

# The Talking Dead: Personal Communication with “the Other Side” through the Ouija Board, Spirit of the Glass, and the Charlie Charlie Challenge

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While many traditional legends are not actively told and believed any more, legends about ghosts, spirits and communication with the realm of the dead are still very much part of popular belief, and even generate new variants. From the Bible to the Charlie Charlie Challenge the narrative scenario keeps repeating itself: ghosts exist, it is possible to summon spirits and communicate with them, they can answer your questions, but all this is not without danger. However, it is not the spirits that are the most dangerous here, but the narrative belief scenarios and ostensive behavior of people. The legends can provide for exciting challenges, but there is also the danger that they can frighten people, make them panic, or even worse.

## The Overvecht Incident

Here's a news report: On Monday evening, 19 October, 1987, a woman named Anneke (45) and her two children pay a visit to sister-in-law Hester van der Stroet (35) and her two children at Hester's flat at the Ivoordreef in Overvecht, a suburb of the Dutch city of Utrecht. Anneke wants to have her hair permed. Her brother Gerrit van der Stroet, the master of the house, is a bus driver on night duty. As the evening progresses, boredom sets in and the mood calls for a game. Hester proposes “spirit of the glass” [“glaasje draaien”] to summon a good spirit and ask questions. This was a popular party game at the time, especially among young people. Anneke's sixteen-year-old daughter Sammy is keen. She is dying to hear what the future has in store for her and her boyfriend. They write down all the letters of the alphabet and the numbers from one to ten on pieces of paper and put them in a large circle

on the kitchen table. A wine glass is put upside-down in the middle of the circle, and the participants put their fingers on the base of the glass. After some moments of concentration, the glass begins to move. Questions about the unknown are being asked; the attendant spirit submissively spells out the answers by guiding the glass past the letters. The spirit turns out to be Hester's late father, Ad. Among other things, he says that Mum will stop by Hester's house the next day (which will prove to be correct), and that Hester will have another baby (which is not to Hester's liking). Then it is sixteen-year-old Sammy's turn to ask questions, which brings the subject to big questions about life and death. Suddenly, there is a change in the atmosphere. An evil spirit appears to manifest itself. At high speed, the letters repeatedly spell out the words "Sammy dead, Sammy dead." Sammy gets upset and desperately asks: "But why?" The spirit spells out "school 79." The people present deduce that this must be about a deceased primary school teacher that Sammy could not get along with. They interpret "Sammy dead" as a downright threat: the evil spirit wants to kill her. The mood turns darker: the glass flies across the table and Hester cannot manage to grab it and turn it upside-down. The company begs for it to stop, but instead, even more evil spirits start entering the apartment.

"One of them pulled my arm so hard, I suffered from it for the rest of the week," Hester would later tell a journalist. Things are getting out of hand: spirits are howling loudly through the room, doors get slammed open and closed throughout the house, the toilet door gets locked without anyone being inside, suspended houseplants come off the walls, alarm clocks fall off bedside tables (repeatedly, after having been put back), a tropical fish ends up in the closed feeder basket of the aquarium ... It is as late as 2 a.m. when driver Gerrit van der Stroet arrives home to find the house in total chaos and panic. It was like he had a premonition: his car had rushed home at a speed of 75 miles an hour, even when he took his foot off the accelerator. They decide to call the police. Shortly after, police officers arrive to see the paranormal phenomena with their own eyes: the kitchen table is dancing, the glass is hurling across the table, objects are flying through the air. They call upon the people present to put an end to all spiritual contact, but it seems there is no stopping it. Since the officers have no experience with paranormal activities, they contact headquarters. As it happens, their communications on police radio are overheard by a Mr Van Ede, a spiritual medium from Utrecht. He contacts the police to offer his help. That same night, the medium and his wife drive over to the Ivoordreef. The closer they get to the house, the more goosebumps the medium gets. He experiences vibrations in the atmosphere. Once they are inside, he witnesses some twenty luminous creatures, invisible to the other people in the room. The medium goes

into a trance and, with a supreme effort, manages to dispel the evil spirits. From then on, Mr and Mrs Van der Stroet decisively renounce spiritualism. Far too dangerous!

