Ouija. For some, the rectangular board evokes memories of late-night sleepovers, shrieks of laughter, and toy shelves brimming with Magic Eight Balls, Frisbees, and Barbie dolls. For others, Ouija boards—known more generally as talking boards or spirit boards—have darker associations. Stories abound of fearsome entities making threats, dire predictions, and even physical assaults on innocent users after a night of Ouija experimentation.

Ouija boards have sharply declined in popularity since the 1960s and 70s, when you could find one in nearly every toy-cluttered basement. But they remain one of the most peculiar consumer items in American history. To get a better sense of what Ouija boards are—and where they came from—requires going back to an era in which even an American president dabbled in talking to the dead.

Spiritualism Triumphant

Today it is difficult to imagine the popularity enjoyed by the movement called Spiritualism in the nineteenth century, when table rapping, séances, medium trances, and other forms of contacting the “other side” were practiced by an estimated ten percent of the population. It began in 1848 when teenaged sisters Kate and Margaret Fox introduced “spirit rapping” to a lonely hamlet in upstate New York. While every age and culture had known hauntings, Spiritualism appeared to foster actual communication with the beyond. Within a few years, people from every walk of life took seriously the contention that one could talk to the dead.

Spiritualism seemed to extend the hope of reaching loved ones, perhaps easing the pain of losing a child to the diseases of the day. The allure of immortality or of feeling oneself lifted beyond workaday realities attracted others. Spirit counsels became a way to cope with anxiety about the future, providing otherworldly advice in matters of health, love, or money.

According to newspaper accounts, President Abraham Lincoln hosted a séance in the White House—though more as a good-humored parlor game than as a serious spiritual inquiry.

Making Contact

In this atmosphere of ghostly knocks and earnest pleas to hidden forces, nineteenth-century occultists began looking for easier ways to communicate with the beyond. And in the
best American fashion, they took a do-it-yourself approach. Their homespun efforts led to something we call Ouija—but not until they worked through several other methods.

One involved a form of table rapping in which questioners solicited spirit knocks when letters of the alphabet were called out, thus spelling a word, a tedious and time-consuming exercise. A faster means was by “automatic writing,” in which spirit beings could communicate through the pen of a channeler; but some complained that this produced pages of unclear or meandering prose.

One invention directly prefigured the heart-shaped pointer that moves around the Ouija board. The planchette (French for “little plank”) was a three-legged writing tool with a hole at the top for insertion of a pencil. The planchette was designed for one person or more to rest their fingers on it and allow it to “glide” across a page, writing out a spirit message. The device originated in Europe in the early 1850s; by 1860, commercially manufactured planchettes were advertised in America.

Two other items from the 1850s are direct forebears to Ouija: “dial plates” and alphabet paste boards. Dial plates came in various forms. Some were rigged to tables to respond to “spirit tilts,” while others were presumably guided—like a planchette—by the hands of questioners. Alphabet boards further simplified matters. In use as early as 1852, these talking-board precursors allowed seekers to point to a letter as a means of prompting a “spirit rap,” thereby quickly spelling a word, perhaps the easiest method yet. And it was only a matter of time until inventors and entrepreneurs began to see the possibilities.

Baltimore Oracles

More than 150 years after the dawn of the Spiritualist era, contention endures over who created Ouija. The conventional history of American toy manufacturing credits a Baltimore businessman named William Fuld. Fuld, we are told, “invented” Ouija around 1890. It is repeated online and in books of trivia, reference works, and “ask me” columns in newspapers. For many decades, the manufacturer itself—first Fuld’s company and later the toy giant Parker Brothers—insinuated as much by running “William Fuld Talking Board Set” across the top of every board.

The conventional history is wrong.

The patent for a “Ouija or Egyptian luck-board” was filed on May 28, 1890, by Baltimore patent attorney Elijah H. Bond, who assigned the rights to two city businessmen, Charles W. Kennard and William H.A. Maupin. The patent was granted on February 10, 1891, and so was born the Ouija-brand talking board.

The first patent reveals a familiarly oblong board, with the alphabet running in double rows across the top, and numbers in a single row along the bottom. The sun and moon, marked respectively by the words “Yes” and “No,” adorn the upper left and right corners, while the words “Good Bye” appear at the bottom center. Later on, instructions and illustrations prescribed an expressly social—even flirtatious—experience: Two parties, preferably a man and woman, were to balance the board between them on their knees, placing their fingers lightly upon the planchette. (“It draws the two people using it into close companionship and weaves about them a feeling of mysterious isolation,” the box read.) In an age of buttoned-up morals, it was a tempting dalliance.

