Blog

An Interview with a Vampire ... and a Zombie, and an Evil Scientist, and a Killer Clown, and a Deranged Pig Farmer

The RFL does a lot of work to learn about people who like to be scared, but this time we - the lab interns - visited Dystopia Haunted House to interview the actors to find out why THEY enjoy scaring others.

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The actors are in part what makes Dystopia Haunted House what it is - but who are they and why have they chosen to join Dystopia? Is it the community? An artistic outlet? The rush? Or simply the love of the game? Those are the questions we set out to answer when we, the lab interns, visited Dystopia in September 2024.



Figure 1

Dystopia is a haunted house in Vejle, Denmark. Every year, the team behind Dystopia, which consists of hundreds of volunteers, including actors, make-up artists, directors, security guards, coordinators, technicians, and more, gather to stage a truly remarkable horror event. Their aim is to turn a formerly abandoned fish factory on Mørkedalsvej (yes, it really is called Dark Valley Road - we couldn't make that up if we tried) into a multifaceted course full of different rooms, trials and horror setpieces designed to scare the pants off all those who enter.

Dystopia's guests can choose three different levels of scariness. Scary is the basic one, hardly any touching, no blood pouring and the actors know to not push their limits too much. Intense is the mid-way, the actors get more physical, electrocution and consumption of curious confections is on the table and you can certainly expect to be drenched in blood (not yours) and other unpleasant fluids. Lastly there is Extreme where the actors go all-out - expect your clothes to get ripped apart, expect no mercy from the actors, they might suck the air out of your lungs with a gasmask, and unlike the other two levels, participants cannot opt out of the Extreme experience.

While all of the haunt volunteers are crucial, the actors pose a particular puzzle: Why would a person volunteer to scare other people week after week? To get closer to this puzzle, we interviewed five actors at Dystopia.

Though typically known as 'actors', Dystopia's performers often go by 'scarers'. A distinction which turned out to be crucial, since according to their interviews, though acting and scaring are certainly adjacent, they are fundamentally different crafts. When preparing the questions for the interview we tried coming up with reasons for why one might want to be a scarer, considering primarily a love of high adrenaline activities or a love of acting.

However, when asked why they chose scaring over other adrenaline-pumping activities like extreme sports, the volunteers unanimously agreed that nothing compares to the unique thrill of scaring. Some emphasized the artistry involved, while others cited a love for acting and roleplay, with Dystopia offering a rare chance to perform for an interacting audience. None preferred other forms of acting; some found traditional theater less engaging, and others valued the specific thrill of scaring above all else. For one, the joy of scaring was the sole motivation.

From all of these answers it seems that scaring people is a distinct activity that cannot be categorized as solely a type of acting, risky play or high-adrenaline activity, as it 'scratches a unique itch' and has a specific craft to it.

When asked about preferred haunt level (Scary, Intense, or Extreme), one of the interviewees stated that he liked doing Intense more, because in Extreme the fear stops being about the uncertainty of what will happen, and becomes more of a fear of the violence that is guaranteed at that level, and consequently, there was less 'craft' to it.

Regardless of which level has more of the 'craft' of scaring in it, all interviewees pointed to unique skills they developed to assist them in the haunt. We presented the actors with a brief definition of 'the sweet spot of fear' - how every person has a different threshold for being scared and how enjoyment from fear looks like a bell curve. This means that each person has a specific level of fear that they find most enjoyable, and everything above or below that becomes increasingly less fun (for more on this awesome finding by the RFL click this link).

The scarers claim to know which guests are the most scared from their body language, and especially their eyes. The scarers all claimed that they either try not to focus on the easily scared ones too much, or that they only try to push them a little bit past their boundaries, so that everyone has a good time, but their other answers show that this is not always the result. Some scarers answered that in cases where they can't get what they would consider a good reaction from the entire group, they will focus on the ones who are more scared because the others would then enjoy watching their group members getting scared and the result would be an overall positive group experience, even at the possible expense of one member's individual experience.

So, what actually makes people volunteer to put in unpaid hours of labor for the sake of scaring others? When we inquired about how the actors ended up with Dystopia, there was a very clear pattern to be found – several actors had made their way to Dystopia after being recommended the place by friends or family. The sense of community was further expressed to play a large role in why the actors chose to return every year. For some of the actors it had even become part of a family bonding experience, where the entire family volunteered together, while others noted how they had found a sense of belonging and close friendships within the community.

While the community had a large impact in their return to Dystopia, another element was the interest in horror. Several scarers noted that they disliked horror before becoming a part of Dystopia; however, after participating as actors in the haunted house, they experienced an increasing interest in (and decreasing fear for) horror. The chance to peek behind the scenes and experience horror up close and in a safe environment impacted their relationship with the genre massively. However, this part of the interview showed a very clear distinction between participants: there were those who had loved horror all along and found Dystopia due to their already existing love for the genre, and there were those who disliked horror, but who had grown to love it – or at least tolerate it – after joining the crew. Nonetheless, some of the actors experienced that joining the crew had created a gateway to horror tolerance and that it had made them better equipped to deal with frightful content.

In conclusion, what started as an innocent question, ‘why do people enjoy scaring others?’, mutated into a topic worthy of a full-on investigation. One that not only showed a different side of the scarers that haunt the dreams of so many visitors, but also points to promising ventures of future research on the proper definition of scaring as an act as well as the importance of community as a means to overcome stress, anxiety and, of course, fear.

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