: “What's over the next hill?” Ouija is a hill we can't quite see beyond – but we're hearing voices over there, and it's too tempting not to look.

JE: I think it's the unknown. I think it's the chill and excitement and thrill of putting yourself in this situation where you don't know what's going to happen and you don't know why. It makes you feel so alive in the moment when you're waiting for that thing to happen. In a world that's really become so domesticated we don't get the feeling of direct engagement and excitement. It makes you feel full of life, and marvel at the mystery of it.

RM: What's incredible about the Ouija board is it explores all the biggest questions about us. Why are we here? What happens when we're not here? The other things that are doing that are the exploration of space, or going into the deep ocean. It's pretty creepy. The Ouija board looks internally, into your subconscious and your mind, instead of looking for answers externally. When you sit down at the Ouija, even if you're like, “Okay, this is bullshit, but I'm going to play because my friends want to play,” you are entertaining the possibility that one day you might be on the other side of that board.

TAK: I think the romance of the Ouija board is that a disparate group of people – a writer who put a [talking] board together, people who were interested in Spiritualism, people who wanted answers to questions – they all found a common device. Whether they thought they were gonna communicate with the dead or get some answers to some problems, whether they were gonna search and see what kind of mysteries they could uncover – isn't it interesting it all came back to a little device that we've labelled the Ouija board?

I think that's a neat piece of cultural history. 🙄

