



Ouija: How Does it Work?

Your fingertips lightly touch the edge of the planchette. Your friend does the same on the opposite side. You consciously move the planchette in circles around the board to get it “warmed up.” Then you ask your question. No response at first. Then slowly the planchette begins to move, seemingly on its own – at least you’re not trying to move it. Sliding from one letter to the next, the planchette spells out its answer. And it seems to fit. More questions are asked, and with increasing speed the Ouija provides its responses, letter by letter. Seemingly with significance. Sometimes with dark significance.

What’s behind the Ouija? How does it work? Is it, as the manufacturer suggests, a harmless game? Or is something more sinister involved? In a recent poll of readers conducted at this site, 65 percent believed the Ouija to be a dangerous tool. While a majority of respondents (41 percent) believed that the board was controlled by the users’ subconscious, 37 percent believed it was controlled by spirits, and 14 percent feared that it was under the influence of demonic spirits.

The Ouija board as we know it dates back to the late 1800s when at the height of the spiritualist movement it was a popular parlor game. Over the years, many manufacturers have marketed Ouijas and other “talking boards.” At The Museum of Talking Boards – one of the best websites about the Ouija – you can see and read about the many incarnations of the board. Currently, apart from the familiar Ouija board marketed by Parker Brothers (now part of Hasbro), there are about eight other styles of talking boards that all work in pretty much the same way – with a pair of hands resting on a planchette that points to words or spells out answers to questions asked.

Why to many people believe that spirits make the Ouija’s plastic planchette move? For one, because they cannot understand how their subconscious might be doing it. For another, the Ouija itself often tells them so. It’s not uncommon for users to ask during a session, “Who is controlling this board?” And very often the Ouija will oblige the users, spelling out a name unknown to the users. Further inquiries sometimes reveal that the controlling spirit died recently, or some other such drama, and can provide cryptic messages and even warnings to the users. Too often, however, users take these messages at face value, never considering that they could be coming from their own imaginations.

So which is it? Are we controlling the Ouija or not? The Museum of Talking Boards articulates the two prevailing theories on how the Ouija works – the automatism theory and the spiritualist theory:

The Automatism Theory – The clinical term is “ideomotor response.” You may not know that you are moving the message indicator, but you are. This is similar to automatic writing, also known as automatism, a well-understood phenomenon. Mediums in years past, would hold a pencil in one hand and pay no attention as it wrote furiously. Some believed that these written messages came from the spirits. Others felt that the messages came from a clever medium. At any rate, most proponents of the Automatism Theory generally accept that it is very possible to move the planchette unconsciously. They claim that the Ouija board opens a kind of shortcut from the conscious to the subconscious mind. Collective automatism occurs when more than one person is operating the board.

The Spiritualist Theory – Ouija messages obviously come from forces beyond our control. You contact or “channel” these entities through the board. They are discarnate spirits, ghosts, or other ethereal beings who have a purpose for contacting the living. Many advocates of the Spiritualist Theory think that there is no harm in contacting the other realm because most spirits are basically benign and have important information to share. A few of these same advocates will perform elaborate cleansing rituals before using the board, just in case they run into a stinker. Other Spiritualist Theory supporters believe that no one should ever use the Ouija board. Malevolent forces can masquerade as good and cause emotional damage, even death to the user of the board. They offer as proof the many accounts of spirit possession reported by “experts” on the occult and demonology.

Indeed there are many anecdotal tales of very weird events and paranormal phenomena taking place during and sometime immediately following Ouija sessions. And this has led to the warnings that the Ouija is not a game at all, but a dangerous tool. Ghost researcher Dale Kaczmarek, of the Ghost Research Society, in his article, *Ouija: Not a Game*, says: “The board itself is not dangerous, but the form of communication that you are attempting often is. Most often the spirits whom are contacted through the Ouija are those whom reside on ‘the lower astral plane.’ These spirits are often very confused and may have died a violent or sudden death; murder, suicide, etc. Therefore, many violent, negative and potentially dangerous conditions are present to those using the board. Often times several spirits will attempt to come through at the same time but the real danger lies when you ask for physical proof of their existence! You might say, ‘Well, if you’re really a spirit, then put out this light or move that object!’ What you have just done is simple, you have ‘opened a doorway’ and allowed them to enter into the physical world and future problems can and often do arise.”

The Moving Glass Séance/Ouija Page offers some other suggestions for how the Ouija operates:

Autosuggestion – Autosuggestion is where the participants unconsciously control the movement of the glass or pointer. Something, possibly the combination of the random and minor spasming of the muscles of the participants, drives the glass in a random direction. This random movement would, one would expect, lead to a random distribution of letters which would, for the most part, appear as gibberish. However, despite all good intentions, there is likely to be some editing by the participants. The participants begin to subconsciously guess ahead and the letters come out in a generally orderly fashion.

Self-delusion – Self delusion is where the belief of the participants drives them to subconsciously control the movement of the glass or pointer. A sort of not quite intended fraud. This is very like autosuggestion except that one or more of the participants actually controls the movement of the glass, albeit subconsciously. They hear the question, they know what needs to be spelt out and their fingers subconsciously push or pull the glass in the direction of the required letter.

Telekinesis – If telekinesis (or psychokinetic ability) exists, there is a possibility that in a séance the questions are answered by those who ask them. The participant who knows the answer also controls the movement of the glass or pointer. It is likely that control of the movement is subconscious, so the mechanism is closer to self-delusion than to fraud.

Telepathy – If telepathy exists, it is again a possibility that in a séance, the questions are answered by those who ask them. The answers are broadcast and the whole group then subconsciously knows the answer and they all ensure that the correct answer is achieved.

Some take the use of the Ouija so seriously that they suggest certain rituals be performed before a session to “cleanse” the board. *Ouija Tips for a Smooth Session* suggests lighting white candles and to be extra careful when using the board on bad weather days. At *Using a Ouija Board*, Linda Johnson, who believes the Ouija is a form of channeling, warns, “Do not choose a place where you suspect earthbound entities are gathered: graveyards, haunted houses, sites of tragedy. Choose a place that feels good – has the right vibrations, a home where loving people live, or a room usually devoted to learning and meditation. Start with a meditation where you concentrate on cleansing your own body, aura and chakras with a visualization of silver rain; filling your bodies with white light; and call upon your guides to protect you and ask them to allow only information and entities through for your highest good.”

Ouija, Using It Without Harm says, “The Ouija can be a useful tool for mediumship (spirit contact), but can also be a tool to tap into the subconscious minds of the users. It is believed that we know more than we realize and often the answers are inside of us. In this way, it can be used to develop your own psychic powers without having to dig up some spirit of a questionable nature. The Ouija is what each person or group makes it.”