

# The fear you experience playing video games is real, and you enjoy it, study finds

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Teresa Lynch, Indiana University. Credit: Indiana University

With the advent of video games, a frequently asked question has been

whether we get as engrossed in them emotionally as we do when we see a scary movie. The answer is yes and in new ways, according to new research by faculty in Indiana University's Media School.

And many game players enjoy the fear caused by the zombies, disfigured humans and darkness they often encounter, the researchers found.

Working with Assistant Professor Nicole Martins, Ph.D. student Teresa Lynch surveyed online 269 college students in 2013 about their experiences with popular video games such as "Resident Evil," "Call of Duty" and "Amnesia: The Dark Descent."

Lynch and Martins followed a method that has been used in studying fear reactions to non-interactive media, such as movies and television programs. They wanted to assess whether the fear felt while playing video games was the same as with movies and shows. They wanted to know if we get as involved in the content in a way that heightens the fear experience.

Compared to the attention given to violence in similar research studies, game-inducing fear in video games has hardly received consideration. This study provides the first identification of features specific to video games that affect fright experiences and insight into what fear reactions people experience with games.

Their findings appear in the latest edition of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*.

"It was interesting to see how the fright reactions that people had, how the emotional experiences that they were having, differed from those reported with non-interactive media," Lynch said. "There a lot more of these anxious feelings ... and an enjoyment of that fear."

Close to half of those surveyed - 44.1 percent - said they enjoyed feeling scared.

"That answers one part of the question of why do people continue to expose themselves to these aversive stimuli, why do they continue to expose themselves to these things that they know are going to cause an unpleasant emotional experience. It's because to some degree, in some way, they're getting pleasure out of it," she said.

"A few people did share in open-ended reports they enjoyed the feeling of surviving the experience."

Martins noted that their study isn't an example of where research is used to "damn" the gaming industry. It merely provides better understanding as to "why people play the games."

"They get some enjoyment out of it. They like the feeling of being scared," Martins said. "Maybe the enjoyment comes from the fact that you're getting this rush, knowing that no harm is really going to come to you."

The researchers feel that part of the enjoyment comes from talking about these experiences. While surveyed, respondents had the opportunity to forego a question about whether they had experienced fear while playing video games. Most were willing to share an example and many provided more than one experience.

"I think we share fear [experiences](#) because it is something that connects us on a very primal level," said Lynch, who noted that she is a "gamer."

## **Men and women experienced video game fear similarly**

Men reported enjoying and playing more frightening games than women. But, notably, no differences emerged in how frequently the sexes experienced fear. They had the same kind of fear.

"People often play games alone... leaving out dynamics surrounding gender roles. Our findings suggest that fearful or brave behavior during a fear-evoking experience may be a societal phenomenon," the authors wrote. "Perhaps females do not experience fear with more frequency, but feel required to admit so under pressure."

"Men get scared and that's OK," Martins said.

Most reported game titles that caused fearful reactions included "Resident Evil," with its descriptions of darkness, zombies and being surprised as causes of fright, "Amnesia: The Dark Descent," "Dead Space" and the "Silent Hill" series. However, many reported fear when using the alternative game mode of "zombies" when playing "Call of Duty."

"We were somewhat surprised to see 'Amnesia' reported so frequently," Lynch said. "Despite its reputation as one of the most frightening games ever created, it wasn't as well known in gaming at the time we surveyed these participants." The researchers also noted that "Amnesia" is only playable on personal computers and not available on any of the [video game](#) consoles.

Although survival horror comprised more than half of the games cited as causing fear, many other games cited did not come from this genre. For example, shooter games comprised more than a third of those reported.

Games presented in the first-person perspective outnumbered those presented in the third-person.

"Interactivity emerged as the most spontaneously reported cause of fear," Lynch and Martins wrote. "Multiple participants spontaneously reported feeling helpless, hunted and overwhelmed as causing fear. These interactive elements transformed the experience into one where control—or loss of control—seemed involved in the [fear](#) experience."

Darkness, disfigured humans, zombies and the unknown were most frequently factors mentioned, while natural disasters, the weather, fantasy animals and even vampires were among those cited least frequently.

**More information:** *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, [www.tandfonline.com/loi/hbem20#.VZF0cOdbJkA](http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hbem20#.VZF0cOdbJkA)

Provided by Indiana University

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