

How Accessible QTE Inputs Reshape Suspense Trajectories in Survival Horror Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Survival horror video games often use button-mashing quick-time events (QTEs) as a design device intended to shape moments of heightened suspense. Button-mashing QTEs require the player to rapidly input the same button for an extended time, creating a form of sustained kinaesthetic engagement during high-threat gameplay sequences. Often, to make these types of interactions more accessible to players with motor-control impairments, developers add the alternative option of holding down a button, which I will call *hold-to-continue*. This abstract hypothesises that altering the required mode of input may reshape the player's suspense trajectory during these moments, producing distinct suspense trajectories for the same game event.

Suspense has long been studied in literary and film theory (e.g., Vorderer 1996; Zillmann 1980). Research in these fields models suspense as a dynamic rise–peak–resolution arc governed by uncertainty and threat anticipation. Although these frameworks have primarily been applied to narrative or audiovisual media, their core principle of a dynamic curve of rising and falling suspense can be theoretically extended to digital game interactions, where kinaesthetic involvement may also contribute to how suspense is structured and sustained. In the context of survival horror QTEs, such trajectories offer a conceptual tool for examining how differing input patterns may reshape the player's experience of suspense during unfolding gameplay events. QTEs are especially suited to suspense-trajectory analysis because they are structured around escalating uncertainty and imminent failure.

Button-mashing and timed-input interactions have existed since the 1980s. Early laserdisc titles such as *Dragon's Lair* (Cinematronics 1983) and *Cliff Hanger* (Stern Entertainment 1983) featured cinematic sequences requiring precise button presses, establishing an early template for what would later become QTEs. For the purposes

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of this abstract, I specifically focus on survival horror QTEs that require repeated input of a single button during gameplay sequences centred on sustained bodily resistance and imminent threat. Button-mashing inputs are commonly used during high-threat gameplay sequences to structure moments of embodied tension by requiring sustained player action while limiting available input options. Often, the player is trying to ward off a final killing blow from an enemy or escape the clutches of an all too close pursuer when they are suddenly faced with a button mash QTE in an attempt to shape moments of escalating suspense.

Accessibility work has shown that the same input demands can be experienced very differently depending on players' motor capabilities and body-controller fit (Dalglish 2019). Accessibility frameworks frequently recommend reducing input repetition for players with impaired motor control (Game Accessibility Guidelines n.d.). One of the most common implementations of this principle in contemporary games is the option to replace rapid button mashing with a tap or hold. This motor-load reduction preserves narrative progression while substantially changing the embodied demands of the interaction. In the context of survival horror QTEs, such an accessibility option is especially significant because it alters the temporal and kinaesthetic structure of player input and how suspense unfolds within the moment-to-moment interaction, reshaping the suspense structure of that particular event sequence.

Drawing on a specific QTE sequence from *The Last of Us Part II*, I have constructed theoretical suspense curves for both the button mash interaction and its hold-to-continue accessibility variant. These curves are based on the previously discussed suspense curve frameworks. The chosen sequence is a ten-second-long game event which begins with Ellie trying to escape from multiple enemies by shutting a door as they attempt to push through it. While she frantically tries to keep the door in place, she is tackled and pushed to a window ledge by another enemy, triggering a button-mash QTE. This QTE has been chosen because the repeated button-mashing input creates a form of kinaesthetic mirroring between the player's interaction and Ellie's sustained bodily struggle to keep the enemy at arm's length as it attacks her.

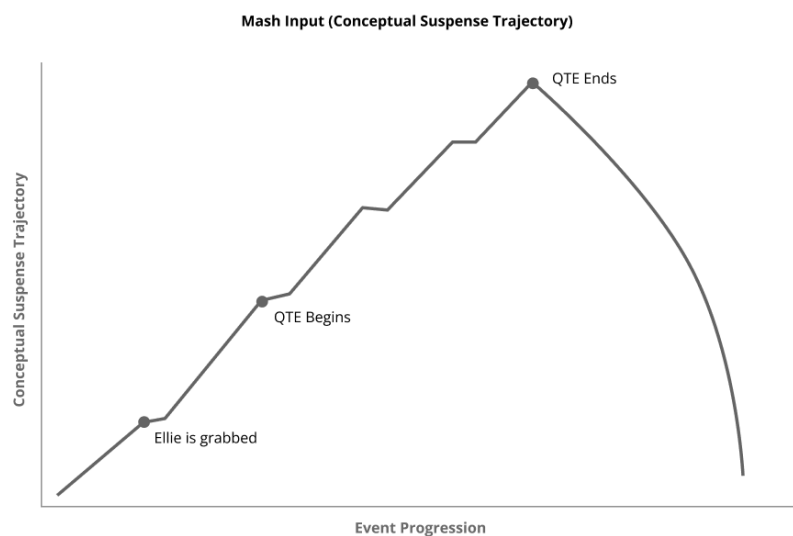


Figure 1: Conceptual suspense trajectory for mash input.

