# Interfacing with the Spirit World: The Ouija Board and Playful Occulture

# By Dr Jeff Howard

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**Abstract**: This talk explores the Ouija board as an artefact mediating between games and occulture, a term coined by Genesis P-Orridge and brought into academia by Christopher Partridge to describe manifestations of the occult in popular culture. Historically, the Ouija board is a novelty invented by nineteenth century investor Elijah Bond, manufactured by a modern board game corporation (Milton Bradley), and marketed as solely for entertainment purposes. Yet, the more that its creators insisted that the Ouija board was “just a game” purely for entertainment, the more it became a genuine piece of spiritual technology operating as a compelling divinatory tool and a powerful occult artefact. This talk investigates the material affordances and cultural contexts that have allowed the Ouija board to flourish as a manifestation of what Howard calls “playful occulture” (a term for the ways in which historical occultism influences games, and magical practice manifests as a form of play). How does play facilitate the evocation of spirits in a way that both imitates the divinatory devices of the ancient world and captured the imagination of the modern world? Howard argues that the Ouija board is an interface, a physically rendered UI whose back-end code is the spirit world. Three words, 10 numbers, and 26 letters of the Roman alphabet yield a combinatorial system for channelling myriad messages, promising both spiritual enlightenment and demonic menace. Howard will demonstrate that play liberates seekers from the constraints of ritual gravitas, thereby energizing the spontaneous spirit contact at the heart of mysticism.

**Bio**: Dr. Jeff Howard is Associate Professor of Games and Occulture at Falmouth University in Cornwall. He is the author of two monographs: *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*(now in its second edition) and *Game Magic: A Designer’s Guide to Magic Systems in Theory and Practice*. He translates theory into practice as a core team member of Apocalypse Studios, where he consults on worldbuilding and systems design. He is also the creator of “Howard’s Law of Occult Design,” published in *100 Principles of Game Design*. Howard has presented on games and the occult at a variety of international conferences, including Berlin Occulture, Trans-States, and ESSWE9. In addition, he has been an invited speaker at Viktor Wynd’s Last Tuesday Society, where he has spoken about folk magic and folk games. With Steve Patterson, he is the winner of the RENSEP (Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practice) award for best Tandem Analysis Paper for “To Reveal the Hidden Kingdom of Eld: Andrew Chumbley, the Cultus Sabbati, and Imaginal Space in Cornwall.” Howard studies Sabbatic Craft at the intersection of the Left Hand Path and the Typhonian current. Through his scholarship and creative practice, Howard is an ambassador for the power of play as a transformative and transcendent practice.

1. Brief History of the Ouija Board
2. Ouija Board as Toy or Game
3. Ouija Board as Interface
4. History of the Interface
5. Interfacing with the Spirit World
6. A Profusion of Spirit Voices

The Ouija board occupies an eerie liminal space, haunting a crossroads between Spiritualist divinatory tool and mass-marketed board game. While the history of the Ouija board’s recent marketing since its acquisition by Parker Brothers in 1966 defines it as a game, the Ouija board does not exhibit many of the formal characteristics of a game as understood by modern game studies. Rather, the Ouija board operates as an interface: a semiotic layer and set of physical affordances by which a user interacts with a larger system. In the case of the Ouija board, this system is both invisible and abstract: the whole of the spirit world and or the subconscious minds of the interactors. Understanding how the Ouija board operates as an interface and what it interfaces with requires an examination of the object’s historical origins.

The motto of the 1966 Parker Brothers Ouija board was “it’s only a game, isn’t it?,” and this motto stems in part from the original patent of the Ouija board. In his 1891 patent, lawyer Elijah Bond declares: “*My invention relates to improvements in* ***toys*** *or* ***games****, which I designate as an “Ouija or Egyptian luck-board;” and the objects of the invention are to produce a* ***toy or game*** *by which two or more persons can* ***amuse themselves*** *by* ***asking questions*** *of any kind and* ***having them answered*** *by the device used and operated by the touch of hand, so that the answers are designated by letters on the board.*” (This patent is reproduced, along with a treasure trove of historical documentation, on the excellent websites *The Museum of the Talking Board* and *WilliamFuld.com*, the second of which refers to the investor who would eventually become the head of the Kennard Novelty Company, which first mass-manufactured the Ouija board).

