The Cycle of Tension and Release in Action Games and Horror Games.

By Rory McLean

Abstract:

This paper discusses and explores what is known as a Cycle of Tension and Release, and how they are used in Horror and Action games. We have looked at what exactly is Tension and Release, how to recognise when this cycle is being used and also each game's mechanics and aesthetics to see how they are used to enhance a cycle of Tension and Release and to what effect on a player. Alongside this, this paper has explored the different aspects of this cycle such as the nature of a threat to the player, vulnerability and nature of failure and how they are used to enhance this cycle.

Intro:

Game Designers have been using various methods and techniques to keep their audience engaged and entertained when playing video games. One such tool is known as the Cycle of Tension and Release. This is a method of raising the tension the player experiences when playing to help raise the player's stress levels, excitement, anticipation or even fear in cases of Horror games. And finally releasing that tension at critical parts of the game to give off an effect such as relaxation and time to prepare or shock and panic depending on the desired effect. This paper will examine this Cycle of Tension and Release in both Horror games and Action games. Exploring how this cycle is used differently in each genre and to what effect. Alongside this, different aspects of this cycle will be explored such as the nature of the player feeling vulnerable, nature of a threat to the player and the aesthetics of each genera and how it helps with the game's cycle of Tension and Release.

What Is Tension in Gameplay? :

Tension in games can be described as the build-up of stress, strain on a player or even build-up of events leading to a crescendo. This is done in various different ways in different genres of games. For Horror games like *Resident Evil Remake* (Capcom, 2002) Tension is experienced when the player is unable to see around the next corner due to fixed camera angles, preventing the player from seeing if a monster lies ahead. Tension is narrowly avoiding a Zombie by running around it while using clunky Tank Controls. In the case of Action Games like *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001), Tension can be experienced when the player is first given their Pistol, readying them for the first combat of the game. All of these are instances of Tension being built which in turn puts minor restraints around the player to make them feel more vulnerable to the game's monsters and dangers and potentially more frightened for the game's next scare or encounter.

What is Release? :

Release in games is when the aforementioned Tension is dispersed from the scene and the player is given a moment to relax, gather their thoughts and plan for the next encounter. Much like Tension, Release is used to different effects in different genres of games. In Action games, Release can typically be experienced right after a combat section, or in-between big set pieces. It is the feeling the player gets when they are no longer in

Figure 1- Silent Hill 2 (2001) James finding the flashlight

danger. In Bernard Perron's book *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine* (Perron, 2012 p. 3), Perron describes his first moments with *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001) and how he felt as a player after reaching safety in an environment which built up the Tension:

>*"I've never been as terrified as the moment I walked down the dark corridor on the second floor of the Wood Side Apartments and began to hear the radio make its static noise… I finally got to Room 205, where I found Mary's dress with the flashlight. This was such a great relief."*

This is a classic example of the build-up of Tension and its Release. The player was in a situation which built the Tension of the scene and once they reached a safe room with a flashlight, the player experienced release. This can also be experienced when the player finds ammunition or health items to help them through the game.

However this is where the two genres use release differently. With Action games the Tension that was experienced is fully released. Tension is no longer being raised, the player can feel completely safe from danger and stress. However the difference with Horror games is tension is never fully released. With Horror games like *Alien: Isolation* (Sega, 2014) although the player may have successfully hidden from the monster, that monster is not gone from the game unlike enemies in an Action game, it is still lurking around another corner or waiting to jump out at the player. This sense of foreboding or scenes of dread is why a Horror games Tension is never fully released.