While Terkildsen et al. (2023) focus primarily on arousal and startle intensity rather than suspense directly, their findings suggest that increased workload may shape affective responses during horror interactions. Following that, this abstract hypothesises that mash-based QTEs may produce sharper suspense spikes during the ascent of the curve, reflecting the higher motor workload they require. Carroll (1990) argues that suspense arises when a narrative situation presents two opposed outcomes: one desirable yet unlikely, the other undesirable yet likely. In mash-based QTEs, the requirement for repeated rapid inputs increases the number of potential failure points. Therefore, mash interactions may heighten the perceived likelihood of the undesirable outcome (e.g., Ellie dying), generating additional spikes in the suspense trajectory. Additionally, Calleja’s (2011) concept of kinaesthetic involvement highlights that players experience greater conscious effort when control demands become challenging or attention-consuming. Mash-based QTEs amplify this form of involvement by requiring continuous, effortful input, whereas hold-to-continue alternatives reduce the kinaesthetic load and consequently alter how suspense is felt during the interaction.

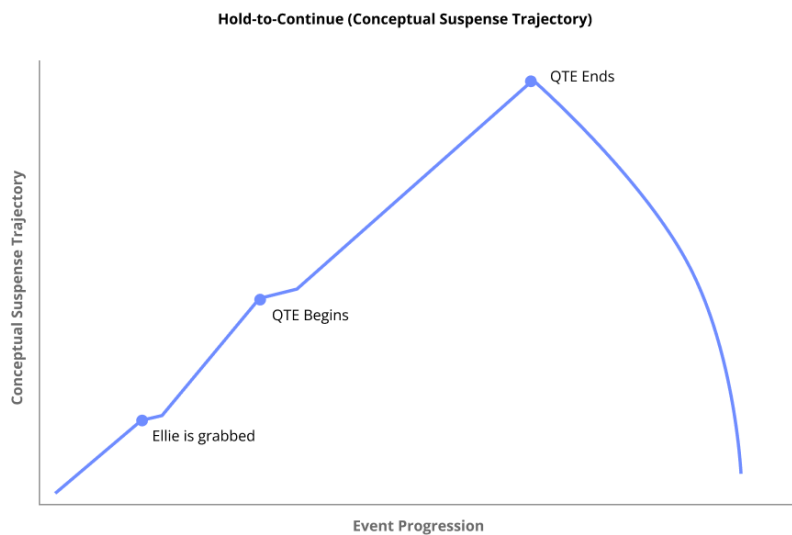


Figure 2: Conceptual suspense trajectory for hold-to-continue input.

Extending this logic, I propose that the reduced motor workload in the hold-to-continue alternative would conversely produce a smoother suspense ascent, yielding a flatter, more sustained suspense curve than the spiked ascending trajectory of mash interactions.

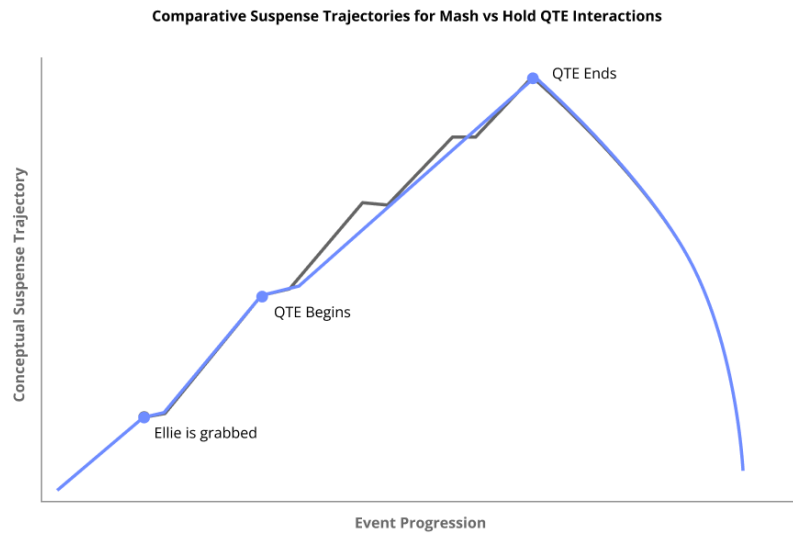


Figure 3: Comparison of both suspense trajectories.

While theoretical, these curves demonstrate how interaction design can be analysed through adapted suspense curve models. This comparison suggests that what may seem like small shifts in input pattern can meaningfully reshape the emotional cadence of high-tension sequences, producing distinct suspense trajectories for players depending on their QTE input. These findings highlight that accessibility features do more than remove barriers; they actively modulate the experience of suspense, one of survival horror’s core pleasure structures.

By framing QTE input patterns as suspense-shaping UX elements, this extended abstract proposes a conceptual tool for understanding how accessibility interventions can transform the affective texture of play. This framework can support more inclusive design approaches and lay the groundwork for future work examining how different forms of physical input shape suspense curves. This analysis aligns with the conference theme of intersectional pleasures by showing how embodied differences can shape the player's experience.

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