True Origins

The Kennard Novelty Company of Baltimore employed a teenaged varnisher who helped run shop operations, and this was William Fuld. By 1892, Charles W. Kennard’s partners removed him from the company amid financial disputes, and a new patent—this time for an improved pointer, or planchette—was filed by a 19-year-old Fuld. In years to come, Fuld would take over the company and affix his name to every board.

Talking boards of a homemade variety were already a popular craze among Spiritualists by the mid-1880s. At his online Museum of Talking Boards, Ouija collector and chronicler Eugene Orlando posted an 1886 article from the New-York Daily Tribune (as reprinted that year in a Spiritualist monthly, The Carrier Dove) describing the breathless excitement around the new-fangled alphabet board and its message indicator. “I know of whole communities that are wild over the ‘talking board,’” says a man in the article. This was a full four years before the first Ouija patent was filed. Obviously Bond, Kennard, and their associates were capitalizing on an invention—not conceiving of one.
And what of the name Ouija? Alternately pronounced wee-JA and wee-GEE, its origin may never be known. Kennard at one time claimed it was Egyptian for “good luck” (it’s not). Fuld later said it was simply a marriage of the French and German words for “yes.” One early investor claimed the board spelled out its own name. As with other aspects of Ouija history, the board seems determined to withhold a few secrets of its own.

**Ancient Ouija?**

Another oft-repeated, but misleading, claim is that Ouija or talking boards have ancient roots. In a wide range of books and articles, everyone from Pythagoras to the Mongols to the Ancient Egyptians is said to have possessed Ouija-like devices. But the claims rarely withstand scrutiny.

Chronicler-curator Orlando points out that the primary reference to Ouija existing in the pre-modern world appears in a passage from Lewis Spence’s 1920 *Encyclopedia of Occultism*—which is repeated in Nandor Fodor’s popular 1934 *Encyclopedia of Psychic Science*. The Fodor passage reads: “As an invention it is very old. It was in use in the days of Pythagoras, about 540 B.C. According to a French historical account of the philosopher’s life, his sect held frequent séances or circles at which ‘a mystic table, moving on wheels, moved towards signs, which the philosopher and his pupil Philolaus, interpreted to the audience.’” It is, Orlando points out, “the one recurring quote found in almost every academic article on the Ouija board.” But the story presents two problems: The “French historical account” is never identified; and the scribe Philolaus lived not in Pythagoras’s time, but in the following century. We know precious little today about Pythagoras and his school. No writings of Pythagoras survive.

Other writers—when they are not repeating claims like the one above—tend to misread ancient historical accounts and mistake other divinatory tools, such as pendulum dishes, for Ouija boards. Oracles were rich and varied from culture to culture—from African cowrie shells to Greek Delphic rites—but the prevailing literature on oracular traditions supports no suggestion that talking boards, as we know them, were in use before the Spiritualist era.

**Ouija Boom**

After William Fuld took the reins of Ouija manufacturing in America, business was brisk—if not always happy. Fuld formed a quickly shattered business alliance with his brother Isaac, which landed the two in court battles for nearly twenty years. Isaac was eventually found to have violated an injunction against creating a competing board, called the Oriole, after being forced from the family business in 1901. The two brothers never spoke again. Ouija, and anything that looked directly like it, was firmly in the hands of William Fuld.

By 1920, the board was so well known that artist Norman Rockwell painted a send-up of a couple using one for a cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. For Fuld, though, everything was strictly business. “Believe in the Ouija board?” he once told a reporter. “I should say not. I’m no spiritualist. I’m a Presbyterian.” In 1920, the *Baltimore Sun* reported that Fuld, by his own “conservative estimate,” had pocketed an astounding $1 million from sales.

Whatever satisfaction Fuld’s success may have brought him was soon lost: On February 26, 1927, he fell to his death from the roof of his Baltimore factory. Fuld’s children took over his business—and generally prospered. While sales dipped and rose, and competing boards came and went, only the Ouija brand endured. And by the 1940s, Ouija was experiencing a new surge in popularity.

Spiritualism had seen its last great explosion of interest in the period around World War I, when parents yearned to contact children lost to the battlefield. In World War II, many anxious families turned to Ouija. In a 1944 article, “The Ouija Comes Back,” *The New York Times* reported that one New York City department store alone sold 50,000 Ouija boards in a five-month period.