How do you Recognise Tension and Release? :

Tension is not just something experienced through a game's mechanics, it can also be experienced through the games aesthetics; the visual and audio design, the game's environments and storytelling. An excellent example of this is during a beginning section of *Resident Evil Remake* (Capcom, 2002). Near the beginning of the original game the player must walk through a hallway in which Zombie Dogs jump through the windows and attack the player. Due to this section being well known to

Figure 2- Resident Evil Remake (2002) Jill being attacked by dogs

the game's fans, when the remake for the game was made the creators played with this section. As the player enters this hallway (if they are an experienced player of the original) they are expecting the dogs to jump through the window and attack them. Instead nothing happens, the player is free to walk through. This builds up the Tension of the scene, forcing the player to become uneased, making them wonder why the dogs never attacked them. This happens again when the player goes through the same hallway, they expect for the dogs to jump through and attack but instead a large crash is heard against the window as a dog has attempted to jump through further building the Tension, further making the player uneasy. When finally after another few more times through the same hallway do the dogs jump through and attack. Due to the Tension of the scene being built upon constantly without any form of Release, when it finally is released it has a much bigger effect on the player, possibly making them panic and run for the door or fumble with the controls as they try to fight back. This was a brilliant change of pace for the game's remake, playing off existing players' knowledge of the game and delivering an effective cycle of Tension and Release. As mentioned with Horror games Tension is never truly released and this scene brilliantly demonstrates this especially with existing fans as they now have no idea what to expect from the game. They are now constantly on edge and unsure where the next threat will come from and thus not fully releasing the game's Tension.

In Bernard Perron's paper *Sign of a Threat: The Effects of warning in Survival Horror games* (Perron, 2004). Perron makes an accurate comparison to Alfred Hitchcock and the rising of suspense. Perron states that:

"As in the well-known example of Alfred Hitchcock, a bomb that suddenly explodes under the table where two people are having an innocent conversation will surprise the spectator for only few seconds at the very moment of the explosion. However, if this spectator is made aware that the bomb is going to explode at any minute, he will participate in the scene and feel suspense for the whole time preceding the explosion".

This example runs parallel with the Dogs coming through the window in *Resident Evil Remake*. The game designers first show a dog attempting to crash through the window and failing, this builds up the suspense of the scene, the Tension. The player no longer knows when the dogs will crash through and attack, and thus constantly builds the tension of the scene until its inevitable release.

Vulnerability:

Vulnerability is treated very differently in Action games compared to Horror. Typically in Action games the player is never without a weapon to defend themselves, this could be a side arm with unlimited ammo or a melee attack if they have no ammo left. A threat can always be tackled with some means of defence. Alongside this a lot of Action games incorporate regenerating health when the player is not damaged for some time allowing them a chance to get back into the action. The player is never truly vulnerable. This is not the case in most Horror games.

A key part of the cycle of Tension and Release with Horror games is making the player feel vulnerable. Taking *Resident Evil Remake* (Capcom, 2002) as an example again the player is constantly made to feel vulnerable with the games use of player controls, consumable items and camera angles. *Resident Evil* makes use of "Tank Controls" a form of player controls that restricts the player's movement by only allowing them to move forward in the direction the player is facing. What this means is; if the player wants to turn and flee from a monster they must spin their character around fully instead of typical controls where the player can simply hold down the control stick to move in that direction.

This works hand in hand with the game's fixed camera angles which prevents the player from having control over the camera but rather keeps the view stationary. With these two mechanics combined the player is forced to feel vulnerable by not knowing what might lurk around the next corner and if there is something, fleeing from the monster is made to be much more difficult.

As stated Action games typically allow the player the ability to continue fighting when they have little to no ammo left, Horror games don't usually allow this. Again with *Resident Evil*, the game makes use of limited ammo; the game has a finite amount of ammo for the player to use and once it is gone the player has no means of defence against the monsters.

All three of these mechanics combined make the player feel vulnerable to being attacked and overwhelmed by monsters which works excellently with the game's cycle of Tension and Release. By making the player feel constantly vulnerable, the Tension is being constantly raised, it makes the player feel on edge, makes them wonder if they can make it to the next safe room with only five bullets, little health and three zombies in the way. It raises the Tension to near snapping point and finally releases that Tension when a new monster appears from nowhere, panicking the player into using the last of their ammo, or the player reaching the safe room without taking damage but knowing that the second they leave the monster will pounce.