Medium Van Ede endorses this choice. Séances involve the summoning of paranormal forces that people cannot cope with. They bring about tensions and fears; they may drive people to insanity, suicide, murder, or manslaughter. On being asked, parapsychologist Wim Kramer of Utrecht University explains that this kind of ritual can indeed be dangerous, although no actual contact with spirits is made. The "popular belief" and the tension could however lead to fear, panic, depression, or—as in the above case—to a mass psychosis. The same phenomenon can occur when people watch a horror film. Spiritualism used to be a thing of the elite, Kramer adds, but now, it has become a children's game.<sup>1</sup>

### Popular belief

Kramer's introduction of the concept of "popular belief" is intriguing, especially when we regard it from some distance. When we confine ourselves to folktales, what did people believe in the past and in the present? Our traditional legends frequently dealt with supernatural or mythical beings like werewolves, dragons, unicorns, mermaids, giants, gnomes, nightmares, "witte wieven" (white women), basilisks, demons, and will-o'-the-wisps. In the past, many tales were told about them and many people believed in them. Meanwhile, the belief has declined considerably and the beings have ended up in the fiction department. They still appear in fantasy stories, legend tours for tourists, and children's books like the *Alfie the Werewolf (Dolfje Weerwolfje)* and *Harry Potter* book series. Rather than remaining a source of great terror, they have turned into forms of nostalgic entertainment. And traditional legends were also replete with "popular belief" in the form of human beings with special gifts: sorcerers, witches, fortune-tellers, faith healers, and exorcists. The belief in such persons has only partly disappeared, although they are now called by different names, like "psychic," "medium," "paranormal healer," "Wicca witch," etc. Also, the belief in future prediction and exorcism has not quite disappeared yet. And traditional legends provide a third category, the belief in which has hardly dwindled: spiritual beings from "the beyond." By this, I am referring in particular to spirits, souls of deceased persons, ghosts (and, to a lesser extent, demons, devils, and angels). Great religions like Christianity and Islam basically believe in the existence of a spiritual life after death. But many nonbelievers too adhere to the idea of there being a hereafter, where human life continues after death in a spiritual form—an inheritance of the golden age of spiritualism, the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The success of TV mediums like Char Margolis, Derek Ogilvie, and many others appears to corroborate this: the audience quite massively assumes that these mediums are in touch with deceased loved ones, and, consequently, that the dead are capable of talking to the living through the intervention of these mediums.

So they exist: the Talking Dead, who have quietly moved from traditional legends to modern legends. Those who wish to make contact with the spirit world can avail themselves of relatively simple instruments. Practically everyone is familiar with stories about Ouija boards, “spirit of the glass,” and, perhaps to a lesser extent with the more recent hype, the Charlie Charlie challenge.

### Communication and rituals

With simple means like a board with letters, a planchette, a glass, separate letters on paper, and pencils, it is possible to summon a spirit (in company), preferably of a deceased relative or friend.<sup>3</sup> Questions are asked to him or her, whereupon the spirit spells out the answers on the board or on separate letters in a circle. Apparently, spirits cannot speak directly; however, despite being immaterial, they do possess the energy to move small objects. Furthermore, the answers make clear that the spirits must be capable of understanding and spelling the language of the players. Moreover, it seems that the soul acquires divine qualities after death, for in many respects, spirits are all-seeing and all-knowing. After all, they know who is going to marry whom and when someone will die. Obviously, the soul is privy to the truth and every man’s destiny.

In the late nineteenth century, the Ouija board was marketed in the United States as a party game—the name being a contraction of the French *oui* and the German *ja*. In order to stimulate sales, producer William Fuld himself was pretty quick to circulate spiritualistic stories (Ellis 2004:180). The games of the Ouija board, “spirit of the glass,” and the Charlie Charlie challenge follow a more or less fixed ritual. They are preferably played in the evening or at night, or, in the case of Charlie Charlie, occasionally at 3 a.m. specifically. The Ouija board contains all the letters of the alphabet and all the numbers from 0 to 9, plus the words “yes,” “no,” “goodbye,” and (occasionally) “hello.” Everything is indicated by a pointed planchette, sometimes containing a hole or a magnifying glass. Ouija and “spirit of the glass” are party games, generally involving three persons or more: Charlie Charlie can also be played individually. Each participant loosely touches the planchette with one or two fingers. The Ouija board can also be played on with a glass. In “spirit of the glass,” the letters of the alphabet are in a circle. The glass (either a lemonade glass or a wineglass—not a shot glass or a beer mug) is on the table upside down, while the participants touch it lightly with

one or two fingers. In English, "glass-pushing" (which, as a term, comes closer to what this practice is called in some other languages) is generally referred to as "spirit of the glass," because it may also involve the catching in the glass some smoke from a burnt match or another small object, which is meant to represent the "spirit." Instead of bright lights, there are often one or more tealights or (black) candles burning in the room, which have been put near the board, the circle, or the paper.