Phrasing the Ouija board’s status as a game as a question through the phrase “isn’t it?” is appropriate. A Ouija board is, at best, an ambiguous and partial game. Some of this definitional uncertainty stems from the elusive characteristics of games, in that games are notoriously difficult to define. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great logical positivist philosopher, famously struggled to define games, and eventually built much of his philosophy around the idea that all thought is a language game. At the same time, some scholars of games studies, such as Salen and Zimmerman and (later) Jesper Juul, have attempted to define the formal properties of games through such criteria as: victory conditions, conflict between players, and rules. Yet, a Ouija board has no victory conditions, no conflict, no formal rules other than an initial set-up process and a mode of play (place a planchette on a board, then lightly touch the planchette with one or more pairs of hands).

In addition to its incompleteness as a game, the Ouija board that was patented by Elijah Bond in 1891 and sold through the Kennard Novelty Company resembles objects with an entirely different purpose from mere entertainment. Namely, the Ouija board is modelled after a variety of talking boards that were used by Spiritualist believers to speak with the dead. The history of the Ouija board in relation to the popular nineteenth century Spiritualist movement is well-documented, though often by popular sources rather than scholarly ones. As the “History of the Talking Board” explains, both the board and the planchette in Bond’s patent have precedents in spiritualist tools. In *Aleister Crowley and the Ouija Board*, J. Edward Cornelius explains that a primitive version of the talking board, stripped down to only letters and numbers without additional ornamentation, can be found in French Spiritualist Allan Kardec’s dial plate designs in *The Book of the Medium*. Similarly, the Ouija board’s version of the planchette descends from an earlier version in which the planchette (spuriously attributed to a Monsieur Planchette but possibly derived from the French for “little plank”) held a pencil used in the spiritualist practice of automatic writing. Elijah Bond’s patent merely streamlines the interface of the Ouija board, re-factoring it for maximum efficiency by combining a sliding planchette with a talking board, thereby unifying two previously separate streams of Spiritualist technology. As Bill Ellis explains in *Lucifer Ascending*, the Ouija board originates in the more general Spiritualist practice of automatic writing, which was assisted technologically by the object that would eventually be known as the planchette. Ellis writes, “The device now known as the Ouija board, however, came out of several ways developed in the nineteenth century to facilitate receiving spirit messages. Some spiritualists practiced “automatic writing,” in which communications would be traced by the medium’s hand while she sat in a trance or meditative state. This practice was facilitated as early as 1867 by what was called a “planchette.” This was a small table on wheels or felt pads that held a pencil against a sheet of paper underneath. It gave users a firmer place for their hands and allowed them to produce messages by moving the planchette over the paper (Goss 1991: 11; Cavendish 1974: 172; Klintberg 1988: 163). Not all individuals were adept at automatic writing, however, even with a planchette, so simpler methods were invented in which the letters of the alphabet were printed on a “spirit board.” The planchette then spelled out a message by pointing to the letters in sequence (Fodor 1966: 270). As Daniel B. Shea further explains, “By the 1860s the technology of inspiration, as Ann Braude has described it, made available a more accessible coach to Olympus in the form of a small, heart-shaped planchette, on wheels, with a pencil inserted at its leading point. The “Boston Planchette,” advertised as having been made “from the Original Pattern,” could be had for as little as one dollar in black walnut, any model predicted to be “full of fun, puzzle and mystery and a pleasant companion in the house.”

A Ouija board could be understood as a toy, defined by Jesse Schell as an object designed to promote play. This would make sense given that the board was originally patented and trademarked by the Kennard Novelty Company. But it’s also not a very developed toy. It would be more productive to think of the Ouija board as part of a game: an interface. More specifically, a Ouija board is a user interface. In software, an interface is the layer of icons and associated controls that allow the user to interact with the software. In a game, the interface is the layer that provides information through vectors of semiotic affordance (which Jesse Schell calls channels) (268). Channels would include numbers, words, and icons used to convey game information, such as the number of lives left in a videogame or the weapons currently equipped.

