

# Ouija Board

By Dr. Brady Blevins

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**Inventor:** Elijah J. Bond

**Patented:** 1891

**Other Names:** Talking Board, Oriole Talking Board, Spirit Board, Witch Board, Oracle Board, Channeling Board

## INTRODUCTION

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The Ouija<sup>1</sup> board has fascinated people and captured the imagination of countless people. Whether it is the plethora of stories and urban legends or the alluring appeal created by the movies that feature the board; the Ouija board has failed to lose popularity in pop culture. There are reportedly 69 movies that feature Ouija boards.<sup>2</sup> The enticement of the ability to gain knowledge from the netherworld has been utilized to grab audiences. From movie franchise *Witchboard* in the 1980s and 1990s to movie titles such as: *Ouija* (2003, 2006, 2012, 2014), *Ouija Board* (2004, 2009), *The Ouija Experiment* and *The Ouija Experiment 2* (2011, 2014) and the most recent film *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016). There have been countless numbers of books written about, for and against the Ouija board.

While the Ouija board entices many to seek unfound knowledge the name itself carries some controversy. Most historians hold that the word Ouija is a combination of “the French *oui* and the German *ja* – yes.”<sup>3</sup> Charles Kennard, who created the current design, claimed that when he asked the board its name it spelled out the letter O-U-I-J-A. He insisted that the board told him that it was an Egyptian word for “good luck;” however, it has not been substantiated that there is an Egyptian word close to those letters that means “good luck.” It wasn’t until William Fuld took over the production that he popularized the current name, and widely accepted, etymology of the word.<sup>4</sup>

## HISTORY

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Many people may think of the Ouija board as a rather recent invention. The history of Ouija-like boards dates back as far as the Chinese prior to 551 B.C. or as some historians have noted the use in the days of Pythagoras in approximately 540 B.C.<sup>5</sup> One can trace the annals of time from Roman usage in the third century A.D. to North America prior to Columbus’ arrival and note uses of similar devices to accomplish the task of connecting with the deceased. Focusing closer to modern day use of Ouija, some believe it was French spiritualist named M. Planchette who, in 1853, invented a heart-shaped or tear-shaped pointer that rests on three pegs, with an opening for lead or a pencil. This understanding is doubtful because the French word “*planchette*” means “little plank” and there is not a record of a person by that name. Nevertheless, the device was used in an action called “Automatic Writing,” which is a method where one is guided by a spirit to move the planchette and it writes a message from the spirit through the person(s) involved. Automatic Writing is another form of channeling.<sup>6</sup>

The Ouija-like practice gained popularity in 1800s as the Civil War came to an end and many people wanted to make contact with the loved ones they had lost in the war. Similar to the naming of the Ouija board the history of who invented it is just as controversial. Stoker Hunt writes, “No one person or culture can take credit for its development. Ouija origins are multiple and ancient having been independently reinvented

and rediscovered in a wide variety of locations.”<sup>7</sup> Charles Kennard claimed that he had developed the board from a bread board with four legs.<sup>8</sup> Then Elijah J. Bond came beside him and made some improvements on the board including the alphabet in a semi-circular pattern. Ultimately it was Bond who filed for a patent in 1891 and thus is the one that history attributes to the creation of the modern-day Ouija board. It was just one year later, in 1892, William Fuld purchased the patent from Bond, filed for another patent and founded “The Southern Novelty Company” in Baltimore, Maryland (which would later be known as the Baltimore Talking Board Company).<sup>9</sup>

Fuld was a Presbyterian who claimed not to believe in the board; but did consult the board on how he should pursue his business. He claimed that the board told him to, “prepare for big business” and he did exactly that building his business and preparing for an explosion of sales. The business saw a major increase in sales as the Ouija board soared in popularity during World War 1. Many people were concerned with the well-being of their loved ones fighting in Europe and were desperate to know anything. The popularity of the board reached levels that were unprecedented. In the December 24, 1919 issues of *The New York Tribune*, it was reported that the “Mysterious Talking Oracle” had succeeded the Bible and the prayer-book in fraternity houses and students’ rooms.