The ritual is opened with the question of whether there is a spirit present.<sup>4</sup> If the answer is "yes" or "hello," the people present can start asking questions. In many cases, the players will first try to identify the spirit (like with Ad, the dead father in the Overvecht incident) by inquiring about its name and background. In the case of Charlie Charlie, the opening question is very specific: "Charlie, Charlie, are you there?" or "Charlie, Charlie, can we play?" The spirit has been identified from the start. In the Ouija game and "spirit of the glass" people can ask open questions, the answers to which will be spelled out by the spirit. The spirit can be put to the test with difficult questions or questions the answers to which are known to only one participant. In principle, a spirit-summoning session may take several hours and contain many questions, for which reason all answers are sometimes taken down by a participant—both as a record and to be able to look at any enigmatic answers afterwards. Charlie Charlie has a closed questions format, allowing only "yes" and "no" answers. Towards the end of the séance, players occasionally try to dare the spirit, for example by requesting a sign or asking if it were capable of killing them. Giving proper closure to the ritual is of the utmost importance. The players must leave the spirit in no doubt that the game is to be ended. The spirit, in its turn, can answer "(good)bye." In the case of Charlie Charlie, the trigger phrase is "Charlie, Charlie, can we stop?" If the ritual is not closed properly, the created portal is left open, as it were, which enables the spirit to enter the human world, with all its harmful consequences. That is to say, if one actually believes in spirits and in a "beyond." Those who consider spirits or ghosts to be non-existent will experience no consequences whatsoever (*NOS Journaal* 2015a).

### **Belief in evil spirits**

The Bible repeatedly warns against the summoning of spirits, like in Leviticus 19:31: "Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God." Leviticus 20:6 reads: "If any turn to mediums and wizards, prostituting themselves to them, I will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people." And Deuteronomy 18:10-12 proclaims: "No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices

divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you.”

For a believer, the mentioning and description of these practices in an authoritative source like the Bible must lead to the conclusion that they do in fact exist. Apparently, it is possible to summon spirits of the dead. To confirmed Christians—both Catholics and Protestants—this is no fiction. And particularly to (Dutch) orthodox Protestants who take the Bible very literally, the aforementioned practices are a real and demonic danger.<sup>5</sup> For he who strongly believes in God is also a strong believer in His enemy.

For that matter, it is mainly the orthodox Protestant parents, school governors, and youth leaders from the Netherlands who foster concerns. Orthodox media like the *Nederlands Dagblad*, the *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, and the Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation warn youngsters playing the games in question about the dangers (Lengkeek 2015; *Reformatorisch Dagblad* 2015; Mastebroek 2015, Cushman 2015).<sup>6</sup> According to converted ex-Wiccan Joyce de Jongh:

Curiosity is one of the tricks used by the devil. It’s ever so exciting. ‘Just try it, it’s probably not as bad as God says,’ he whispers in your ear. It’s the same lie he used with the fall of man. Don’t think playing such a game only once is without risk. You wouldn’t say that either about someone getting in touch with a sex trafficker. (qtd. in *Reformatorisch Dagblad* 2015)

Theologian Robert Doornenbal explains to young people why they should refrain from playing the Charlie Charlie challenge:

For two reasons. (1) You don’t know what you’re about to embrace. There are evil spirits out there stronger than us humans. At first, they may seem harmless, but spirits can get people in their power. (2) God has forbidden it, and He has done so to protect us. This ought to be reason enough! [...] Demons are evil spiritual powers. Normally, they can’t have influence over you. But they can if you invite (or summon) them yourself. By doing so, you’re giving them permission to do something—this is what they mean by “opening the portal”. What may happen then—sooner or later—is for spirits to scare you witless. Young people are suddenly overcome by nightmares, obsessive and compulsive thoughts, negative thoughts and feelings, etc. In such cases, it is

appropriate to acknowledge the act of summoning spirits to God as a sin. After doing so, the influence of the spirits can be ended in the name of Jesus. That’s the good news! (in Hoogenboom 2015)<sup>7</sup>

The Dutch Folktale Database of the Meertens Institute currently contains over 46,000 folktales. It presently includes 29 modern legends about “spirit of the glass” or other, similar methods to summon spirits in a private setting. The tales were assigned type number TM 6057. In 86% of the stories, it is explicitly assumed that spirits are being summoned, whereas in only 14%, this is dismissed as nonsense. Quite a few stories contain an explicit warning about the dangers, and in some cases, the story ends with a calamity, like a stable catching fire, a traffic accident, or a disease (LOMBO453, ANYA0020, SAVEL030).<sup>8</sup> Two narrators say it is necessary to smash the glass at the end of the séance, otherwise the spirit will stay in it (LOMBO465, INZ00143). In these cases, the narrators are far from exclusively orthodox Protestants.

