

Blog

Recreational Fear 101: Come Play with Us

What is recreational fear, and what do we know about the phenomenon? Essay by lab interns Majbritt Kastberg Grønbæk and Pernille Lærke Munk-Hansen.

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Figure 1 Screenshot from the Recreational Fear Lab's promotional video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhGHLj1JfRk&feature=youtu.be> ▶)

You might find yourself safely in the confines of your home, sitting on the couch in front of the TV, but your hands are sweaty, you are squeezing the pillow or the hand of your movie night companion a bit harder than usual. Your heartbeat is elevated, and your breathing is quickening. You cover your eyes to avoid what comes next, but find the temptation too strong. As the camera suddenly cuts to a horrifying monster, you can't help it: you involuntarily jump in your seat and let out a squeal of fright.

Many people probably recognize this scenario if they have ever subjected themselves to the experience of watching a horror film or have had the pleasure of seeing it happen to someone they know. Horror entertainment is enormously popular and constantly growing as an industry. In fact, a Danish study from 2013 surveyed 500 respondents on if and in what context they enjoyed horror. They found that as many as 47 percent liked some type of horror entertainment, and only 21 percent of the sample did not enjoy horror at all. The remaining 32 percent enjoyed horror in only specific contexts - like watching a scary movie with friends,

but never alone (Johansen 2013 in Clasen 2017). These results have been replicated in a more recent study on an American sample with a thousand respondents, which indicates that this paradoxical attraction is a widespread phenomenon (Clasen et al. 2020).

But why this fascination? Why on earth do you voluntarily expose yourself to something that will most certainly frighten you? People who consume horror media generally expect and want to feel frightened, so what could you possibly gain from putting yourself through such negative emotions, such as nervousness, anxiety, and fear (Clasen et al. 2020, 217)? If you are curious about this phenomenon, known as the “the paradox of horror”, you are not alone (Scrivner et al. 2022, 1).

But have no fear, research into the phenomenon of “recreational fear” has some possible answers to the paradox of horror. Recreational fear is a broad term that encompasses deriving positive emotions, such as enjoyment, from engaging with a negative emotion, typically fear. Recreational fear does not only include conventional horror media and activities, such as watching horror movies and visiting haunted houses where scare actors skillfully assist your heart in attempting to climb out of your throat. It can also include watching a creepy true crime documentary or feeling the rush of a roller coaster in an amusement park. Additionally, recreational fear is present in all walks of life and at all ages. We’re not suggesting you start reading Stephen King to your children as bedtime stories, but when you play peek-a-boo with a baby or hide-and-seek with a 7-year-old, when you watch *Midsomer Murders* with your grandmother on weekends or enjoy the occasional slasher movie in the company of friends, you find yourself within the realm of recreational fear.

Each Halloween season since 2016, our lab has been collaborating with Dystopia Entertainment and has collected data from more than a thousand participants. Each year, we ask new questions that are derived from previous years’ research, conversations with participants, and collaborations with other researchers. When you come inside our research tent next to the haunt, you will most likely be presented with a questionnaire, and in some studies we have collected physiological measurements on the brave souls who dare enter the haunt. So, before sending off people to meet their makers - sorry, we mean *face their fears* - we put heart rate monitors on their chests and send them on their merry way. Each year, all these courageous people help us discover new things about recreational fear and we are enormously grateful to them.



Figure 2 Visitor at *Dystopia Haunted House* running from the infamous Mr. Piggy. Used with permission, copyright Tina Liv.

Why would anyone voluntarily seek out fear?

Engaging with recreational fear can provoke very real feelings of fear in us. It is as if whatever distance between us and the perceived danger diminishes – even if we know that the haunted house is not filled with real zombies but rather actors in makeup, that the gory images on the big screen are made with CGI, or that the serial killer from our favorite podcast is not actually standing next to us in our living room. But when we decide to engage in these activities, we are aware that we are not actually in danger, and this provides us with an opportunity to play with these intense feelings and have fun while also being scared - excuse our French - shitless.

Our Recreational Fear Lab director, Mathias Clasen, has a possible answer to the paradox of horror entertainment. He argues:

Horror fiction targets ancient and deeply conserved defense mechanisms in the brain; when it works, it works by activating supersensitive danger-detection circuits that have their roots far back in vertebrate evolution, circuits that evolved to help our ancestors survive in dangerous environments. Humans have an adaptive disposition to find pleasure in make-believe that allows them to experience negative emotions at high levels of intensity within a safe context. (Clasen 2017, 4)

So, we voluntarily engage in scary activities because we - in a safe context - are able to derive not only enjoyment from it, but learn about the possible dangers of the world we live in.

It is important to also consider the 32 percent from the study who said that they only liked horror entertainment in certain contexts, for instance in the company of trusted friends, and some people do not enjoy horror at all. So, we obviously also need to account for individual differences in the equation. Our studies from

Dystopia Haunted House indicate that everyone has their own so-called “sweet spot” of fear, where a person can experience just the right balance of pleasure and fear (Andersen et al. 2020). This “sweet spot” is visualized as the high point of an inverted-U-shaped relationship between the reported levels of fear and enjoyment in an individual, where the ideal amount of enjoyment is found when the activity is neither too boring nor too scary, but just right.