American toy manufacturers were taking notice. Some attempted knock-off products. But Parker Brothers developed bigger plans. In a move that would place a carryover from the age of Spiritualism into playrooms all across America, the toy giant bought the rights for an undisclosed sum in 1966. The Fuld family was out of the picture, and Ouija was about to achieve its biggest success.

The following year, Parker Brothers is reported to have sold more than two million Ouija boards—topping sales of its most popular game, Monopoly. The occult boom that began in the late...
1960s, as astrologers adorned the cover of TIME magazine, fueled the board’s sales for the following decades. A Parker spokesperson says the company has sold over ten million boards since 1967.

The sixties and seventies also saw Ouija as a product of the youth culture. Ouija circles sprang up in college dormitories, and the board emerged as a fad among adolescents, for whom its ritual of secret messages and intimate communications became a form of rebellion. Sociologists suggested that Ouija sessions were a way for young people to project, and work through, their own fears. But many Ouija users claimed that the verisimilitude of the communications were reason enough to return to the board.

**Ouija Today**

In a far remove from the days when Ouija led Parker Brothers’ lineup, the product now seems more like a corporate stepchild. The “Ouija Game” merits barely a mention on Hasbro’s website. The company posts no official history for Ouija, as it does for its other storied products. And the claims from the original 1960s-era box—“Weird and mysterious. Surpasses, in its unique results, mind reading, clairvoyance and second sight”—have been significantly toned down.

And yet . . . Ouija receives more customer reviews—alternately written in tones of outrage, fear, delight, or ridicule—than any other “toy” for sale on Amazon.com (390 at last count). What other “game” so polarizes opinion among those who dismiss it as a childhood plaything and those who condemn or extol it as a portal to the other side? As it did decades ago in The Exorcist, Ouija figures into the recent fright films What Lies Beneath (2000), White Noise (2005), and Ouija (2014). And it sustains an urban mythology that continues to make it a household name in the early twenty-first century.

But what makes this game board and its molded plastic pointer so resilient in our culture, and, some might add, in our nightmares?

Among the first things one notices when looking into Ouija is its vast—and sometimes authentically frightening—history of stories. A typical storyline involves communication that is at first reassuring and even useful (a lost object may be recovered) but eventually gives way to threatening or terrorizing. Hugh Lynn Cayce, son of the eminent American psychic Edgar Cayce, cautioned that his research found Ouija boards among the most “dangerous doorways to the unconscious.”

Ouija enthusiasts note that channeled writings, such as an early twentieth-century series of historical novels and poems by an entity called “Patience Worth” and a posthumous “novel” by Mark Twain (pulled from the shelves after a legal outcry from the writer’s estate), have reputedly come through the board. Such works, however, have rarely attracted enduring readerships. Poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes wrote haunting passages about their experiences with Ouija; but none attain the level of their best work.

So, can anything of lasting value be attributed to the board—this mysterious object that has, in one form or another, been with us for nearly 125 years? The answer is yes, and it has stared us in the face for so long that we have nearly forgotten it is there.

**An Occult Splendor**

In 1976, the American poet James Merrill published—and won the Pulitzer Prize for—an epic poem that recounted his experience, with his partner David Jackson, of using a Ouija board from 1955 to 1974. His work The Book of Ephraim was later combined with two other Ouija-inspired long poems and published in 1982 as The Changing Light at Sandover. “Many readers,” wrote critic Judith Moffett in her penetrating study James Merrill, “may well feel they have been waiting for this trilogy all their lives.”

First using a manufactured board and then a homemade one—with a teacup in place of a planchette—Merrill and Jackson encounter a world of spirit “patrons” who recount to them a sprawling and profoundly involving creation myth. It is poetry steeped in the epic tradition, in which myriad characters—from W.H. Auden, to lost friends and family members, to the Greek muse-interlocutor called Ephraim—walk on and off stage. The voices of Merrill, Jackson, and those that emerge from the teacup and board, alternately offer theories of reincarnation, worldly advice, and painfully poignant reflections on the passing of life and ever-hovering presence of death.

And yet we are never far from the human, grounding voice of Merrill, joking about the selection of new wallpaper in his Stonington, Connecticut, home; or from the moving council of voices from the board, urging: In life, stand for something.