### Films and Morality

Most films about the summoning of spirits are from Hollywood. The most influential film that kickstarted the genre is *The Exorcist* from 1973. Twelve-year-old Regan (played by Linda Blair) plays with a Ouija board and gets possessed by a demonic entity. It takes two priests to exorcise the demon. The film made a deep impression back then, not in the last place because of the peculiar, nauseating special effects: Regan masturbates with a crucifix, hovers over the bed, starts looking worse and worse, speaks shocking words in a demonic voice (“Your mother sucks cocks in hell!”), can turn her head 360 degrees, and throws up green vomit. When this film was released, I was thirteen years old and therefore too young to see it in the cinema. There were, however, all sorts of rumors going around among people my age about sick bags being issued in the cinema rooms, visitors making their way out while vomiting, and the occasional filmgoer literally going crazy with fear. Incidentally, the Ouija board did not take a central position in this film yet. Rather, it was the prelude to a plethora of horrors. It did set the tone, though: an occult game gets a youngster into trouble with demonic forces.

The years to follow saw a profusion of films based on this motif, often with a Ouija board, sometimes including “spirit of the glass,” and recently also featuring the Charlie Charlie challenge. Discussing all these films would be impossible, therefore I will limit myself to just mentioning a few: *Witchboard* (UK, 1986), *Long Time Dead* (UK, 2002), *Ouija* (Spain, 2003), *Spirit of the Glass* (Philippines, 2004), *The Ouija Experiment* (USA, 2013), *The Ouija Experiment 2: Theatre of*

*Death* (USA, 2015, also released under the titles *The Ouija Resurrection* and *Ouija Haunting*), *The Ouija Exorcism* (USA, 2015), *Ouija Summoning* (USA, 2015), *Entity F* (NL, 2015), *Charlie Charlie* (USA 2017), and *Ouija House* (USA, 2018).

I failed to mention one more title: the recent *Ouija* series from 2014–2016. All these productions were released in the United States shortly before Halloween, with the intention of providing the cinema audience with a suitable night filled with shudders and shivers. The first film, called simply *Ouija* (2014), is still very straightforward: after having played with the Ouija board, some youngsters are confronted with an evil spirit who is out to kill them all. Burning both the corpse of the spirit and the Ouija board turns out to be the solution. As regards script and styling, part 2 (*Ouija: Origin of Evil* [2015]) is more original. In this instalment, the mother is a swindling spiritualist, whereas her daughter has genuine paranormal gifts. Unfortunately, she gets possessed by the devil and a camp executioner while playing with the Ouija board. In *Ouija 3: The Charlie Charlie Challenge* (2016), which is marketed as “based on the terrifying urban legend,” the attention is shifted to the Charlie Charlie challenge. In a fairground attraction—a haunted house—some youngsters summon the spirit of the Mexican boy Charlie, who was killed by Satanists. One by one, they fall victim to the forces of darkness. In this series, evil always befalls those who engage in experiments. A recurring motif is the set of rules linked to the use of the Ouija board:

1. Never play alone
2. Never play in a graveyard
3. Always say goodbye

Moreover, it is possible to perceive the spirit through the magnifying glass in the planchette. *Charlie Charlie* also includes the obligation to say goodbye to stop the paranormal activity.

It is not only the multitude of folktales and legends on the subject, but also the popular culture versions like the aforementioned films that have an influence on people’s image of the summoning of spirits that should not be underestimated. All of these films—which can all be classified as horror films—emphasize the dangers of occult practices. Scepticism is condemned repeatedly.

### The sceptical approach

As a teenager, I played “spirit of the glass” with a group of friends on several occasions. It started out as a scary affair, because you assumed you had actually summoned a spirit, who was capable of answering intimate questions and major questions of life and death. The anticlimax came when one of my friends said: “I think it’s me giving all the answers.

Everything that pops into my head is given as an answer.” None of us had pushed the glass deliberately, but this one friend had in fact (unconsciously) guided our movements.

According to sceptics, the unconscious movement of the planchette or the glass can be explained by the ideomotor effect. John Jackson explains: “Ideomotor actions are unconscious, involuntary motor movements that are performed by a person because of prior expectations, suggestions or preconceptions” (2005). A similar effect occurs while dowsing with a pendulum or a stick. Lightly touching a planchette or a glass with a stretched arm causes involuntary movements.<sup>9</sup>

A simple experiment by Michael Faraday with a glass and two cardboard discs on top, tied together with elastic, demonstrates how the glass is being pushed. There is no question of the glass being moved by a spirit, because then the fingers of the people touching it would be dragged along behind it—quod non (Blanckenberg 2009; scienceofscamsc4 2009). Another experiment shows that the participants (rather than an all-knowing spirit) give the answers unconsciously. When the participants are blindfolded, all that comes out is random letters and misses, and no meaningful answers whatsoever (Romano 2017).

