

Practical Tools for Empowering the Relationship between Theme & Mechanics

By Strix Beltrán, Mariana Boucault, William Chyr, Graeme Lennon, Chris Proctor, and Lauren Scott.

[I. Abstract](#)

[II. The Problem](#)

[III. Polaris Workgroup Process](#)

[IV. Proposed Tools for Strengthening the Relationship between Theme and Mechanics
Tools to Action](#)

[V. Term Definitions](#)

[VI. The Tone Bridge](#)

[VII. Consonance and Dissonance
Consonance & Dissonance](#)

[VIII. Thematic Excursions](#)

[IX. Day-to-Day Considerations](#)

[X. Takeaways
Takeaways](#)

[XI. Conclusion](#)

[XII. References](#)

I. Abstract

Often, in games, the merging of theme and mechanics isn't totally successful. Either there exists a very strong theme, with mechanics that feel tacked on and disconnected; or a brilliant mechanic is showcased, with thematic trappings draped over that feel like an afterthought. When mechanics and theme are not in sync, a game's overall feel rings hollow, and the disconnect is felt by the player. Think "Press F to Pay Respects". Righting this imbalance, and bringing synergy to these two crucial aspects of a game, is the goal this paper aims to find. Through the intensive three-day Polaris design workshop, the authors pored over examples of good and bad execution of this concept, and pulled in practical knowledge from our varied games expertises, in order to extract a set of tools that can be employed by the average game designer faced with this problem. Our results come in the form of three tools – the Tone Bridge, Consonance and Dissonance, and Thematic Excursions – as well as practical suggestions for how to apply them. Our position is that the resulting strong relationship between theme and mechanic ultimately yields a better game as a result.

II. The Problem

As we sat down to our workgroup, the fundamental problem we set out to explore was the phenomenon of disconnect between a game's theme and its mechanics. The authors are a mixed group of systems and narrative designers, and in our discussions on tackling this topic in our working lives, certain problems kept arising: encountering misunderstandings between disciplines during production, maintaining thematic consistency across mechanics, and, in some cases, creating thematic exhaustion when being *too* consistent. It is in this way that we broke down the broad problem into what we saw as its constituent parts.

The authors assume the following axioms to be true:

1. PRODUCTION: A strong relationship between theme and mechanics helps prevent project drift, maintains vision, and guides decision making.
2. PRODUCT: When mechanics and themes are misaligned, gameplay doesn't meet player expectations. Conversely, when they are aligned, it is easier to meet player expectations and produce intuitive gameplay.
3. ART: When a game work has a theme that resonates with its mechanics, it results in higher quality art.

We call this strong positive relationship between theme and mechanics **resonance**. Resonance is when theme and mechanics are aligned and in a good relationship with each other. They rhyme. We believe that games that are **resonant** are more meaningful, and that meaning is good.

We don't intend to argue in favour of these claims, but rather take them to be both true and desirable, and proceed from there: How do we, as designers, empower and strengthen the relationship between theme and mechanics in order to achieve these results?

We propose some possible solutions to these problems below.

III. Polaris Workgroup Process

After creating our group and settling into a workroom fitted with whiteboard, markers, and plenty of natural sunlight, our first act was to just talk as much about the topics of theme, tone, and mechanic as possible, with a brainstorm and no-wrong-answers mentality, to both frame the problem as well as learn about each other and what expertise and history we each brought to the table. We also needed to form a shared language of terms that we all agreed on, so that we could have a precise conversation about these topics, some of which were more amorphous and meant slightly different things to each of us. Among these terms were Tone, Theme, Narrative, and Mechanic, the full list detailed in part VI.

After we had a solid problem statement, we explored several examples of games that have themes that perfectly match their mechanic (or the opposite), and others where there's a clear mismatch. For example, emergent systems in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* such as throwing a metal sword in a lightning storm and setting fire to grassland reinforce the game's theme of exploration. *Citizen Sleeper* utilizes its dice mechanic to create feelings of randomness and scarcity, to reinforce its theme of tension and constantly scraping by. *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* forces a co-op team to go from using two controllers to just one after one of the main characters dies, to reinforce the dramatic event and put players in a position of precarity, as the remaining character is in the game. These examples showed us how theme and mechanic relate in lots of different, complete projects.

