

The Science Behind Ouija Boards

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Maybe you're at a sleepover, or a Halloween party. Maybe it's night, it's probably night. You sit before a board with the alphabet printed on it, a little sun and moon, the words "yes" and "no" and "goodbye." You rest the tips of your fingers on a heart-shaped plastic platform and ask a question. You're not moving it, you swear, and your friend says they're not moving it either, but the platform glides across the board, from one letter to the next, spelling out a name, an answer to a question it couldn't possibly know. What's really happening?

For over 130 years, Ouija boards have amazed, entertained, and even frightened people with mysterious messages from the beyond. But more recently, they've provided psychologists with insights into the human body and mind, living up to an 1891 advertisement for a Ouija board proclaiming that "for the scientific or thoughtful its mysterious movements invite the most careful research and investigation — apparently forming the link which unites the known with the unknown." Ouija boards don't tell us much about the spirit world, but they can tell us about ourselves.

Ghostly Movement

Chris French, a professor emeritus of psychology at Goldsmiths University of London, has spent decades studying the science behind supernatural experiences, but his first brush with Ouija boards came when he was an undergrad. "It used to be regular Friday night entertainment for me," he recalls. He and his friends made their own Ouija board by writing the alphabet on a piece of paper and using an upturned wineglass as a planchette. "I don't think any of us really believed that we were communicating with spirits, but it was great fun."

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