### Hype on YouTube

In modern times, the influence of YouTube and social media on the spread of folklore must not be underestimated. In this day and age, youngsters in particular are more into watching vloggers on YouTube than reading books or watching regular TV. On YouTube, there are international and Dutch videos about séances with the Ouija board, “spirit of the glass,” and the Charlie Charlie challenge. The videos are sometimes accompanied by suspenseful music, and the peak of horror is reached when candles die down seemingly spontaneously, lights go out, or lamps start falling over.<sup>10</sup> An additional ritual to “spirit of the glass” is the catching of smoke in the glass to make it seem even more as if a spirit has entered it (Barons Demise123 2016; ImJayStation. 2017).

In 2015, the Charlie Charlie challenge turned into a real hype in the Netherlands. In South America, the Charlie Charlie challenge had been played since the nineties, including some variants, like Sarita Sarita, Carlos Carlos,<sup>11</sup> Willy Willy, the game of La Llorona, and a few more. Charlie can be a demon, a boy who committed suicide or was murdered, or the victim of a car crash.<sup>12</sup> In South America, there are several known cases of mass psychosis, hysteria (including [mainly female] victims fainting, foaming at the mouth, and suffering from convulsions), symptoms of vomiting, palpitations, insomnia, stomach cramps, breathing difficulties, and possibly a suicide. In certain cases, the help of an exorcist was required. In sum, the Charlie virus had been contagious

for some time, but in the spring (and summer) of 2015, this piece of adolescent folklore started to go viral worldwide through social media (Burger 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; Oosterom 2015).<sup>13</sup>

Let me provide one example of a Charlie Charlie challenge video by a known Dutch vlogger (“Dutchtuber”), which is recommended as “super scary” and has been watched more than a million times.<sup>14</sup> Dutchtuber is the chatty type: he explains how the game works, with the paper and the pencils already laid out. He demonstrates all that needs to be done, while flanking the setup on the floor with burning tealights. Showing the screen of his mobile, he explains it is now precisely the appointed time of 3 a.m., and that his parents are not at home.<sup>15</sup> He admits he finds this pretty scary and that his heart is beating really fast. Then he asks, in English: “Charlie, Charlie, are you there?” At first, nothing happens, but when the pencil suddenly starts moving—be it only slightly—Dutchtuber is visibly shocked. “This really isn’t funny,” he comments, but for all that, he tries again. The pencil now clearly moves in the direction of “yes,” while the kid is reasonably far removed from it. Panicking slightly, he says: “I’m gonna quit this game. No, really, I’m gonna quit. This ain’t sane, you can’t do this.” Then the camera is switched off.

In several videos, the youngsters are so freaked out by the movement of the pencil that they run away screaming or at least stop asking questions (for example Brants 2015; *NOS Jeugdjournaal* 2015). YouTube features not only suspenseful videos, but also parodies ridiculing the phenomenon. In a video from *BadHumorTV*, a boy summons Charlie to come and play. Then Charlie appears with a white sheet over his head, and the two start playing cards and video games (2015).

Since there is no physical contact with the pencils in these cases, the ideomotor effect can be ruled out. Rational explanations (which are sometimes also given in the videos) are sought in the precarious balance position of the upper pencil. Air displacement could easily cause the pencil to move. All it takes is the waving of hands, blowing, or air breathed out during speech. One might say that the very name of “Charlie” ensures displacement of air (TheDuckVoice 2015).

### The Twitter hype in Dutch

In the Netherlands and Flanders, 615 original tweets (i.e. excluding retweets) with the #charliecharliechallenge hashtag appeared on Twitter between May and November 2015. The distribution of the responses is (by and large<sup>16</sup>) represented in the diagram below.