These brainstorms and case studies revealed key insights, including one of our main findings that tone is the translator between theme and mechanic. These insights helped us identify where we wanted to go, what we wanted to achieve, with the rest of our time at the workshop. We wanted to identify what made the successes successful, what contributed to failures, and how to suggest a way to achieve the former and avoid the latter. We noticed that the successes had very strong relationships between their themes and mechanics. So, we narrowed our focus to answering the question of how to create those strong relationships.

Our goal then was to develop ways to better build themes that reinforce mechanics (and vice versa). After discussion, one of our first practical ideas was that the best way to achieve this is to ensure that systems designers and narrative designers can effectively communicate, i.e. establish a shared vocabulary. Narrative designers are well versed in the theme side of the relationship, and systems designers from the mechanics side, so we reasoned that a shared vocabulary should be something common to both.

We also developed the three design tools outlined in section V and detailed in subsequent sections. Most of the latter half of our work time was dedicated to the development of these three tools.

IV. Proposed Tools for Strengthening the Relationship between Theme and Mechanics

Tools to Action

We have identified three specific techniques that game designers, of any discipline, can use to help address this problem.

Tone Bridge

A tone bridge is a bi-directional bridge that connects theme and mechanics.

One can break a theme into tones, which can then more easily be connected to mechanics.

This works from the other direction as well: a mechanic produces tones, which fit into a theme.

Consonance and Dissonance

A consonant mechanic is on theme, a dissonant mechanic is distant from the theme.

One can strengthen a theme using both consonant and dissonant mechanics.

Thematic Excursion

Consonance and dissonance exist at the level of mechanics, but it's possible to do something similar at a high level.

A thematic excursion is an entire section of the game that is deliberately off theme. This can be used to address theme fatigue, or simply to explore a different theme without committing an entire game to it.

V. Term Definitions

The following are terms that we defined together as a group, to facilitate efficient discussion and reduce any confusion arising out of vagueness. Some of these concepts can have different meanings depending on context; these are our agreed-upon definitions, for the purpose of this paper.

Theme: Central idea that permeates the whole of a creative work.

Subtheme: Central idea that permeates a section of the work, that should be consonant or dissonant with a theme (as opposed to unrelated).

Tone: Attitude or mood experienced by the player (in an area or sequence or mechanic).

Mechanic: Rules and actions that governs and/or guides the player's actions and the game's response.

Mechanic group: A group of related mechanics that come together to deliver a tone.

VI. The Tone Bridge

The first of our tools arose as we repeatedly found, through the course of our discussions and workgroup process, that there was one key element that was often present at the intersection of themes and mechanics. Often, theme and mechanic are big, impenetrable concepts that are difficult to map directly onto each other: they both have lots of complex pieces, and they are sort of in different “languages,” theme often being more narratively-driven in explanation and mechanic being described in more systemic terms. There is one thing, though, that each contain, and produce: **tone**. Themes in games aim to produce a variety of tones, and communicate tones through their narrative content, and how that content is served to the player. Mechanics produce tones as players interact with them and experience the feelings those interactions create. For example, a button mash mechanic aims to produce tones of franticness, while a save point or healing station might inspire feelings of safety and an ease of tension. Because both themes and mechanics contain and produce tones, tone can be seen as the way to translate between the two. Tone “bridges” the communication and conceptual gap between theme and mechanic, and creates a common language for the two.

The Tone Bridge is a bi-directional communications tool that uses **tone** as a way to bridge the gap between **theme** and **mechanics**.

As a part of our discussions with systems and narrative designers, we have found that there is often a communications gap between disciplines. Narrative designers and systems designers often discuss the themes of the game using different vocabularies and sets of expectations, which can often lead to misunderstandings and frustration.

Rather than discussing themes directly, we’ve found that focusing on discussing intended tones can lead to more consistent results, as tone, while subjective, has a much more consistent understanding across disciplines than more abstract themes.

PAPERS, PLEASE: A successful example



Papers, Please is a good example of successful application of mechanics through tone to theme.

