Modeling dynamics of suspense and surprise

Zhiwei Li
NYU, New York, New York, United States

Neil Bramley
NYU, New York, New York, United States

Todd Gureckis
New York University, New York, New York, United States

Abstract
Activities such as watching a sports match and reading a novel often provoke suspense and surprise (S&S). Computationally, we hypothesize that these feelings derive from the dynamics of our beliefs. In our experiment, participants watch real videotaped volleyball games or play a card game, where their belief dynamics (e.g. chance of winning) can be affected by both the stimuli and background information (e.g. game rules and prior beliefs about the teams / the card deck). Following Ely et al (2015) we formalize instantaneous suspense as a function of expected variance in future belief, and surprise as related to the magnitude of belief changes. Through probabilistic model we generate point-by-point predictions of S&S. We find that ratings of S&S for the same games depend on experimentally manipulated in qualitative agreement with our model, but we also identify several situations where the model fails.