

Blog

Gremlins Revisited

In honor of Gremlins's 40th anniversary, the lab interns watched the horror classic to see whether lowering the film's age certificate was justified

Lab interns Clara Billum Have, Gili Chaim Sercarz, and Rikke Østergaard • 14 January 2025

Gremlins was given a 15 certificate by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) when it was released in 1984. At the time there were no 12 or 12A categories, so the choice was between PG or 15, with 15 eventually winning out.

However, in 2012 alongside its theatrical re-release, *Gremlins* was given a 12A certificate.

This new certificate, combined with the film's 40th anniversary, made it a hot topic at the 2024 "When Fear is Fun" workshop hosted by the Lab. In the workshop Dr. Cat Lester, Dr. Kate Egan, Mr. Michael Prescott and Mr. Steve Ryder presented a study surveying the reactions of both adults and children at a 40th anniversary screening of *Gremlins* to see if their reactions matched the decision to lower the rating. With the whole discussion concerning age rating in mind, paired with Dr. Ellen Sandseter's presentation on risky play (acts of play that carry a sensation of either physical or mental danger e.g. sliding down a hill at high speed, scary video games) and why it is beneficial for children, we decided to 'recreate the study' ourselves. We three interns sat down to watch the film in order to give our take on the changed age rating, as well as give our take on whether we would show this film to the children in our families as a form of 'risky play'.



Figure 1 The film *Gremlins* follows Billy, who has just received an early Christmas present from his father in the shape of a new pet - a mogwai. He inadvertently breaks the three important rules concerning his new pet and unwittingly unleashes a horde of unruly Gremlins on his small town.

Clara:

I watched *Gremlins* for the first time more than fifteen years ago. At that time, I was already fairly experienced in the field of horror and at the age of twelve, I regularly got together with a group of friends to watch the newest horror movies from Blockbuster. My memories of *Gremlins* were fairly blurred, remembering snippets that had made a profound impression on me, while other parts were long forgotten. The jump scares still managed to get me this time around, which perhaps proves that the jump scares weren't what terrified me the first time I watched it, because I had completely forgotten about them. Three scenes in particular had a lasting impact on me. One of the things I vividly remembered from the first time was the *Gremlins* entering through the cat door in Mrs. Deagle's house. Having grown up with cats (and therefore a cat door), this scene haunted my memories for quite a while after watching it as a child.

Additionally, the scene where the *Gremlins* are seen sneaking around the house, while Lynn Peltzer turns off the record player, also had a lasting impact on me. The slow build-up with the shadows of the *Gremlins* and the unknowing mom is just extremely unsettling. Last –

but definitely not least – is the scene where Billy’s mother fights off a Gremlin lurking in the Christmas tree. Throwing a Gremlin inside the Christmas tree is just plain evil, and it haunted me for quite some time.

In my opinion, the age-lowering is justified. While the movie does have scary elements, it still allows for a good kid-friendly introduction to the horror genre. However, children have varying tolerances for horror – just like adults – and while the age-lowering might be justified for some, other kids might not be ready for the amount of gore and unease that *Gremlins* introduces. Nonetheless, this is a great place to start if you are new to horror.

Gili:

I had never watched *Gremlins* as a kid, and truth be told I don’t think I would have minded it all that much. Sure it’s violent, but mostly it’s so over the top that it comes back around to being almost slapstick. There’s a lot of ‘gross-out humor’ in there, but for many kids that’s not exactly a deterrent. I didn’t really watch a lot of purposefully scary things as a kid, but I didn’t mind violence, gore and gross-out in my films or television, so I don’t think I’d have a problem seeing it. In fact, I have one or two nieces that I’d be happy to show this movie to knowing that they’ll enjoy it precisely because it contains so many gross segments. I also have one or two nieces and nephews that I will never ever show this film to because I know they won’t be able to stomach it past the halfway point. I think the age-lowering is very justified because it shows that while the movie can be enjoyed by a younger audience, some kids might still find it disturbing, so the parents may want to stick around.

Even though the PG *Gremlins* wouldn’t have bothered me, I still remember scenes from the G rated *The Secret of NIMH* that absolutely mortified me, while my friends didn’t mind them all that much. However, I specifically wanted to watch *The Secret of NIMH* for those scenes, I looked forward to being scared and felt proud when I ‘pushed through’ them. I think *Gremlins* can offer something in much the same vein as a film that can challenge kids to figure out what scares them, what doesn’t and where is their sweet spot. Worst case, there’s always the pause button.

Rikke:

As a horror aversionist, this was naturally the first time watching *Gremlins* for me, but in hindsight I do not think I needed to have waited this long to watch it. I think I could have mustered up the courage to watch it at maybe age 16.

Gremlins is not a terribly scary film for adults. The scariest parts, for me, were the instances of sheer stupidity by both adults and teenagers alike that were, of course, needed to propel the plot along. As a child, though, I suspect my feelings would have been entirely different. The chaos and unpredictability of the gremlins coupled with the violence would definitely have scared me. Moreover, the design of the gremlins, which I can appreciate now as being very cool, would have haunted my dreams. I was an easily frightened child. However, I am, and was at the time, well aware that I was behind my fellow children and teenagers in that regard. For that reason, I suspect that the newer rating is the more appropriate one. Moreover, I think children nowadays are more experienced in the horror genre than ever before, due to, amongst other things, video games and online content. Therefore I do not necessarily think that *Gremlins* would be as scary for children now as it was fifty years ago. However, for every horror-loving kid out there, past and present, there is also someone like me, which is why I think parental accompaniment to the age 12 certificate is nice. Parents are hopefully capable of making an educated guess on what their children can handle horror-wise.

In conclusion, although Clara was the only one of us to have seen the film before, she was the only one who was jumpscared. It was a lively experience watching *Gremlins* for us, the Fear Lab interns, 40 years after its initial release. It was not terribly scary for us; mostly we marvelled at the choices the characters made throughout the film.

As it turns out, our experiences lined up with current research on horror! Clara's experience matches Cantor and Wilson's 1984 study, which found that exposure to horror during middle childhood can result in lasting impressions due to the heightened sensitivity of this developmental stage. Not only that, Gili's noted difference between the effectiveness of different types of scare tactics matched Valkenburg and Cantor's (2000) research, which highlights individual differences in children's enjoyment and tolerance of frightening media. Lastly, Rikke's appreciation of the film's artistry underscores findings by Zillmann and Weaver (1996), who suggest that perceived aesthetic qualities can temper the fear response in older viewers.

All that said, we are nonetheless way too old to say anything definitively about 12-year-olds being able to stomach the film, but we have faith in them and the new age certificate. And if not in them, we have faith in their parents making the right choice for their individual children. For what it's worth, *Gremlins* receives the RFL Interns stamp of approval as a great addition to any spooky holiday.

Reference List

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