Nature of Threat:

Much like vulnerability, Action games and Horror games treat a threat to the player very differently. Typically in Horror games the threat is consistent. It is the same monster that stalks you through the halls throughout the game, it has the same weaknesses, strengths and abilities. The player knows how to deal with it, knows when to fight and when to hide. With Action games the threat is constantly evolving to give the player a greater challenge and keep them engaged. For example at the beginning of the Action game *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) the player might only be faced with small Grunts with side arms, but as the player progresses they are pitted against Elites which have a lot more health and deal out more damage. The threat is progressively getting stronger with latter parts of the game putting the player against Tanks, multiple enemy types at the same time and in large numbers. The Tension of the game is building higher and higher with each new threat, raising the stakes, making victory harder and harder to achieve. However as stated before, Action games release this Tension after each successful combat section, the player is given a chance to rest, gather health and ammo to prepare them for the next fight. The threat has disappeared, the player is safe, and this on the other hand may not be the case in Horror games. The threat may still lurk around the next corner waiting to attack the player when they believe they are safe.

Using *Alien: Isolation* (Sega, 2014) as an example for the nature of a threat and player vulnerability. The primary antagonist for the game is the Alien in question, it cannot be killed or hurt, and the player can only scare it away temporarily or hide. The player has various ways to detect the Alien is nearby, such as an audible cue from the Alien itself, and a motion detector. With the motion detector, the device will beep louder and faster the closer the Alien is to the player which builds
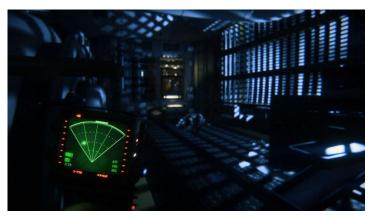

Figure 3- Alien Isolation (2014) Tracking the Alien with a Motion Tracker

the Tension higher with each beep. With the appearance of the Alien, the Tension begins to build faster, the player must find a place to hide lest they be caught and killed. This makes the player feel more and more vulnerable as the Alien gets closer, knowing they can only scare it away or hide. Once the Alien leaves the scene, the Tension is released giving the player a chance to progress, however as mentioned with Horror games, the Tension is not fully released. The threat of the Alien is still present, which helps keep the player on edge and easier to scare.

Nature of Failure:

Failure can take many forms in video games, failure can occur when an objective has not been achieved or even when the player takes damage. However, the type of failure which works best to help demonstrate a Cycle of Tension and Release is a game over or a player death. When the player is killed in an Action game, the time it takes for the player to reach the same position they died at is very small. This is due to many Action games making use of check points. For example if the player was to die in a room full of enemies, they may only be put back to a position right outside that room and are quickly put back into the action.

The death of the player has resulted in a release of Tension, the player is no longer in danger and this allows them to better prepare for the fight. This is also the case in Horror games, although it has been stated in this paper that Action games fully release Tension and Horror games do not, this is a rare instance that the genres share. However, what is different is the build-up of Tension leading to a player's death (a failure) and after they re-spawn/ try again.

Most Horror games make use of save points, specific places in the game where progress can be saved. In *Resident Evil Remake* (Capcom, 2002) this is done through the use of Typewriters which the player can interact with to save their progress. What this means is when the player dies or reloads their save they are put back to that Typewriter, losing all progress they would have made before saving their progress. This can allow for great amounts of Tension to be built in Horror games when dealing with potential failure. For example, if the player has made significant progress in the game but has very little health left and wishes to save their game, the Tension in the game is increased significantly. Will the player be able to make it to a Typewriter and save their progress, or will they be killed and all the progress they have made be lost? This makes a failure in Horror games much more stressful and Tension filled than a failure in Action games.

Where a failure in an Action game is a temporary nuisance and only takes you out of the game for a few seconds, a failure in a Horror game can result in hours' worth of progress being lost if the player is not careful. This works hand in hand with the aforementioned mechanics most present in Horror games such as Tank Controls, Fixed Camera angles and limited items.