THEME: Oppression

TONES: Repetition, constraint, pressure

MECHANICS: Stamping, limited workspace, quota

It can be difficult to see how a systems designer, when told to implement a system that activates “oppression”, would arrive at stamping. Breaking “oppression” into intended tones, such as “repetition”, however, can suggest specific mechanics much more directly.

HEAVY RAIN: An unsuccessful example



Heavy Rain, in contrast, displays at least one instance of a disconnect between mechanic and theme, bypassing tone to create a feeling of franticness with its mechanic, but failing to take into account the overall theme of gravity and trauma.

THEME: Trauma

TONES: Franticness, worry, fear

MECHANIC: "Press X to Jason"

Tone Bridge: Usage

The process of using the Tone Bridge is as follows: You are a designer with a great theme, but need a mechanic that fits really well with it. Or, you're a designer with the opposite problem, an amazing mechanic but stumped about what theme to wrap it in. Let's go with the first scenario first. I'm going for a specific theme, say, something like "In this society, everyone struggles to scrape by, and only those willing to bend the rules see any wealth". Sure, a game can convey this theme through its visuals and narrative. But how do you find a mechanic that conveys it, as well? That theme is pretty big, and it's not immediately apparent what mechanic(s) might fit. We can break it down, though, into some tones. "Everyone struggles to scrape by"; there are tones of scarcity, and hopelessness, in there. "Only those willing to bend the rules see any wealth"; you might interpret this as containing tones of moral dilemma, difficult choices, economic disparity, or more, or maybe even a totally different set of tones altogether; it's up to you, as the designer, what you pull out. You can now see a road to some mechanics: each of these tones probably calls to mind some possible player actions that can produce those tones. For example, scarcity: Tweaking your game's economy so that the player is always near the end of their resources, constantly

needing to do more to find stuff, and making that stuff difficult to find, would probably create a tone of scarcity. Moral dilemma: Lots of games like to use a light/dark mechanic to convey tones of moral dilemma, like Mass Effect's Paragon/Renegade system. You might think of other ways you want to produce this tone, like maybe introducing a resource that the player can only get by doing a morally dubious thing, like the Little Sisters situation in Bioshock. By breaking down the theme into tones and repeating the process of mapping mechanics to each tone, you can start amassing a pile of mechanics that might fit well with your amazing theme.

Now, let's look at the other side. You have a great mechanic, say, a character that can create a mirror of himself in order to complete the various puzzles in the game. This is fun to play with, and you've created a ton of fun puzzles, but the game sort of just feels like a toy, with no underlying meaning or way of really connecting with the player. How do you find a theme to map to this mechanic? Utilize the Tone Bridge to find your way from mechanic to theme. The mirroring mechanic produces lots of tones: Duality, the need for precision, a constant companion, and more, depending on what you see. Putting that mechanic into a game with increasingly-complex puzzles also creates some tones, like an increasing difficulty, a gradual slope up to a natural climax. You can take these tones and see what themes fall out of them for you. Duality, and a constant companion: Maybe a theme of friendship, or perhaps one of rivalry? Increasing difficulty: Perhaps the game takes place within a mountain, traversing symmetrical caverns with your clone or friend, ending with a triumphant crest at the top, all signifying a struggle through adversity, maybe even with yourself? (If this sounds familiar, you've probably played Celeste.) Taking each tone, you can define what each means to you thematically, until you have a complete set of thematic ideas which you can then weave into your game's overall theme. This game's theme could well be, "You must learn to be your own friend before you can truly conquer your internal demons and break through to an enlightened life." Or something completely different! Again, the Tone Bridge can possibly reveal different themes and mechanics depending on the person using it, and what they interpret as they go through the exercise.