Considered in this way, the Ouija board is a well-designed and elegantly informative interface. 10 numbers, 26 letters, the words “yes,” “no,” and “goodbye” together constitute a set of channels by which a vast combinatorial array of messages can be delivered. These channels are mapped onto the two-dimensional space of the board. Moreover, the small heart-shaped device (known as a planchette) is an elegant pointing device, akin to a mouse cursor, by which characters and words can be spelled out one at a time. With its slick and aerodynamic design, the planchette has a high degree of what Jesse Schell would call “second-order motion,” i.e. the capacity to produce significant amounts of movement based on little input (265). Schell describes the Swiffer sweeper (a disposable broom with a swivelling head) as an example of an interface with high second order motion. The planchette, which rests lightly on the smooth board and skims across it like an air hockey puck, has high second order motion in that it responds to minor muscular twitches and other vectors of force.

Thinking about these vectors and their origin leads to the question of what the Ouija board interfaces *with* or between. In software developers often make the distinction between front-end and back-end design, with the front-end being the visible aspects of an interface that are interactable by users and the back-end being the invisible (or indirectly visible) code governing the calculations that cause the software to function. In a Ouija board, however, there is no back-end code: only an imagined or actual relationship to the spirit world. The user of a Ouija board asks questions of an invisible conversational partner, and this conversationalist answers. Brandon Hookway’s history of the concept of interface points to the origins of this idea in fluid dynamics (where the word is coined) and, later, thermodynamics. Hookway understands interface in terms of relationality between humans and technology. He writes, “this study views what I term ‘the interface’ as a relation with technology rather than as technology in itself.” Moreover, Hookway associates the concept of interface with liminality and boundaries, and he sees this quality of interfaces as associated with shifting, dynamic interactions. He writes that when the nineteenth-century engineer James Thomson coined the term “interface” in the context of fluid dynamics, the word “denoted a dynamic boundary condition describing fluidity according to its separation of one distinct fluid body from another.” Moreover, Hookway argues that as the term “interface” was extended into thermodynamics, the “interface” continued to signify “a boundary across which dynamic conditions are held in a state of contestation.” While Hookway notes that the concept of an interface is eventually associated with control, as in his dissertation’s primary case study of the aircraft cockpit, the word’s core connotations are associated with the “moment of contestation and in the production of dynamic form.”

I argue that Hookway’s nuanced and dynamic conceptualization of an interface is appropriate for describing the Ouija board, in which the players’ hands held lightly over the planchette do not control the messages received in any direct or deterministic way. Rather, the planchette and the board both exist in a dynamic, fluid crossroads between the material and the spirit world, the conscious sensations of players’ hands and the subconsciously motivated twitches of their nervous systems, materialist understandings of commodified entertainment and immaterial hauntings of the spirit world beyond the veil. While Hookway does not discuss the Ouija board or spiritualism per se, he does note that the concept of the dynamic contestation at the point of the interface evokes the concept of Maxwell’s demon: a thought experiment from the physicist James Clerk Maxwell, who imagined an entity (later referred to as a “demon”) that could sort fast-moving particles from slow-moving particles, thereby circumventing the second law of thermodynamics, preventing the entropic dissipation of heat through the combating of informational entropy. In exploring the concept of a demon, proposed by Maxwell and his successors as a mere thought experiment, Hookway invokes the early classical Greek concept of the “daimon” or “numen,” as understood by early neo-Platonic theurgists (sorcerers who worked through contact with the gods). Hookway writes, “the attribution of numen, or of the daimon, may be seen as adhering to, or residing within, those things or places whose particular qualities appear to reflect the working of an intelligence that is nonetheless not fully intelligible, or of a will that is in some way comparable but not ultimately reducible to human will.” Hookway’s invocation of the numen in relation to interfaces is purely metaphorical for complex scientific concepts, yet in intersects perfectly (even eerily) with the Victorian spiritualist discourse that would eventually give rise to the Ouija board. The Ouija board is a literalization and material instantiation of a tool which proports playfully to act as an interface with the daimons, spirits, or numen at the core of the Spiritualist doctrine.

