

WHAT MOVES "LITTLE PLANK"?

What exactly is moving Ouija's planchette? Where do we even start to try and find out?



Volunteers test Shannon Sylvia's experimental planchette

Shannon Sylvia of *Ghost Hunters International*, recently demonstrated that imagination, and a willingness to experiment, can produce surprising results even in that most familiar of occult devices, the Ouija board. To be specific, Ms Sylvia is working with the pointer or planchette (Fr. "little plank").

The planchette has undergone many changes since its popularity peaked in the 1860s. Early examples resemble miniature milking-stools, with their legs ending in casters, and fitted with a downward pointing pencil. It was placed on a piece of paper; the medium rested her hand on top and, as the planchette slid around, the pencil wrote out messages and produced pictures - presumably from the spirit world. Another device was the letter board (a board with the alphabet printed on it; mediums spelled words by moving a finger over the letters and stopping when the spirits rapped). When combined, the Ouija board was created and patented in 1891. Since then, the planchette has gotten smaller, a porthole was added around 1915, and today it is a piece of lightweight, glow-in-the-dark plastic with felt-tipped legs.

Ouija is frequently found on the family game shelf wedged between Parcheesi and Monopoly, but for all its ordinariness, questions remain about how the board actually works. Do we subconsciously move the planchette or does some force outside the participants play a part in producing those spine-tingling "yeses" and "nos".

Shannon Sylvia asked herself these questions while working with the board. She decided that there must be some way to debunk or prove that the planchette is moving on its own. But how could that be determined?

This past weekend at Phantom Con in Hickory, North Carolina, Shannon introduced the prototype of a planchette that might put an end to the Ouija "real" or "fake" debate. The main component is a very sensitive scale that measures the pressure put on it by the participant's fingers. The scale has a small digital readout that could be watched as questions were asked and the planchette moved across the board.

Before the session began, everyone had the opportunity to see how the prototype worked and how physically moving it, pushing or pulling, would cause the reading to jump. With everyone's fingers placed on the planchette, the base reading was about 50 to 70. I am not sure what unit of measurement was used, but I don't think that mattered. If it was physically pushed or pulled, a readout of over 100 and even into the 200's, would be seen.

After everyone had their chance to play around with it, it was time for a live test. As everyone gathered around the table, four brave volunteers stepped up to face the Ouija board and its mystery. When everyone's fingers were on the planchette, a base reading was recorded of around 60. As the question "how old are you?" was asked, the planchette began moving across the board towards the row of numbers. No one was paying attention to the answer, of course; all eyes were on the readout.

To everyone's amazement, the pressure being measured had only slightly increased to the 70's and even dropping back down to the base reading as the planchette kept moving. Every so often you would see a slight spike, but this could have been easily caused by participants trying to keep up with the movement. This spike would only be seen for a split second and then drop back down to the base reading or just above.

The session stopped for a minute as everyone had to take a step back and digest what they had just seen. Once the questions began again, the results were the same. It clearly appeared as if the planchette was moving on its own - without the aid of pushing or pulling fingers.

So what's this say about the reality of an Ouija board? Can we contact the dead or open the doors to evil spirits? I don't think this unique planchette answers those questions, but it sure does get one to thinking about new possibilities and *Mysteries* is looking forward to reporting new developments in Shannon's research.

