

Constructing Horrific Moments in Games: The Curveball

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The “*Curveball*” is a framework for creating and analyzing horror moments that I developed while working on *The Lift*. The Curveball consists of four steps: the *Hook*, the *Build*, the *Diversion*, and the *Execution*. The Hook engages the player, the Build creates anticipation, the Diversion throws the player off guard, and the Execution delivers the scare. Using this framework you can construct suspense-driven horror moments capable of frightening players without resorting to jump-scares and gross-out tactics.

The *Hook* engages the player by posing a question that will be answered in the Execution. It establishes an abnormal feature of the player’s environment, marking the transition into the realm of horror. This effectively announces a future scare. In movies and games, an unannounced scare feels cheap because it triggers the fight or flight response, but it doesn’t actually engage us. Presenting a Hook at the start of a scare informs the player that something is amiss and piques their interest, but it doesn’t tell them the breadth of the danger; establishing this ambiguity is critically important, as it plays upon the player’s curiosity. In *The Lift*, the Hook for the game’s first major scare is a pair of smeared hand prints leading off into the darkness. This Hook asks, “Whose hand prints are these; what happened to them?” It primes the player for the mounting suspense that follows in the Build.

The *Build* heightens the player’s anxiety and draws them into the scare. This should be the longest step; affording players time to be hesitant. The Build is the journey to resolve the Hook, it makes the player feel vulnerable and entices them to act against their better judgement (e.g. crawl into confined spaces where they can’t turn around, stuff themselves into dumbwaiters, investigate the source of mysterious noises, and stick their heads in to dark attics). It is important to put their goal where they can see it, make it inviting, and put an ominous obstacle in their way. In *The Lift*, the Build for the first major scare is a trail of text written in luminescent paint that reads “Click Crack” leading towards the second power node. As players move closer to the node, they start hearing the crackling sound of a Geiger counter. The nearer they are, the louder the noise becomes. This illustrates the goal of the Build, which is to increase anticipation without revealing when or where the scare will occur. In an effective Build, players search anxiously for other options before proceeding. Once players have experienced the Build, they encounter the Diversion.

The *Diversion* is unique to the Curveball. It is a visual or aural cue planted to draw the player’s attention away from the real scare. The Diversion is not necessarily startling or scary, but it matches the player’s expectation of where the scare will come from. In *The Lift*, the Diversion for the first major scare is a broken vent with smeared hand prints leading into it. When players enter the room, they see the broken vent and become wary of it. What they don’t see is the nonthreatening vent to their left. When the scare comes from this second vent,

players are caught off guard, not because they didn't expect the scare, but because they were focusing elsewhere. A strong Diversion will hold the player's focus until the Execution.

The *Execution* is the final stage of the process. This is where you resolve the question posed by the Hook. The Execution releases the tension you built; bringing either relief or a moment of terror. It is important to follow each scare with a lull in the action that allows the player to regain his or her composure. When players do not have enough time to recover between scares, they will either acclimate and react to scares with diminishing intensity or burn out and quit the experience. After an appropriate amount of time, a new Hook is presented to the player, announcing the start of a new scare.

The Curveball is an effective framework for constructing horror moments that others should adopt, expand, and refine. The strength of the Curveball is its ability to prepare players for a scare without dampening its impact. Through foreshadowing, building tension, and diverting the player's attention you insure a strong execution and deliver an experience driven by player anticipation rather than surprise and revulsion.