VII. Consonance and Dissonance

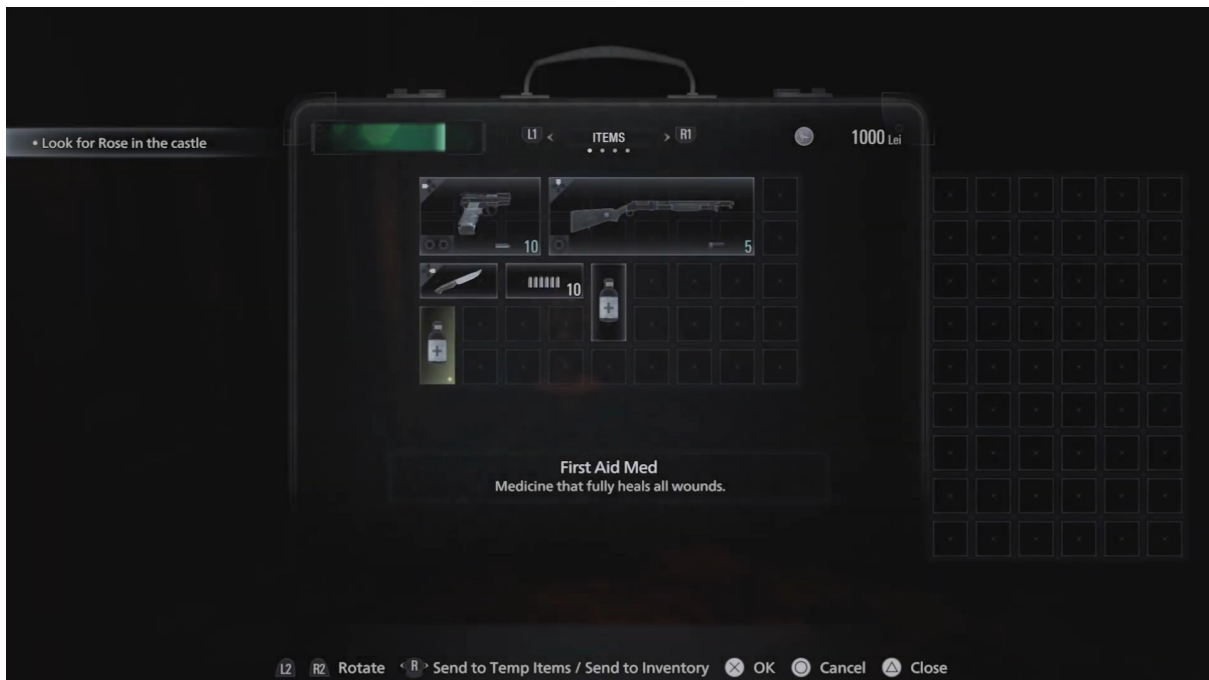
Consonance & Dissonance

The concept of “consonance” is the agreement, compatibility, or harmony between two things. This might be the harmonic nature of two musical notes, or the concord between two ideologies. We found that the idea of consonance can also be used as a tool for connecting theme and mechanic. If struggling with a mechanic, looking to the theme and trying to find something that is in harmony with that theme can yield a mechanic that works well.

In contrast, “dissonance” is the tension or clash between disharmonious things. While it sounds negative, dissonance can be a tool for finding a mechanic that changes the pace or flow of the game. If you find a mechanic that clashes with (but is not unrelated to) the theme, and insert it into the game, it can create a refreshing or surprising experience for the player, which is sometimes desired.

Both consonance and dissonance contribute to resonance, and create a geography around the theme. Something analogous is the level design idea of contract and expand.

As an example, let’s look at Resident Evil.



THEME: Survival and Horror

Reintroduces the thematic tone (pressure, uncertainty) into the dissonant thematic space.



Dissonant with the core themes of unsafety



The combination of the two creates the possibility space to subvert player expectations around the theme without breaking expectations.

VIII. Thematic Excursions

Thematic Excursions is the way we define when a game that has a strong theme and tone decides to explore a dissonant tone within its set of rules.

Take for example when a serious and realistic game like For Honor tries to include a much lighter tone in an in-game event, like a spooky and funny Halloween event. Or Destiny 2 when the Dawning Event for the holiday season was introduced and suddenly your favourite enemy killing guardians are baking cookies and celebrating the dawning spirit.

The reasons why a production or game decides to take a thematic excursion can be varied. It is common to see it in live service games as a solution to **theme fatigue**: players are used to a certain theme or tone and this can shake things up, bringing players back to the game and serving as a tool for reengagement and experimentation.

Theme fatigue can also affect developers that might be tired of working on the same tone for a long period of time. A thematic excursion can help them pitch new ideas and not be constrained by the frames that are set during production.