Figure 3

Everyone probably has their own individual “sweet spot” - yours is probably different from mine, but there is good news for those of us who want to have a horror movie night with friends: To help us achieve the perfect balance between fear and enjoyment, we have a multitude of coping strategies that can help us increase or decrease our fear levels (Clasen et al. 2019). If you want to downregulate your fear level, you can, for instance, lower the volume on your TV, laugh off the experience instead, or tell yourself that it isn’t real, that underneath all that killer-clown make-up is a normal guy who probably doesn’t want to rearrange your insides. However, if you want to maximize your fear you might do just the opposite: you might try to immerse yourself more fully in the experience, turning the lights down low, the sound way up, reacting to the scary stimuli by screaming or forcing yourself to keep your eyes open during the scariest parts. As you will learn in the following section, how you approach recreational fear activities might depend on what kind of horror fan you are.

Who in their right mind actually wants to be scared?

Three types of horror fans walk into a haunted house. Let's ask them about it, shall we? While horror entertainment is something that many people engage with, they do so in different ways. Recent research identifies three types of horror fans: the "adrenaline junkie", the "white knuckler", and the "dark cop" (Scrivner et al. 2022). The adrenaline junkie enjoys an intense recreational fear experience and likes feeling scared. The white knuckler, on the other hand, does not enjoy intense feelings of fear and therefore does not get the same immediate gratification as the adrenaline junkie during horror activities. White knucklers also report experiencing negative side-effects of horror activities, such as nightmares, after the scary activity.

Finally, we have the dark cop. While dark copers reported that horror movies remind them of negative aspects of the world, they also reported that watching scary movies helps them control negative emotions of anxiety and depression that might arise from thinking about the more difficult aspects of life. There is evidence to support that horror films could have psychological benefits for the dark copers and other horror fans, but there is still a lot of work to be done in this area of research (Scrivner et al. 2022, 8).

The different types of horror fans do not only experience the recreational fear activity differently, they also handle the experience differently. When engaging with recreational fear activities, people use different strategies to manage their emotions. The adrenaline junkies want to maximize emotional arousal to hit their sweet spot, which involves a higher fear level than for white knucklers. The white knuckler seeks to minimize emotional arousal to make their way through the experience with their sanity intact. While they use different strategies and enjoy these activities in different ways, both adrenaline junkies and white knucklers report similar levels of satisfaction and feel they gain something from the experience (Clasen et al. 2019, 69).

While doing haunted house research, we come across all three horror fans frequently. The adrenaline junkie is often pumped and ready to go, probably goading their friends in an attempt to make them feel even more scared. Not that everyone needs it: a white knuckler will often be all nerves, shaking, sometimes crying, and asking "Is it really scary?", while seemingly searching for the nearest escape route. Dark copers are less easily identified. Just like we need to explore the possible psychological benefits of recreational fear, the dark cop is the most recent category of horror fan which we need to research further.



Figure 4 Visitors caught on a scare cam at *Dystopia Haunted House*.

Is there anything to be gained from playing with fear? The answer might surprise you...

So far, we have identified three possible benefits for the different types of horror fans: 1) adrenaline junkies get immediate gratification during the activity, 2) white knucklers learn something about themselves, and also 3) experience personal development. Dark copers reap all three benefits. They get both immediate enjoyment from the activity and report feeling that they learned something about themselves and developed as a person. As previously mentioned, the epistemic benefits that the dark copers experience might go beyond that of the white knuckler, as they report that engaging with scary media helps them cope with negative emotions such as anxiety and depression.

Anyone engaging with recreational fear gets to practice their fear-management skills in a safe environment, which could have lasting positive effects: “There is adaptive value in exposing oneself to negative stimuli in order to identify and push one’s limits and achieve a sense of mastery” (Clasen et al. 2020, 227). Exposing yourself to threat simulation through recreational fear activities might help you prepare and deal with negative emotions in the real world. Gradual exposure can build up “a certain level of coping competence” (Clasen et al. 2020, 228). In fact, a study we published in 2021 showed that people who frequently enjoyed horror- and pandemic-centered films handled the COVID-19 pandemic better than people who did not: “People who engaged more frequently with frightening fictional phenomena, such as horror fans and the morbidly curious, displayed more robust psychological resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic” (Scrivner et al. 2021, 5). It seems that playing with fear in a safe space can teach you how to deal with those not-so-easily-manageable emotions and might cause less psychological distress in a stressful real-world situation, such as the recent pandemic.

The academic field of recreational fear is still young and there is so much that we have not found the answers to yet or even thought to ask, but our curiosity is only growing with each new thing we discover. We are currently very interested in furthering the research into what possible mental health benefits might be found in engaging recreational fear. Likewise, we would like to know more about how the “sweet spot of fear” varies from person to person and how individual differences might be explained. Lastly, we are curious to broaden our scope of participants and investigate what cultural variation there may be found in recreational fear across the globe.

While horror media has gotten a bad rap in the past and been believed to cause negative psychological effects in everyone who exposes themselves to it, more recent research - including the studies we just discussed - has shown that the truth is much more nuanced (Clasen 2021). In fact, recreational fear activities may have positive psychological benefits by helping develop psychological resilience and strategies for emotional regulation, when consumed in suitable contexts, in the right amount, and adhering to your individual “sweet spot of fear” (Søndergaard & Clasen, 2022). So, if you’re on the fence about dipping your toe into the pool of all things scary, consider starting out in the kiddie pool section and test the waters before you completely submerge yourself in the deep end of scary entertainment.

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