A recent article from Smithsonian magazine by Linda Rodriguez McRobbie declares that “The Ouija Board Can’t Connect Us to Paranormal Forces—but It Can Tell Us a Lot About Psychology, Grief and Uncertainty.” But this declaration makes metaphysical assumptions that are entirely at odds with the historical context surrounding the Ouija board: 19th-century Spiritualism, which does assert the reality of spirits and a spirit world within which spirits dwell and through which they can be contacted. As Catherine Gutierrez explains in her overview of Spiritualism in *The Occult World*, Spiritualism was a wildly popular system of metaphysical belief that entailed a complex set of beliefs in a multi-levelled afterlife in which the dead continued to advance toward greater progress. Guetierrez further argues in her book *Plato’s Ghost* that Spiritualism descends from Platonism and Neoplatonism in its emphasis on an otherworld of ideal forms from which a chain of being proliferates. She writes that spiritualism “entailed a revivification of ancient epistemologies: Platonic and Neoplatonic ladders of ascent proliferated in middle-class American thought.” Moreover, as Janet Oppenheim argues in *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, the background of Spiritualist thought (from which the Ouija board emerges) encompasses a variety of religious and scientific (or pseudoscientific theories), including both Christian and non-Christian religiosity as well as proto-psychological theories of the “ideomotor effect.” The movement from Spiritualist tool to mass-marketed board game is thus not one-way and does not necessarily entail a movement from earnest spiritual seekership to frivolous entertainment.

At the crossroads of game and spiritual technology lurks Aleister Crowley, the infamous ceremonial magician who was also an afficionado of Ouija boards. In the book *Aleister Crowley and the Ouija Board*, Cornelius chronicles Crowley’s complex relationship to the Ouija board. Crowley believed that Ouija boards could be used as effective tools for divination, but that they should be combined with preparatory ceremonial magic to assure contact with a particular spirit rather than opening the way for possession by any random spirit in the vicinity. In a 1917 article in the newspaper *The International* collected in *The Equinox of the Gods* and quoted by J Edward Cornelius, Crowley wrote “Suppose a perfect stranger came into your office and proceeded to give orders to your staff. Suppose a strange woman walked into your drawing room and insisted on being hostess. You would be troubled by this. Yet, people sit down and offer the use of their brains and hands (which are, after all, more important than offices and drawing rooms) to any stray intelligence that may be wandering about. People use the Ouija Board without taking the slightest precautions.” (Crowley 1917, quoted in Cornelius). According to J. Cornelius, Crowley planned to design a Ouija board to his own specifications and discussed his plans with his disciple Frater Achad in 1919, though his designs are lost. It makes sense that Crowley would have been open to the use of the Ouija board as part of his syncretic magical system of Thelema, which privileges joy and freedom as the birthright of humanity. Moreover, Crowley was a chess master and attributed his ability to visualize detailed astral temples, in part, to the intense abilities in visualization and visual memory that he developed while playing multiple games of chess simultaneously while blindfolded. Moreover, while Thelema originally entailed a definition of magick through the formula of “change through will,” the late-stage Crowley eventually shifted emphasis of his system toward the goal of contact with “discarnate intelligences.” This includes Crowley’s approach to divination through tarot (another game that eventually became a divinatory tool). Crowley’s instructions for the use of his Thoth tarot deck involve a preliminary invocation to. Play opens the way for spirits Given Crowley’s demonstrated ability (along with the assistance of Lady Frieda Harris) to playfully and meaningfully re-design the tarot deck as the Crowley-Thoth Deck, Crowley points to the possibility of re-sacralizing the Ouija board through a fresh and creative design that nonetheless retained the board’s spiritualist origins.

\*Among the branches of occultism that I study, there is a shift over time from elaborate ceremony to spontaneous, intuitive spirit contact

\*But in these systems, an interface with the spirit world is still useful

\*The playfulness occurs in and through the interface, where dynamic movement can take place

\*The playfulness is not so much ontological indeterminacy or paradigm shifting (which are

The paradox of the Spiritualist movement (and a challenge of occultism more generally) is that the more people seek to prove the objective existence of the spirit world, the more they reduce it to the material and (thereby) strip away its magic. Ouija boards operate by insisting that they are only games, thereby opening up a haunting possibility that they are more than genuine gateways into the beyond. Understanding the Ouija board as an interface designed to promote play helps us to contextualise the history of the Ouija board as a series of what software developers would call “re-factorings,” i.e. attempts to make the board more functional, aesthetically appealing, and spiritually relevant. Moreover, the 19th-century origins of the interface concept in fluid dynamics and thermodynamics. Contextualizing the play of Ouija boards within the framework of Spiritualism and the later ceremonial magick of Aleister Crowley emphasizes that a playful object can have a serious spiritual dimension.

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