

Spook me, please: What Psychology tells us about the appeal of Halloween

From the Research Digest in 2014, guest blogger Mathias Clasen.



It's the time of year, at least in our part of the world, when darkness encroaches on us—literally and metaphorically. The symbols and agents of darkness dominate Halloween decorations everywhere, and Halloween is growing in popularity across Europe and in the US. According to the National Retail Federation, US Halloween spending [now exceeds \\$7 billion](#). In the UK, [Halloween is worth about £330 million](#).

Why is this Americanised version of the ancient pagan festival so successful? Is it merely another instance of the McDonaldisation of culture, the increasing hegemony of American commercial culture, explicable in terms of market mechanisms alone? No. The dread scenarios evoked by the paraphernalia of Halloween are deeply fascinating to a prey species such as *Homo sapiens*. Ghouls, zombies, demons, giant spiders, and horrors hidden in darkness all engage evolutionarily ancient survival mechanisms—and all figure prominently in the scenography of horror films and in Halloween decorations. We seem to love the good thrill of a safe scare, and Halloween provides plenty of those.

Horror films, horror monsters, and the iconography of Halloween are culturally successful because they are well-adapted to engage evolved [danger-management adaptations](#). We know that existence for our prehistoric ancestors was precarious. The threat of predation has been very real and very serious for hundreds of millions of years. As the

anthropologist Lynn Isbell [has shown](#), mammals and reptiles have been engaged in a lethal co-evolutionary arms race for a hundred million years or more, and that arms race has profoundly shaped our genome. A hard-wired, adaptive tendency to easily acquire fear of snakes explains the prevalence of snake phobias today, even in snake-less ecologies.

Similarly, the threat posed by poisonous spiders in prehistoric environments has left an eight-legged imprint in human DNA, an imprint that is expressed as a tendency to easily acquire fear of spiders. We are, at the very least, likely to pay close attention if a saucer-sized arthropod scuttles out from under the couch. Spiders engage attention—as [recent research documented](#), spiders override inattentive blindness, our tendency to overlook even striking stimuli in peripheral awareness when we're engaged in a cognitively taxing task. [Another study](#) claimed that five-month-old infants pay closer attention to schematic representations of spiders than to representations that consist of the same graphic elements but do not look like spiders. Spiders are inherently attention-demanding and, to most people, gross and a little scary, and that explains why they feature so prominently in Halloween iconography. They simply perform the functions of engaging attention and eliciting a shudder well.

Likewise, the usual suspects in the horror genre's antagonistic line-up—from supernatural monsters via rotting zombies to homicidal maniacs in masks—all [connect squarely with defensive psychological adaptations that arose over evolutionary time](#) in response to dangers in the environment, from the threat posed by hostile conspecifics and lethal pathogens to the bite of hungry carnivores. Although there were no child-eating clowns in prehistoric environments, a character like Pennywise the Dancing Clown has achieved pop-cultural infamy because it effectively targets danger-management mechanisms in human cognitive architecture.

The dangers of pre-historical existence have left deep grooves in human nature. [The creatures and situations we typically fear](#)—spiders, snakes, the dark, heights, confined spaces, and so on—are the same creatures and situations that posed real dangers to our evolutionary ancestors, even though they play little role in modern-day mortality statistics in the West. We should be afraid of driving too fast in a car, of smoking cigarettes, of eating unsaturated fats, and so on. Our Halloween decorations should feature such elements prominently, but they don't. Why? Because humans evolved to [swiftly detect](#), respond to, and develop phobias of stimuli that posed a threat over thousands of generations. The dangers posed by fatty acids and cigarettes are evolutionarily novel and have left no impression in human DNA. When we thrill to supernatural monsters and giant spiders, we are thrilling to the ghosts of dangers past, ghosts that persist in the human central nervous system despite relaxed selection pressures.

Of course the scary costumes and props of Halloween are symbolic and don't pose any real threat; they provide safe thrills, our love for which has roots deep in our mammalian heritage. Other mammalian infants [also find great pleasure in forms of play](#) that allow them to get experience with life-threatening situations in a safe context. Children's play often revolves around simulating dangerous situations. Witness an infant responding enthusiastically to a game of peek-a-boo, the most primal of horror situations where the primary caretaker disappears from the infant's field of vision (and thus its world) for a few stress-inducing seconds ... only to reappear suddenly, causing a mild startle reaction. Or

witness any kid delightedly simulating being chased by a daddy- or a mommy-monster in a session of chase play or hide-and-peek. Such activities serve the adaptive functions of giving children experience with evasion techniques, they build locomotor skills and muscle tone, and they allow the children to get experience with their own cognitive and emotional responses to situations that feel dangerous but aren't. Such experience could become vital later in life, when they face truly dangerous situations or when they have to face and overcome their own fear.

Halloween has the potential to bring us into contact with our evolutionary heritage by confronting us with reflections of evolutionarily ancient, fear-inducing stimuli. Halloween is here to stay, so we might as well embrace it. When darkness falls, the monsters stir. That's true of prehistory no less than of horror films—and on the last day of dark October, they all come out to play.

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