

Gateway to the Dead?

Guide on Ouija Boards and how they allow us
to communicate with the deceased

HG2052 Assignment 1

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Introduction

Ouija Boards are often shrouded in mystery, with claims that they are a “medium of communication between this world and the next” (Sword, 1994, pg 555). This essay aims to analyse the use of Ouija boards as an unusual mode of communication, its uses throughout history, and how it has impacted language and society.

History

The origins of Ouija boards trace all the way back to the late 1880s, but the actual creator of the board is unknown. In 1886, a new kind of “talking board” was reportedly created in Ohio, which was said to be used to communicate with spirits (Mcrobbie, 2013). Thereafter, the Kennard Novelty Company was the sole producer of Ouija boards commercially in 1892 (Sword, 1994). The name Ouija came when one of the founders asked the board for a name. In the end, the answer they got to their question was Ouija. Hence, Ouija boards were born.

Ouija boards primarily work on the belief of Spiritualism, which is the faith in the ability for the dead to converse with living beings (Gooden, 2020). Hence, Ouija boards were extensively sought after in the 19th century. This is because Spiritualism exploded after the Civil War in the United States caused widespread disease, poverty, and death (Gooden, 2020). People thus looked for a method to communicate with the loved ones that they lost, thereby turning to Ouija boards as the only answer. Furthermore, people also started using them for otherworldly guidance. When in doubt, people would ask the Ouija board for advice and instruction, or even inspiration. Ouija boards were thus a commercial success, with the number of Ouija boards sold by 1967 gauged to be over 2 million (Buckley 1968). By the 1960s, the number of Ouija boards sold were on par with that of Monopoly, America’s most popular board game (Cordero, 2017).

However, Ouija boards started to gain a darker reputation. In 1973, a movie “The Exorcist” showcased a little girl playing with a Ouija board and subsequently possessed by a demon (Mcrobbie, 2013). People thus related Ouija boards to communication with evil spirits such as Satan. From then on, Ouija boards was no longer mainly seen as a medium of communication. Instead, it became a popular icon in horror movies, thereby spreading the craze of Ouija boards throughout the world. People started to buy Ouija boards for recreational purposes, because of the element of terror associated with it. Moreover, the switch of Ouija boards from a mode of communication to a game was also associated with scientific reasons, which debunked the power of Ouija boards to contact spirits.

Mechanics

A Ouija board arranges alphabetical letters in a semi-circle above the numbers one to nine. At the top corners, “yes” and “no” are inscribed, while “goodbye” is printed at the bottom. The planchette, seen in the middle of Fig 1, is for users to move around the board with.

Ouija boards can be used by just one person, or by multiple individuals. They would sit around the board and ask whatever question that they wanted, while keeping their fingers on the planchette. The planchette would then move around the letters and numbers printed on the board by itself, spelling out the answer to the question letter by letter. According to spiritualists, the one causing the planchette to move would be a supernatural being. Hence, Ouija boards were said to be a medium of communication between humans and the dead. One

linguistically interesting feature of Ouija boards is that the spirit that is communicating with the user always speaks in the language of the user. This can happen even when users are trying to establish communication with random spirits, to answer their generic questions.



Fig 1. A typical Ouija board

Comparisons with speech and text

<u>Speech</u>		<u>Text</u>	
Time bound	No	Space bound	Yes
Spontaneous	No	Contrived	Yes
Face-to-face	No	Visually decontextualised	Yes
Loosely structured	Maybe	Elaborately structured	Maybe
Socially interactive	Maybe	Factually communicative	Maybe
Immediately revisable	No	Repeatedly revisable	No
Prosodically rich	No	Graphically rich	No

Table 2. Comparison of Ouija boards to speech and text communications, using Crystal's (2006) seven features

The table above delineate Crystal's (2006) seven features of language. As it can be seen from Table 2, Ouija boards lean much more towards textual forms of communication. Letters on Ouija boards are space bound and fixed. They are also not time bound, as there is no time limit given for the message to be delivered. This makes Ouija boards more text-like. As Ouija boards are a form of text message, Ouija boards are contrived, not spontaneous. Additionally,

there is no way to add in expressions or hand signals on the Ouija board, making it visually decontextualised.

Moreover, Ouija boards can be either loosely or elaborately structured, depending on the supernatural being communicating the message. They can decide to be formal and elaborate. On the other hand, the messenger can decide to be casual, using slangs and grammatically incorrect sentences. This makes the message from Ouija boards like a written form of speech. Ouija boards can also be both factually communicative and socially interactive. Although they are alphabetical text messages, the user can hold a sustained conversation with the spirit using the Ouija board. However, social interactiveness is limited due to the inability to convey tone or attitude, as there are no punctuations or differentiation between upper- and lower-case letters on the Ouija board.