*Distinguishable categories in #charliecharliechallenge tweets*

Dangerous	122	<p>contain warnings about the dangers of demons</p> <p><i>“Occultism is like quicksand. It looks harmless, but once you’re stuck in it, you won’t get out under your own power.”</i></p> <p>27 May, a man named Jan-Kees de Feijter</p> <p><i>“I so hate the #charliecharliechallenge. Why the fuck do people get it into their heads to summon spirits? It is sooo dangerous.”</i></p> <p>29 May, a woman called Elise Fans</p>
Scary	96	<p>express fears of the challenge</p> <p><i>“We thought we’d give it a try, this #charliecharliechallenge ... Don’t do it, man. I was shitting myself.”</i></p> <p>26 May, Selina (from Flanders)</p>
Humor	95	<p>poke fun at the challenge</p> <p><i>“If this Charlie from the #charliecharliechallenge exist, he’ll probably have a burnout by now from answering all those questions.”</i></p> <p>31 May, Willem de Gelder</p>
Fun	37	<p>saying they like doing the challenge</p> <p><i>“Hahahaha I’m gonna do this #charliecharliechallenge with Mum.”</i></p> <p>27 May, Laura Vanemelen</p>
Sceptical	102	<p>it is all nonsense and fake, and that no spirits are being summoned.</p> <p><i>“#charliecharliechallenge is a big lie. No demons, spirits or whatever, and should they come round anyway, tea is ready for them.”</i></p> <p>26 May, Jackie Kamphuis</p> <p><i>“Okay, just did the #charliecharliechallenge, and the pencil moved. Because of me laughing, mind you #Voodooofun.”</i></p> <p>25 May, Simone Laurey</p>

Neutral	129	no opinions expressed often contain announcements (i.e. people saying they are going to do the challenge) or remarks about having seen something related to the topic on the “Jeugdjournaal” (Dutch news programme for children)
Rest	34	contain the #charliecharliechallenge hashtag but fail to express a clear view on the subject

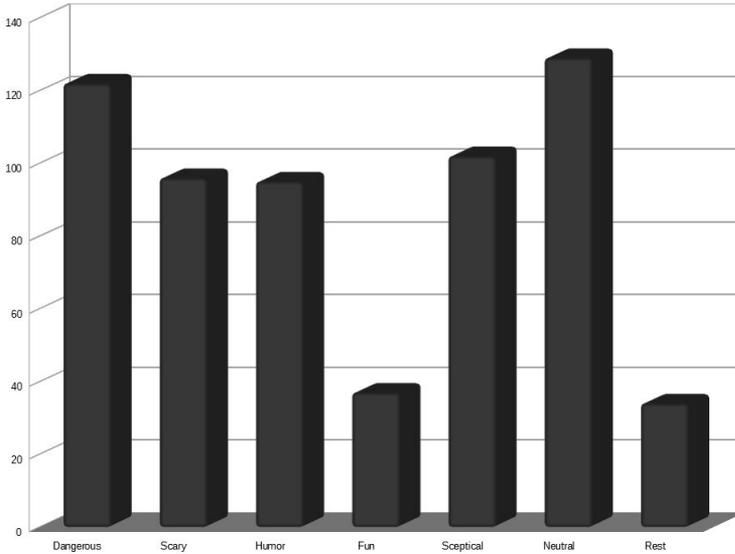


Figure 1: Dutch language Charlie Charlie tweets in 2015

Roughly speaking, we can distinguish two major significant categories to represent the Charlie Charlie situation in the Low Countries: believers (35%) and sceptics (slightly outdoing the believers by 38%). The believers are convinced of the existence of spirits, the possibility of summoning demons, and the dangers attached to it. In the category of frightened people in particular, there is an overrepresentation of young girls. For the sceptics, it is little more than a funny game. They deny the actual summoning of spirits (doubting their very existence) and make fun of it. In the category of the pronounced sceptics, the proportion between boys and girls is more equal.

### Ostension

From a parapsychologist’s and sceptic’s point of view, no spirits are summoned by means of the Ouija board, in “spirit of the glass,” or during the Charlie Charlie challenge. There is no contact with “the beyond.” Indeed, the very existence of spirits (and demons) is doubtful—and if they exist, they are incorporeal and incapable of harming us. Whatever it is we do when we are “summoning spirits,” it is all in our heads. Every movement of the planchette or the glass is caused by the participants themselves, who are also responsible for giving all the answers. And as for Charlie Charlie, every breath of wind can cause a movement (*NOS Journaal* 2015b).<sup>17</sup>

From this sceptical perspective, every contact with the spirit world is imaginary, which brings us to the central concept of “ostension,” as a great many stories related to Ouija boards, “spirit of the glass,” and the Charlie Charlie challenge carry an occult connotation. Ostension implies the living and experiencing of legends (Ellis 2001:41, 164; Meder 2006:241-254; 2014). People act according to the tales in their heads. The scenario of these tales is more or less fixed: spirits exist, you can communicate with them, they have answers to our questions (also about marriage and death), but the ritual is not without danger (Ellis 2004:174-175). In reality, the danger lies not in the spirit world, but purely in the narrative scenario. People can respond negatively to the scenario, because 1) they are addressed by spirits of the dead (which is scary), 2) spirits they believe to be all-knowing occasionally give answers that are not to their liking (like “Sammy dead, Sammy dead”), and (3) the portal is opened to evil spirits and demons (who could ruin your house or take possession of your body). The scenario is essentially Christian, rather than Satanic: demons and dead people are challenged all right, but they are also (preferably) sent back. At the same time, this narrative scenario can cause people to become frightened, get into a panic, start imagining certain phenomena and become susceptible to mass hysteria, turn depressed or aggressive, or get the idea that they are possessed. For most youngsters, though, it is only an exciting game, a daring role play, in which a seemingly dangerous scenario is acted out (Ellis 1994:78-79, 82). As we have seen before, however, adult authorities—and orthodox Protestants in particular—take these modern legends very seriously and very literally.

