

Recreational fear: Why some of us like scary movies and haunted houses

[We] tend to seek out scary movies, horror novels, or haunted houses—and not just during the Halloween season. This tendency has been dubbed “recreational fear” in the academic literature: a “mixed emotional experience of fear and enjoyment.” But the scare factor has to be just right in order to achieve that mixed state, according to [a new paper](#).

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“The hypothesis is that there’s a sweet spot between too much fear and not enough fear, between predictability and unpredictability, where you feel you have a certain amount of control over the situation, but there’s still a degree of unpredictability,” [researcher Mathias] Clasen told Ars last year. And the results largely support that hypothesis. When Clasen’s team plotted the relationship between levels of self-reported fear and enjoyment by participants in [a haunted house], the data showed an inverted U-shape—a Goldilocks zone for maximum enjoyment. There was a similar U-shaped trend in the data for participants’ heart-rate signatures.

“This is strikingly similar to what scientists have found to characterize human play,” said [researcher Marc Malmdorf] [Andersen](#). “We know, for instance, that curiosity is often aroused when individuals have their expectations violated to a just-right degree, and several accounts of play stress the importance of just-right doses of uncertainty and surprise for explaining why play feels enjoyable.”

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