



Malcolm Burt

## The science behind why we love terrifying ourselves on rollercoasters

The paradox that fuels a \$12 billion industry.

PETER DOCKRILL 22 JAN 2016



If you think about it for a second, rollercoasters make almost no sense. People plan expensive holidays around attending crowded theme parks where they proceed to line up for hours on end – all to spend maybe a minute or so screaming in absolute, upside-down terror. Why do we do this to ourselves?

According to Malcolm Burt, a researcher at the [Queensland University of Technology \(QUT\)](#) in Australia, it's because people have an emotional compulsion for thrill rides and the sense of controlled fear they provide.

Burt's recently completed Masters project was perhaps the sweetest postgrad research gig of all time. He travelled the US and Asia, visiting as many theme parks as he could, riding rollercoasters and thrill rides on his merry way.

When not doing corkscrews and loop-de-loops, he interviewed theme park managers, psychologists, and rollercoaster enthusiasts about why we love to terrify ourselves on these insane machines, using their perspectives to help construct his thesis and [this fascinating documentary](#), which you can watch in its entirety on YouTube.

"It very quickly became obvious that roller coasters exist because we have a strong psychological need for them, and of course they make a lot of money for theme park owners," [says Burt](#). "So the next question became: why do we have such a psychological need for them?"

According to Burt's hypothesis, the answer has to do with the civilised world in which we live – a moderate, sheltered environment that may have become a little too benign for our needs as an animal species.

"The world has changed enormously since the Industrial Revolution but, from a biological perspective, we haven't," [Burt says](#). "We aren't at immediate risk every day any more – we actually live in a fairly lazy, consumerist society, but we still need a way to stay in touch with our primal selves. Coasters and other thrill rides are one way of maintaining a 'hands on' form of release, an adrenaline rush without being in any danger."

Burt also suggests that despite the costs and time involved with visiting theme parks, compared to more intense adventure-seeking pursuits, thrill rides provide a practical and accessible outlet – perhaps in much the same way as [virtual reality experiences](#) and the scares that come with [watching horror movies](#).

"In the Western world we have very limited amounts of paid leisure – most of us don't have the time, money or skills to get the genuine release from doing something extreme like climbing Mount Everest," [he says](#). "But we can easily head to the theme park and scare ourselves senseless, as the biology of the thrill you get from a scary coaster and that of the peak experience when climbing a mountain is almost identical."

You can find out more about [Burt's research here](#), and be sure to check out the [full documentary](#) below:



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