### The Urk murder case

This brings us to a second news report: the murder of Dirk Post in the Dutch polder town of Urk. Urk is an old fishing village that used to be an island, and where the majority of the population is Reformed. On 17 November 2009, a couple of boys, who have summoned spirits before

through “spirit of the glass,” decide to go to the Urkerbos (a local forest area) to play the game again. The suggestion came from one of the boys, Jaap van der Harst (15). He is joined by Dirk Post (14) and two other friends, aged 12 and 13. Presumably, Dirk Post makes a comment during the ritual that raises Jaap’s hackles. The statements differ on the exact words that were said that day. Was Dirk being sarcastic about a former séance, in which Jaap thought he had fallen victim to the curse of a spirit (of which he was later ashamed)? Or was Dirk disrespectful about Jaap’s girlfriend? Whichever it was, Jaap responds by pulling a knife and killing Dirk with 47 stab wounds. The other two boys rush off in shock and keep their mouths shut for fear of reprisals. When Dirk’s body is found the next day, Jaap maintains his total innocence for the next ten months. Meanwhile, Urk is buzzing with insinuating rumours: Moroccans or “Negroes” are supposed to have killed Dirk. Others believe this to be a crime of passion. Allegedly, Dirk and Jaap were both in love with a pretty local girl called Nellie (14). After serious interrogation, Jaap confesses to the murder in September 2010. Criminal defense lawyer Ilse van der Meer tries to shift the blame from Jaap by claiming he committed the act after becoming possessed by an evil demon while playing “spirit of the glass.” On a program of the Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation, Dutch Reformed minister Henk Vreekamp explains that the devil can indeed get into you through a game of “spirit of the glass.” The occult card is being played. The judge, however, refuses to follow the above theory on the day of the verdict (19 October 2010). A psychiatric examination reveals Jaap’s reduced accountability and his proneness to psychotic disorders. Jaap had purposefully taken a knife with him that day, and had announced that he was going to kill Dirk. Ergo, it was a case of premeditated murder. Given his minor age, Jaap is sentenced to one year of juvenile detention with compulsory psychiatric treatment.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Stories about Ouija boards, “spirit of the glass,” and the Charlie Charlie challenge commonly manifest themselves as modern legends. The scenario of these stories usually boils down to the possibility of making contact with the souls of dead people (from “the beyond”) by means of the methods applied in the aforementioned games. The spirits of these dead people can be summoned and approached with questions, which the spirits will then answer. According to believers, the summoning of spirits is not without danger: one opens a portal without knowing who will come forward. It may well be an evil spirit, a demon, or the devil himself, whose intention it is to harm the participants of the game.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, believers say, the summoning of spirits had better be discouraged. In the meantime, the scenario has lodged itself in

the minds of many people, because not only stories, but also films give off the same ominous message time and time again. So it is hardly surprising that people are inclined to act according to the scenario. At present, the summoning of spirits—as well as the large variety of challenges,<sup>20</sup> scary WhatsApp messages,<sup>21</sup> and legends about killer clowns<sup>22</sup>—must be considered primarily as children’s folklore (especially around Halloween)<sup>23</sup>: as a dark game, an experiment, a challenge, and ideally as a means of *bonding* (Ellis 1994:62; 2000:66; 2004:175-176; 186; Tucker 2005:186-187, 198; 2012:397; cf. 2008:113-116). Moreover, it involves a form of *ostension*: participants “live the legend,” like actors in a suspenseful plot, comparably to *legend tripping* including a nocturnal visit to a haunted house (Ellis 2004:185; Tucker 2005:191-192). Where suspense is concerned, summoning spirits is at least as rewarding as watching a decent horror film. Contrary to their intentions, quite a few adult authorities only stimulate youngsters’ belief and curiosity with their warnings. Sceptical researchers deny all paranormal claims. According to them, our fears are wholly self-inflicted. There are no spirits or demons, so we cannot summon any, and there is no such thing as supernatural communication. It is all in our heads. It takes *mythbusters* rather than *ghostbusters* to debunk the hypes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This account is based on *Leeuwarder Courant* 1987, *Limburgs Dagblad* 1987, and Mensing 1987.