Arguably one of the most important moments for the Ouija board came in 1920 when the Internal Revenue Service contended that it was a game, and therefore taxable. The Baltimore Talking Board Company took the IRS to court and lost. It was determined that they would have to pay taxes on the sale of the boards. The court acknowledged that it was “unique” and “in a class by itself” but refused to see it as anything more than a game. This thought has caused many to diminish the Ouija board as nothing more than a board game like Monopoly. However, attorney Allen Fisher, who argued for the Baltimore Talking Board Company stated something much different. He said, “We contend...that it [the Ouija board] is a form of amateur mediumship and not a game or sport. By means of this board one is enabled to get in touch with the other side.”<sup>10</sup> The company would petition the Supreme Court but they refused to hear the case.

In 1966, Parker Brothers purchased the rights to the Ouija board and moved the operations from Baltimore, Maryland to Salem, Massachusetts. “The first full year after their takeover, Parker Brothers sold more than two million Ouija boards...topping the sales of their perennially best-selling board game, Monopoly.”<sup>11</sup> In 1991, Hasbro Inc. purchased the Tonka Corporation which included its Parker Brothers unit. Today, Hasbro continues to enjoy the commercial success of the Ouija board even reporting a 300% increase in sales after the 2014 movie *The Ouija Experiment 2* was released.<sup>12</sup>

## **HOW IT WORKS: NECROMANCY/DIVINATION**

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The ability to gain knowledge or power from supernatural forces, apart from the God of the Bible, is a basic definition of an occultic practice.<sup>13</sup> The primary purpose of the Ouija board is to gain knowledge from the deceased, which is also known as necromancy. This practice, of attempting to communicate with the dead, has been a regular practice throughout recorded human history. “The Ouija board, in fact, came straight out of the American 19th century obsession with spiritualism, the belief that the dead are able to communicate with the living.”<sup>14</sup> Upper Class Americans in the 19th century would frequently hold séances in their parlor; viewing such practice as divination<sup>15</sup> as nothing more than a “parlor trick.”<sup>16</sup> The hope for those involved in this practice may include: closure, an update of the well-being of an individual, to gain knowledge in making an important decision or simply personal amusement. Whatever the case may be, sinister or not, the controversy lies in what is actually happening when the board is used.

Mediums<sup>17</sup> and amateur mediums alike make the claim that through the use of the Ouija board they are able to make contact with the dead. Through the use of the host and other individuals involved, the spirit(s) will move the planchette to spell out words giving direction, answering questions, or delivering some type of information for those who are engaged with the planchette. According to psychics/mediums and spiritualists, when the board is in use it is a gateway to making communication with the dead.<sup>18</sup> Sir William

Barrett, a 19<sup>th</sup> century physicist and parapsychologist,<sup>19</sup> tested the Ouija board and concluded that there were indeed supernatural forces at work. Barrett stated that after completing the test he was "...convinced of their [the board] supernormal character, and that we have here an exhibition of some intelligent disincarnate agency mingling with the personality of one or more of the sitters and guiding their muscular movements."<sup>20</sup>

There are other forms of divination such as: channeling,<sup>21</sup> palmistry (palm reading), séances, tarot card readings, orbuculum (crystal ball/crystal gazing), fortune telling, and astrology;<sup>22</sup> but the Ouija board is a deeper attempt to speak with the deceased. Each of the aforementioned practices claim to give the participant the ability to gain knowledge from the other side. However, the sole purpose of the Ouija board is to go beyond the attainment of knowledge but to gain access to the deceased by contacting and conversing with them.<sup>23</sup>

### **Skeptical Criticism and Alternative Explanations**

There have been a number of explanations proposed in an attempt to explain what happens when the "mysterious talking board" seems to be communicating through the movement of the planchette. Many of the explanations propose compelling or at least plausible rationalizations to the seeming mystical practice. One possibility is simple fraud in which one of the practitioners is intentionally moving the pointer. There are other, less sinister possibilities. Scientists have rendered an explanation from a psychological perspective in that "memories of distressing events can be repressed into those areas because they are too painful to be faced by the conscious self..."<sup>24</sup> This also includes the desires that one may have that "do not fit into the pattern of life ordained by that self."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the Ouija board becomes a doorway or pathway for the subconscious to manifest itself and overcome any barriers that have kept the thoughts repressed. The Ouija board allows the individual(s) to express these thoughts via an anonymous outlet.