However, Ouija boards do not fit in perfectly into the model of text-like communication. For example, there is no way of deleting or modifying the letters of the message once the letters are out, thereby not being revisable. Ouija boards are, furthermore, not graphically rich. No visuals such as images or videos can be included in the message.

Comparisons with other mediums

Psychic mediums

Ouija boards are a one-of-a-kind medium of communication, due to its unique nature of being used to communicate with supernatural beings. The closest medium in similarity with the uses of a Ouija board is that of psychic mediums. A psychic medium is an individual who can communicate with deceased spirits (Zapata, 2019). These mediums are extremely sensitive and intuitive, such that they are able to listen, perceive and receive information from spirits (Zapata, 2019). Psychic mediums then pass on messages either through “acting as a vessel” (Zapata 2019, pg 1) for the spirit to speak, or by through empathic powers to share the experiences of the spirits. However, there are several differences in the linguistic features of Ouija boards as compared to psychic mediums.

Ouija boards	Psychic mediums
Space bound (text)	Time bound (Speech)
Contrived (text)	Spontaneous (Speech)
Visually decontextualised (text)	Face-to-face (Speech)
Can be loosely or elaborately structured	Can be loosely structured or elaborately structured
Can be factually communicative or socially interactive	Socially interactive (speech)
Not revisable	Immediately revisable (speech)
Neither prosodically rich nor graphically rich	Prosodically rich (speech)

Table 3. Comparison of the features of Ouija boards and psychic mediums as tools of communication, using Crystal’s (2006) seven features

As it can be seen from Table 3, Ouija boards and psychic mediums are similar in terms of their purpose, which is to communicate with the spirits. However, they vary drastically in terms of linguistic features. Psychic mediums lean more towards being a speech-like, medium of communication, due to its ability for a much more socially interactive and prosodically rich communication with gestures and intonations. Communication with a Ouija board, on the other hand, is more text-like and static.

Social media

Unlike most mediums of communication in the modern era, it does not make use of the Internet, such as social media and messaging platforms. Furthermore, the features of social media are drastically dissimilar. Social media puts a heavy emphasis on graphics and social interaction. Pictures and words are often paired together on social media to tell a full story. Social media has also evolved to become highly interactive through multiple functions. Some examples include Instagram polls, live streaming and messages. People can respond and talk to each other through these functions. However, Ouija are devoid of any graphics such as videos or images. Although conversations between the spirit and the user can be continuous, but social media uses many various innovative ways for users to interact with each other, such as the poll function mentioned above. Ouija boards, on the other hand, are limited to letter by letter text conversations. This makes conversations much slower than those that occur using social media as the medium.

Impacts on language

1. Inspirations for literature

Firstly, Ouija boards give rise to literacy works. Communication with the dead has given rise to prize winning and highly praised literature. An astonishing example is of Pearl Curran, a housewife with little education. However, in 1916, she suddenly began writing high quality poems and stories. She claimed that all her works were given to her through an Ouija board. The real writer was someone named Patience Worth, a woman who lived in the 17th century (Diliberto, 2010). Her works won much critical acclaim, with her book being lauded as a “feat of literary composition” (Diliberto, 2010). Ouija boards are hence a medium of communication and voice for numerous poetic predecessors.

Another example is of James Merrill’s Ouija inspired poem, titled “The Changing Light and Sandover”, which earned him an accolade at the National Book Critics Circle Award (McRobbie, 2013). In a 1991 paper written by Materer, he claims that the Ouija board’s alphabets are a “metaphor for language itself” (Materer, 1991, pg 138). The letters, being chosen one after another, compels the user to interpret them in their own manner, thereby creating unique poetry as in the case of Merrill (Materer, 1991). Sword (1994) agrees with this, by arguing that the Ouija board drives the user “rethink and reexperience the very act of writing” (Sword, 1994, pg 556), due to the easy rows of alphabets and the prolonged movement of the planchette. Figure 4 shows how Merrill takes letters down one by one as they appear on the Ouija board, to eventually form words and sentences. Therefore, Ouija boards have inspired many distinctive poetic discourses due to the ambiguity of its message, which leaves the interpretation for the users to figure out and shape in their own manners.

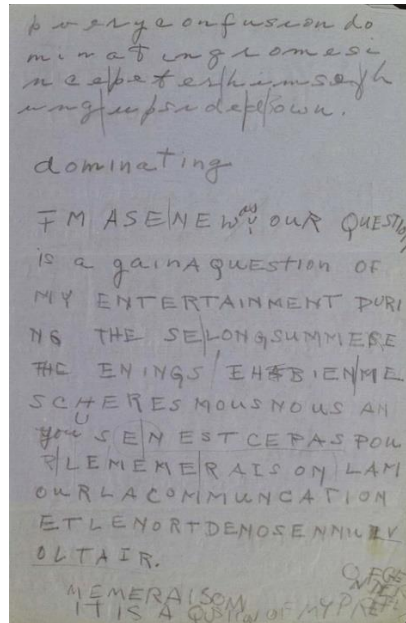


Figure 4. Written manuscript by Merrill, with the content being given by the Ouija board (Staff, 2014).