For example, the player has made significant progress in the game but has not saved recently, they now need to find a Typewriter to save their game; the Tension begins to build. Walking through the mansion of *Resident Evil* with clunky Tank Controls makes avoiding enemy attacks much more difficult. With each attack hitting the player the Tension rises further. While fleeing from the monster they need to navigate around a corner which they cannot see around due to the camera angles, they run head first into another monster and take more damage further building the Tension. Making the player uneasy, stressed and frightened that all their progress will be lost. When at last the player reaches a safe room with very little health, they are relieved briefly as the Tension from the scene lowers but then the horror dawns on them. They are out of Ink Ribbons (The item used to save their game when used with a Typewriter). The player now has to search the mansion for this limited item to save their progress, the Tension is now at near snapping point, the threat of failure is at its maximum point. If they die, all their hard work will be lost. And then one small mistake causes the player to die, and all their progress is lost and the Tension is fully released.

Although Tension in both Horror and Action games is fully released in the event of a player death, the prior knowledge of what lies ahead in a Horror game can work to great effect when raising up the Tension again. Perron in his paper, *Sign of a threat: The effect of warning systems in survival horror games* (Perron, 2004) he mentions a study in which two groups of subjects were shown a "made-for-television" horror movie. The study was to test the effects of forewarning of forthcoming events in the film to see if prior knowledge about upcoming frightening events would reduce its emotional impact. One group was given no prior knowledge and one group was. The results of the test showed as Perron puts it:

"Subjects who were given prior knowledge of upcoming frightening events reported more intense fright and upset in response to the movie than did those who had no forewarning"

This prior knowledge to upcoming events mentioned works hand in hand with the nature of a failure in games. Since the player knows what is coming next (after a failure and then reloading the game) and what monsters they have to face, the player's stress levels could increase, making them more conscious of a potential failure and thus raises the Tension further.

As stated, the lead up to a player needing to save their progress can be a great source of building Tension, but the act of saving one's progress is also a great source of release from Tension. Dr William Huber mentions in his paper "Catch and Release: Ludological Dynamics in Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly" (Huber, 2010):

"Not only do player's use save-points in the ways we might expect… but menus are also called up to freeze play to take a break, as a pause mechanism. These patterns of saving and pausing are the player's way of managing the tempos of the game experience in the interstices between intense and semiorically dese sequences of play."

What Dr Huber is describing is using menus in a game or even saving and quitting a game as a means of release from Tension. It is a common trend with Horror games that a jump scare can often result in the player pausing their game to help release the tension of a scene and give them a chance to gather their thoughts and plan their next moves. This as described previously in this paper is a prime use for release, the chance to gather one's thoughts, relax and rest.

Aesthetic:

We've talked a lot about the mechanics in games and how they can build and release Tension, but there has not been much discussion on a game's Aesthetics and how important they are for a game's Cycle of Tension and Release, alongside this let's take a closer look at Action games than Horror. As mentioned the raising of Tension can be used for more than leading to a scare or make the player feel stressed, Tension can be used to "pump up" the player, make them feel

Figure 4- Halo 2 Master Chief fighting through covenant civil war

invincible and powerful. A perfect example of this comes from *Halo 2* (Bungie, 2004) in its eleventh level "Gravemind", at this part of the game the hero "Masterchief" (the player character) finds himself in the middle of a civil war between the enemy faction "The Covenant". This conflict has been building up throughout the game, raising the Tension of the story, raising the stakes for humanity to survive and increasing the odds against the player. This conflict comes to an explosive crescendo when the two factions clash with "Masterchief" stuck in the middle as one of the game's few copyrighted rock songs starts to play.

All of these aesthetic elements combined raises the tension in the scene, making the player feel more powerful than ever. This is also a classic example of a narrative's flow in an Action game and by extension Tension. With each set piece or action sequence in the game the Tension is built higher and higher with moments of rest in-between these sequences (release), increasing the stakes and sense of satisfaction when the player is triumphant.