A common assertion from users of the board is that the planchette seems to be moving without their assistance. Could this be supernatural forces at work? Skeptics provide another explanation and that is called the ideomotor effect, also known as the Carpenter effect.<sup>26</sup> The ideomotor effect was coined with the combination of the words "idea" and "motor." The thought is that one's ideas would cause a muscular response that was independent of one's conscious desires or emotions.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the individual(s) were moving the planchette as a way of, again, revealing the subconscious.

While there are some who do not see the board as anything to be feared and nothing more than a plaything; there are many who feel otherwise. The Christian view of the practice is that any attempt to communicate with the dead (whether by the Ouija board or any other means) is a harmful activity that should be avoided. While specific biblical reasons for the Christian position will be given in the next section it should be noted that even those who have a less than sinister view of the Ouija board agree that it should not be used by adherents of Christianity. It has been stated that "...Christians or people who believe in the existence of Satan and the demonic essence of the Ouija board should obviously not use the instrument."<sup>28</sup> Clairvoyant and exorcist Rev. Donald Page of the Christian Spiritualist Church,<sup>29</sup> stated that the use of the Ouija board "is one of the easiest and quickest ways to become [demon] possessed."<sup>30</sup>

## **CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

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From a biblical perspective only God can communicate with the dead, thus human beings are incapable of such activity (Luke 16:26). The Bible strictly prohibits any attempt to communicate with the dead (Deut. 18:9-14; Lev. 19:31, 20:6, 27; Gal. 5:19-20). This may be why Peter, James and John, on the Mount of Transfiguration, did not speak to Moses or Elijah yet Jesus [being God] did (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13). The act of attempting to speak with the dead, necromancy, is clearly a transgression and at the very least a vain attempt to gain knowledge (Isa. 8:19). One such example is Saul's consultation with the witch/medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). Both Saul and the woman were sinning and the result for Saul is that the next day he died. Some have tried to argue that the Old

Testament practice of using the Urim and Thummin was akin if not an occultic practice itself. This view is problematic for no less than two reasons. First, it was a way of seeking God's will not a deceased person or spirit. Second, this practice was allowed by God for a time as a means of receiving an answer from Him (Hebrews 1).

With this basic understanding, there are two potential dangers or types of deception involved in the use of the Ouija board: one would be fraud and the other demonic activity. The Bible's clear teaching that only God can communicate with the dead is a clear indicator that those who attempt to convince others that they are communicating with the dead are most likely executing a fraudulent scheme. However, there is another possibility that should not be readily dismissed. There is a possibility that they are making contact with a spirit but not the spirit of a deceased person; instead what the Bible calls a familiar spirit or demon. When a person attempts to call on the spirits through any means; he or she, is opening a door or pathway to a demonic encounter. While there is no guarantee that an individual will be possessed or oppressed by a demonic spirit through the use of a Ouija board; the warning from Scripture should be conceded. Even if the likelihood is low that one would become demon possessed, if a person regularly used the board it would only increase the chances for possession or oppression to take place. Ultimately the Bible speaks in condemnation of the use of items like the Ouija board and calls on those to confess their involvement as they would other sins and burn the items (Acts 19:18-19).