<sup>2</sup> According to van Beek 2015, in 2015, the Dutch population included only 17% believers versus 25% atheists and some 60% agnostics and so-called ietstsits (those who believe there is “iets” [“something”], without defining it further). Belief in the hereafter is still very prominent, though: 53% of the population believe in life after death. About this, see also Hofland 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the blog of Lynn Robin (2017), a sceptic who nonetheless believes in a soul and thinks humans can make contact with deceased persons with the help of a Ouija board.

<sup>4</sup> About the narrative pattern, see also Ellis 1994: 68-77; 2000:67-72. A similar pattern is encountered in exorcism (summoning, identifying, confronting, rejecting, exorcising): see Ellis 2000: 80; 2004:176.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see also Ellis 2000:65; the establishment of a connection with Satanism is as old as the Ouija board.

<sup>6</sup> Kamp 2015 advocates a Jesus Jesus challenge.

<sup>7</sup> Ellis (1994) is aware of the arguments of the religious leaders, but has virtually never encountered any of the negative consequences: “Evangelists Koch [...] and Gruss [...] include cautionary narratives in which such sessions are followed by periods of mental depression, loss of faith, or suicidal impulses; however, as Pimple [...] and I found, such narratives are not paralleled in archival collections, suggesting that teens see ‘demonic’ contacts as rarely leading to any lasting complications” (77).

<sup>8</sup> These numbers refer to specific entries in the Dutch Folktales Database [Nederlandse VolksverhalenBank], available at [www.verhalenbank.nl](http://www.verhalenbank.nl).

<sup>9</sup> A traditional parapsychologist like Tenhaeff had also explained the movements of planchettes and glasses as “involuntary muscle spasms” (1975:135).

<sup>10</sup> On this, see for example Wassabi 2015. Some vloggers admit at the end that it was all fake.

<sup>11</sup> It would make much more sense for the Mexican spirit to be called Carlos Carlos instead of Charlie Charlie; the English name seems to suggest an Americanisation of the game; see Solon and Hamill 2015.

<sup>12</sup> In the Bahamas, Charlie is in fact a homosexual demon; see Burger 2015c.

<sup>13</sup> In the Netherlands, #charliecharliechallenge was trending topic on Twitter during Whit weekend (25 and 26 May), of all times—when Christian churches celebrated the descending of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> See Dutchtuber 2015. Incidentally, some time earlier, on 28 May 2015, Dutchtuber tweeted: “I’ve just tried #charliecharliechallenge. And it worked! (after I had started to blow).”

<sup>15</sup> There is an entire series of 3 a.m. challenges (i.e. to be performed at three o’clock in the morning), ranging from calling up strangers, visiting haunted flats, and talking to Siri (the iPhone bot). On the latter, see DutchTuber 2017.

<sup>16</sup> All 615 tweets were coded by hand, because a digital sentiment analysis is supposed to be largely incapable of interpreting youth language, abbreviations, emoticons, irony, and references to images, blogs, and vlogs on Twitter. It needs to be noted, though, that also for the human annotator, discovering the underlying emotions was often a matter of guesswork.

<sup>17</sup> On this subject, the Reverend W. de Bruin, Christian Reformed minister from Purmerend (province of North Holland), also strikes a sceptical note: “Pencils tend to move easily. Bearing that in mind, one might say that the Charlie Charlie challenge would gain credibility if it were done with bricks” (qtd. in *Reformatorsch Dagblad* 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Based on Atheisticsquotes 2010; Korterink 2009, 2010; Quid 2010; and *Nu.nl* 2010.

<sup>19</sup> See also Vergel de Dios 2015 and some Dutch witness accounts in DutchGhosthunter (2008; 2010; 2015; 2016a; 2016b). One evil demon (or a group of demons) is said to go by the name of Zozo (Raar Maar Waar 2016). Also see Tucker 2008:141.

<sup>20</sup> For example the Ice Bucket challenge, the Cinnamon challenge, the Tin Can challenge, the Babyfood challenge, the “Rusk Whistle challenge” (i.e. trying to whistle after eating a Dutch rusk), the Floor is Lava challenge, the Bloody Mary challenge, the 3AM challenge, and the 48Hours challenge. The Bloody Mary challenge is a revival of the Bloody Mary ritual and the contemporary legend; see Dundes 1998.

<sup>21</sup> For examples from the Dutch Folktale Database, search with keyword [whatsapp].

<sup>22</sup> For examples, search the Dutch Folktale Database with keyword [Crimiclow].

<sup>23</sup> According to *Verus* 2015, Charlie Charlie was popular with pupils from the last year of primary school and the first three years of secondary school.

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