2. Insights into olden day and new forms of language

Ouija boards also allow a deeper analysis into how language has evolved. Ouija boards facilitated the communication with deceased spirits, some of whom are centuries older than the users. This leads to messages coming out in much older forms of English as compared to the version that is currently used. For example, Patience Worth was quoted to often speak in older forms of language, using some peculiar and obsolete words that had to be looked up (Diliberto, 2010). Moreover, she also employed a “wholly original syntax” (Diliberto 2010, pg 1), which influenced her works and was widely distributed throughout the country. Therefore, due to the popularity of Ouija board-inspired texts, there is a resurgence of the usage of old expressions and employment of new forms of word order. Ouija boards hence play a part in shaping the language used in the 20th century.

Impacts on society

1. Business benefits

Ouija boards have allowed continued business profits, even 200 years after it was created. Ouija boards are used as a leading horror icon in many movies and television shows. In recent years, a Hollywood movie named “Ouija” was released, and this immediately boosted sales of the Ouija board by 300% (Tweedie, 2014). Ouija boards, with their mystique and ability as a medium to link up humans to the dead, thereby creates opportunities and profits for business owners.

2. Motivated research on the mechanics of the brain

Due to Ouija boards being a supernatural medium of communication, much research and experimentation has been conducted into the mechanisms of it. Hence, investigation has been

done in the field of how our mind processes information, especially in the subconscious level. Scientists have since then uncovered significant discoveries, such as the ideomotor effect. The ideomotor effect argues that the planchette of Ouija boards move because of our body's own subconscious movement (Romano, 2018). For example, the first study on ideomotor effect was by James Carpenter, who conducted studies to attempt an explanation of involuntary actions by humans that are not part of their conscious objective (Carpenter, 1852). This was thus the pioneering study that linked perception and movement together. Since then, many other specialised studies, looking to uncover the secrets behind the Ouija board, have conducted in-depth research into this ideomotor effect. This can be seen in 2016, where a study conducted uses an innovative haptic illusion to compare the "visual, force and vibrotactile cues" in which movement on a Ouija board happens (Shitara et al. 2016, pg 139). Therefore, Ouija boards have inspired further research and allowed us, in the present, to have a better and much more comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions in a human's mind.

3. Improved mental health for individuals

As mentioned earlier in the paper, using Ouija boards are a medium of communication with the dead has allowed living humans to reconnect with their lost loved ones, giving them closure for the lost lives. This is especially during major world events such as the Civil War, where millions of lives were lost. The death of a loved one can bring about much psychological and emotional stress, especially if it was a sudden occurrence (Keyes et al. 2014). Closure is defined as the state whereby an individual accepts the death of those around him, with sadness and sense of loss no longer affecting the individual (Hamber and Wilson, 2002). Although no official research has been conducted, many personal stories of receiving closure from a loved one's death through the Ouija board have been reported. One such instance is of professional counsellor Karen Dahlman, who used the Ouija board with a group of friends, eventually establishing communication with one of the user's sister who recently passed away. She reported that the conversation held between them helped the user to find closure and comfort, as her sister offered words of love and encouragement (Wagner, 2018). Furthermore, an astrologer also shared that her clients who used Ouija boards to contact loved ones all reported thankfulness, calmness and a sense of closure (Faragher, 2018). Figure 5 below also shows a documentary on Ouija boards, where a woman asks if her grandfather, who already passed away, was happy. As it can be seen in the Figure 3, the reply was Yes (the planchette is over the letter Y). The girl then reported feeling happiness at the answer she received. Closure and reassurance from spirits themselves thus allows a raise in mental health of the living individual, as they are not in a state of denial over the death of their loved ones or focused on taking revenge (Hamber and Wilson, 2002).



Fig 5. A snippet from a National Geographic Youtube Video featuring participants asking questions to a Ouija board

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ouija boards have attracted the attention and scrutiny for many years. Though unorthodox, Ouija boards are undeniably a form of communication that has been widely used by people for centuries and has led to numerous benefits. Its linguistical features make it a text-like form of communication. Even though Ouija boards may not be as interactive as psychic mediums, it is much more accessible as Ouija boards are sold in shops. Psychic mediums are special beings that are rare in numbers. Although Ouija boards are now associated with demonic ideas and are mostly used for recreation, I feel that using them to attempt contact with your deceased love ones and find emotional closure is still an overwhelming advantage of Ouija boards, even if it is the ideomotor effect in work.

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