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ouija and all related characters are trademarks of Hasbro, Inc.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ouija Board Movies: All Movies Featuring Ouija Boards*. <http://oujiaboardmovies.com> (accessed September 6, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Hunt, Stoker. *Ouija: The Most Dangerous Game*. Harper and Row Publishers (New York: NY, 1985), 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Cornelius, J. E. *Aleister Crowley and the Ouija Board*, Feral House, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> Fodor, Nandor. "Ouija Board," *Encyclopedia of Psychic Science*. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1966.
- <sup>6</sup> A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Rick Branch, "Channeling," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2017). A complete collection of Profiles (over 500 pages) is available at [www.watchman.org/notebook](http://www.watchman.org/notebook). This Profile is available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/channelingprofile.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> Hunt, 1985, 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Gruss, Edmond C. *The Ouija Board: A Doorway to the Occult*. P&R Publishing (New Jersey, 1994).
- <sup>9</sup> Hunt, 1985.
- <sup>10</sup> As quoted in Hunt, Stoker. *Ouija: The Most Dangerous Game*. Harper and Row Publishers (New York: NY, 1985), 6.
- <sup>11</sup> Hunt, Stoker, 1985, 6.
- <sup>12</sup> Tweedie, N. "Sales of Ouija boards up 300% and threatening to become a Christmas 'must buy' despite warning from churchmen." *The Daily Mail*. November 30, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2855439/Sales-Ouija-boards-300-threatening-Christmas-buy-despite-Church-England-warning.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: James K. Walker, "The Occult," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2017). A complete collection of Profiles (over 500 pages) is available at [www.watchman.org/notebook](http://www.watchman.org/notebook). This Profile is available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/occultprofile.pdf>.
- <sup>14</sup> McRobbie, Linda Rodriguez. "The Strange and Mysterious History of the Ouija Board." *smithsonian.com*. October 27, 2013. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-strange-and-mysterious-history-of-the-ouija-board-5860627/>
- <sup>15</sup> Divination is the attempt to gain knowledge of the future through supernatural means.
- <sup>16</sup> Ankerberg, John & John Weldon. "The Ouija Board," *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996.
- <sup>17</sup> James Van Praagh explains that "a psychic senses energy around the living people or objects. A medium not only senses energy, but is able to interface between the slower vibrations<sup>14</sup> of the physical world and the much faster ones of the spirit world." As quoted in "James Van Praagh," *Profile*. <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/vanpraaghprofile.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> Hunt, 1985
- <sup>19</sup> Parapsychology is the study of the paranormal or mental phenomena such as hypnosis, telepathy, near-death experiences, clairvoyance, etc. Mainstream scientists consider it a pseudoscience.
- <sup>20</sup> Barrett, Sir William. *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research*. September 1914, 394.
- <sup>21</sup> Channeling Profile.
- <sup>22</sup> A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Marcia Montenegro, "Astrology," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2017). A complete collection of Profiles (over 500 pages) is available at [www.watchman.org/notebook](http://www.watchman.org/notebook). This Profile is available at: <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/astrologyprofile.pdf>
- <sup>23</sup> For more information check out Profiles on Psychics and the New Age Movement. Available at: [www.watchman.org/profiles](http://www.watchman.org/profiles)
- <sup>24</sup> Richard Cavendish, ed. "Ouija Board." *Man, Myth & Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*. New York, Marshall Cavendish Corporation: 1970, 2090.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Dr. William Benjamin Carpenter was an English physician who, in the 1840s and 50s, researched a naturalistic explanation of the phenomena that mediums (and others) witnessed when using a planchette, table turning, and other techniques to draw a link to the spirit world.
- <sup>27</sup> Heap, Michael. "Ideomotor Effect: the 'Ouija Board' Effect." *Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience*. Denver, CO: ABC-CLIO, 2002, 127.
- <sup>28</sup> Hunt, Stoker. *Ouija: The Most Dangerous Game*. Harper and Row Publishers (New York: NY, 1985), 142.
- <sup>29</sup> Christian Spiritualists Church is an occult church that focuses on making connection with the dead and does not adhere to the fundamental beliefs of evangelical Christianity.
- <sup>30</sup> Cavendish, 1970.



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