Critic Harold Bloom, in a departure from others who sidestep the question of the work’s source, calls the first of the Sandover poems “an occult splendor.” Indeed, it is not difficult to argue that, in literary
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME BOARD AND ITS MOLDED PLASTIC POINTER SO RESILIENT IN OUR CULTURE?

terms, The Changing Light at Sandover is a masterpiece—perhaps the masterpiece—of occult experimentation.

Voices Within?

Of course, the Merrill case begs the question of whether the Ouija board channels something from beyond or merely reflects the ideas found in one's subconscious. After all, who but a poetic genius like James Merrill could have recorded channeled passages of such literary grace and epic dimension? Plainly put, this wasn’t Joe Schmoe at the board.

In a 1970 book on psychical phenomena, ESP, Seers & Psychics, researcher-skeptic Milbourne Christopher announces—a tad too triumphantly, perhaps—that if you blindfold a board’s user and rearrange the order of letters, communication ceases. In 1915, a specialist in abnormal psychology proposed the same test to the channeled entity called Patience Worth, who, through a St. Louis housewife named Pearl Curran, had produced a remarkable range of novels, plays, and poems—some of them hugely ambitious in scale and written in a Middle English dialect that Curran (who didn’t finish high school) would have had no means of knowing.

As reported in Irving Litvag’s 1972 study, Singer in the Shadows, Patience Worth responded to the request that Curran be blindfolded in her typically inimitable fashion: “I be aset athin the throb o’ her. Aye, and doth thee to take then the lute awhither that she see not, think ye then she may to set up musics for the hear o’ thee?” In other words, how can you remove the instrument and expect music?

Responding to the occult fads of the day, biologist and researcher Louisa Rhine wrote an item on Ouija boards and automatic writing adapted in the winter 1970 newsletter of the American Society for Psychical Research. Whatever messages come through the board, she maintained, are a product of the user’s subconscious—not any metaphysical force: “Because [such communications] are unconscious, the person does not get the feeling of his own involvement. Instead, it seems to him that some personality outside of himself is responsible.”

For his part, the poet Merrill took a subtler view of the matter. “If it’s still you’re writing upon,” he said, “then that self is much stranger and freer and more far-seeking than the one you thought you knew.” And at another point: “If the spirits aren’t external, how astonishing the mediums become!”

To Ouija or Not to Ouija

Ouija is intriguing, interesting, even oddly magnetic. A survey of users in the 2001 International Journal of Parapsychology found that one half “felt a compulsion to use it.” But, in a culture filled with possibilities, and in a modern life of limited time and energy, is Ouija really the place to search? Clearly, for James Merrill, it was. For me, the answer is no. It is time to pack up my antique Ouija board and return to what I find most lasting: the work of Merrill, passed through this instrument, that perhaps justifies the tumultuous, serpentine history from which Ouija has come.

EDITOR’S NOTE: The latest news from collector-curator Gene Orlando (see Museum of Talking Boards credit below) is that Ouija is definitely not on the wane. Talking board enthusiasts are interested and active and growing as a community. Hasbro continues to issue new versions of the signature Ouija to capture both youth and adult markets. Etsy and eBay offer a staggering array of boards and the handcrafted gallery on the MoTB website showcases the custom work of individual artists. The Talking Board Historical Society (TBHS.org) held the first ever Ouijacon in 2015 to celebrate Ouija’s Baltimore heritage, where the mayor’s office declared it “Ouija Day.” Gene reports that it was “the largest exhibition of talking boards in history” and “the Ouija board has never been healthier.”

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MUSEUM OF TALKING BOARDS generously provided all images for this article. The online gallery is the brain child of super-collector and curator Gene Orlando. Visit the comprehensive website for all things “Ouija” (and other talking boards): history, lore, images of antique boards, links to other resources, how-to tips, and interactive talking boards so you can ask Ouija and “otherworld” authorities your most probing questions online.

museumoftalkingboards.com

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> ORIGINS, a 13-part web series, hosted by author Mitch Horowitz, on the history of superstitions. Short 90-second videos include topics such as black cats, the number 13, mirrors, ladders, and death. originestheseries.com

> “Out of this World: James Merrill’s Supernatural Muse,” Dan Chiasson, The New Yorker, April 13, 2015. Discusses Merrill’s poetry, which was infused with the poet’s experiences of Ouija, opera, heartbreak, and other life experiences. newyorker.com

> “Featured Author: James Merrill.” Compilation of news and reviews on Merrill includes audio of the poet and others reading his work. nytimes.com/books/01/03/04/specials/merrill.html