In the same sense, it can be done during conception as a tool to explore different themes in a game that is not fully defined.

Apart from pre-production and post-launch, thematic excursions can be thought of beforehand, as part of the initial offer of the game and creating a memorable experience. One example of this type of excursion is the Eventide Island in Breath of the Wild, where players are stripped away from their equipment to survive in a series of challenges to place three metal orbs on altars of the island. On top of turning an exploration tone to a survival style, progress is not saved along the way, making it more difficult and with higher stakes than the rest of the game.

In all cases mentioned, there is one big rule that brings all thematic excursions together: it should be in a bounded space or time. As it is an experience outside of what is expected by the player (or developer), it must be treated as such. For example: if you have an open world game with a very serious tone, perhaps you can have an island off to the side that is goofy and doesn't impact the main story line. Or it can be a limited time event, where players are allowed to play with characters that do not belong to an universe and then they go away.

Another application for an excursion is to be used as a band-aid by the narrative team to address issues with wildly divergent mechanics that would otherwise break the theme. For example, in a game about survival and scarcity, the player is given a very powerful weapon to kill a boss just at that moment to fulfill a moment of power fantasy.

IX. Day-to-Day Considerations

When applying this theory into practice, we noted that sometimes it is easier to communicate with developers of different areas in terms of tone rather than themes. One can break a theme into tones, which can then more easily be connected to mechanics.

A theme of war for example could have multiple interpretations of what war means depending on the person's point of view or their background. If you take an example of the side of the military, you could be thinking of Call of Duty, while if you look at the civilians' survival, you could have a very different type of game with This War of Mine.

Using the tone as the bridge can bring other ways to choose which features to choose from at the conception phase: in a cozy game about tending animals, you might not be selecting shooter features to develop since these mechanics are dissonant with the tone.

A tone is also a good way to create a common ground for realisation choices within the same mechanic. Take opening a chest for example. This mechanic is widely used in various games as a way to get loot, but each game has different ways to display that interaction. Link, in Zelda games, has a very strong curiosity tone on his actions, so when a chest is opened, it is accompanied by a fanfare sound effect, a very bright visual effect with a satisfying and iconic ending. Kratos in God of War is very brutal, and this tone is constant in several choices of the game, so when he opens a chest, he punches it, destroying the chest and picks up its content viciously. While in Apex Legends, since the focus is not in demonstrating each character's personality, rather in being practical and quick to gear up and be back in action, the interaction is very simple so the player chooses the content as fast as possible.

Alternatively, a mechanic produces tones, which fit into a theme. Shooting mechanics are frequently assimilated with more action tones, which narrows down some themes it can relate to.

A game can be balanced in 2 different ways and produce extremely different results. The lack of ammo or abundance of it can transform a survival game into a time trial type of game.

While both theme and tone can be subjective and open for personal interpretation, we believe that tones are more narrowed and can help create a common ground for communication.

X. Takeaways

The work detailed in this paper results in a few key takeaways that, while not the totality of the topics in detail, convey the broad strokes of each important main point.

Takeaways

1. Use the Tone Bridge to help bond a mechanic to a theme, or a theme to a mechanic, via use of tone. Break down a mechanic into tones and use those tones to define a theme that matches well, or vice versa.
2. Also use the Tone Bridge to help communicate between disciplines (often between narrative and systems or level design).
3. Understand how the interaction of consonant & dissonant mechanics amplifies the main theme and creates space to subvert expectations in interesting ways.
4. Use Thematic Excursions as a framework for safely encapsulating theme-agnostic content.

XI. Conclusion

Our hope is that the three tools in this paper empower designers in their day-to-day work to strengthen any mechanics or themes that they might find lacking in their games, or even to come up with new ones wholecloth. Whether AAA or individual indie, these tools are meant to be usable in the course of normal work, at any stage of production, whether to ideate in pre-production or find clever, efficient solutions closer to shipping.

XII. References

For Honor
Destiny 2
Zelda Breath of the Wild
Call of Duty Series
This War of Mine
God of War
Apex Legends
Citizen Sleeper
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
Papers, Please
Heavy Rain
Celeste
Resident Evil