This build-up of tension in a game's narrative is excellently explained in the web series *Extra Credits* with their episode on Pacing (Portnow, 2012). They explain that in order to keep an audience engaged with an action oriented narrative there must be a level of engagement that is progressively increased with each action sequence (Tension) with time to relax between these sections (release). They go onto explain that if the audience is given none-stop action (no release from tension) the audience can become bored or not engaged with the next action sequence as they have been given no time to reflect or relax.

Contributing editor of Wired.com Clive Thompson wrote an article titled, "Halo 3: How Microsoft Labs invented a new Science of play" (Thompson, 2007). In the article Thompson describes Bungie's experience with keeping player engagement. Thompson states:

> *"Early on, the Bungie crew came up with a mantra that would eventually guide all aspects of Halo gameplay: "30 seconds of fun." The idea was to have Halo repeatedly immerse players in hectic battles that would last for half a minute – just long enough to create heart-thumping chaos and risk of death – before offering a respite."*

This "*30 seconds of fun*" that Bungie is using to keep players engaged is a cycle of Tension and Release. Immersing players in combats raise the tension of the scene to offer them a fun and enjoyable experience with their "*offering a respite*" being the release from Tension.

Conclusion:

Throughout this paper, we have explored where the Cycle of Tension and Release has been used to great effect in Horror and Action games. Through these examples we can better understand how to create this cycle of Tension and Release in other media within the same genre and genres outside of it. When creating a game or even a film it would be very beneficial to examine when tension is being raised in a scene and when it is most appropriate to release that tension and what desired effect you are trying to achieve. Whether it is to surprise or scare your audience in the case of Horror or build up and excite them in the case of Action, using this cycle can benefit the experience a user has towards a play experience.

I personally believe that this Cycle can be used to great effect when creating works of fiction. It can help achieve great levels of suspense, dread or even empowerment. As my career progresses I will consider the Cycle of Tension and Release when I am creating my own projects.

References:

Alien: Isolation (2014) *Alien Isolation* [illus]. Available at: https://uk.gamesplanet.com/game/alien-isolation-the-collection-steam-key--1096-10 (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Bernard Perron. (2012) *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine*. University of Michigan Press. Available from: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/idx/l/lvg/11053908.0001.001/1:2/--silent-hill-the-terror-engine?g=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Bernard Perron. (2004) *Sign of a Threat: The Effects of Warning Systems in Survival Horror Games* pp. 1 – 9. Available from: http://ludicine.ca/sites/ludicine.ca/files/Perron_Cosign_2004.pdf. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Capcom (2002) *Resident Evil* [Computer Game]. Capcom.

Clive Thompson. (2007) *Halo 3: How Microsoft Labs Invented a new science of play*. Available from: https://www.wired.com/2007/08/ff-halo-2/?currentPage=all. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Extra Credits. 2012. *Pacing – How Games Keep Things Exciting – Extra Credits*. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LScL4CWe5E [Accessed 09 November 2017].

Halo 2 (2004) *Halo 2* [illus]. Available at: https://i.ytimg.com/vi/FWq0C8OIBlg/maxresdefault.jpg (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo (2001) *Silent Hill 2* [Computer Game]. Konami.

Microsoft Games Studio. (2001) *Halo: Combat Evolved* [Computer Game]. Microsoft Games Studio.

Microsoft Games Studio. (2004) *Halo 2* [Computer Game]. Microsoft Games Studio.

Resident Evil (2002) *Resident Evil* [illus.]. Available at:

http://www.thedailygamepad.com/the-18-scariest-shinji-mikami-moments-that-made-us-soil-our-shorts/ (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Saga (2014) *Alien: Isolation* [Computer Game]. Sega

Silent Hill 2 (2001) *Silent Hill 2* [illus.]. Available at:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/silent/images/6/6f/James_obtaining_the_flashlight.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150325095038 (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

William Huber. (2010) *Catch and Release: Ludological Dynamics in Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly*. University of California. Available from:

http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/viewArticle/91. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Bibliography:

Alien: Isolation (2014) *Alien Isolation* [illus]. Available at: https://uk.gamesplanet.com/game/alien-isolation-the-collection-steam-key--1096-10 (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Bernard Perron. (2012) *Silent Hill: The Terror Engine.* University of Michigan Press. Available from: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/idx/l/lvg/11053908.0001.001/1:2/--silent-hill-the-terror-engine?g=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Bernard Perron. (2004) *Sign of a Threat: The Effects of Warning Systems in Survival Horror Games* pp. 1 – 9. Available from: http://ludicine.ca/sites/ludicine.ca/files/Perron_Cosign_2004.pdf. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Bycer, J. N/A. *The Balancing Act of Tension in Horror Game Design.* Available from: http://game-wisdom.com/critical/tension-horror-game-design [Accessed 9 October 2017].

Capcom (2002) *Resident Evil* [Computer Game]. Capcom.

Capcom (2005) *Resident Evil 4.* [Computer Game]. Capcom.

Clive Thompson. (2007) *Halo 3: How Microsoft Labs Invented a new science of play*. Available from: https://www.wired.com/2007/08/ff-halo-2/?currentPage=all. [Accessed 24 November 2017].

Electronic Arts (2008). *Dead Space* [Computer Game]. Electronic Arts.

Electronic Arts. (2013) *Dead Space 3.* [Computer Game]. Electronic Arts.

Extra Credits. 2012. *Pacing – How Games Keep Things Exciting – Extra Credits*. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LScL4CWe5E [Accessed 09 November 2017].

Extra Credits. (2015). *Places of Horror – The Secrets of Scary Settings – Extra Credits.* [Online Video]. 28 October 2015. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weTznlEkzfk [Accessed: 9 October 2017].

Extra Credits. (2014). *Shiver with Anticipation – How Horror Games Create Tension Cycles – Extra Credits.* [Online Video]. 5 November 2014. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyiAR2BXtKU [Accessed: 9 October 2017].

Halo 2 (2004) *Halo 2* [illus]. Available at: https://i.ytimg.com/vi/FWq0C8OIBlg/maxresdefault.jpg (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo (2001) *Silent Hill 2* [Computer Game]. Konami.

Microsoft Games Studio. (2001) *Halo: Combat Evolved* [Computer Game]. Microsoft Games Studio.

Microsoft Games Studio. (2004) *Halo 2* [Computer Game]. Microsoft Games Studio.

Microsoft Game Studios. (2007) *Halo 3.* [Computer Game]. Microsoft Game Studios.

Nintendo *(2002). Eternal Darkness.*[Computer Game]. Nintendo.

Pruett, C. 2015. *The Mechanics of Tension.* Available from: https://gamedevdaily.io/the-mechanics-of-tension-5d7f427762d9 [Accessed: 9 October 2017].

Pruett, C. 2017. *Chris's Survival Horror Quest.* Available from: http://horror.dreamdawn.com/ [Accessed 9 October 2017].

Resident Evil (2002) *Resident Evil* [illus.]. Available at:

http://www.thedailygamepad.com/the-18-scariest-shinji-mikami-moments-that-made-us-soil-our-shorts/ (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Rose, J. 2010. *Addressing conflict: Tension and Release in Games*. Available from: https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/134313/addressing_conflict_tension_and_.php?page=3 [Accessed: 9 October 2017].

Saga (2014) *Alien: Isolation* [Computer Game]. Sega

Silent Hill 2 (2001) *Silent Hill 2* [illus.]. Available at:

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/silent/images/6/6f/James_obtaining_the_flashlight.jpg/revision/latest?cb=20150325095038 (Accessed: 04 December 2017).

Sony Computer Entertainment. (2013). *The Last of Us.* 2013. [Computer Game]. Sony Computer Entertainment.

William Huber. (2010) *Catch and Release: Ludological Dynamics in Fatal Frame 2: Crimson Butterfly*. University of California. Available from:

http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/viewArticle/91. [Accessed   24   November 2017].