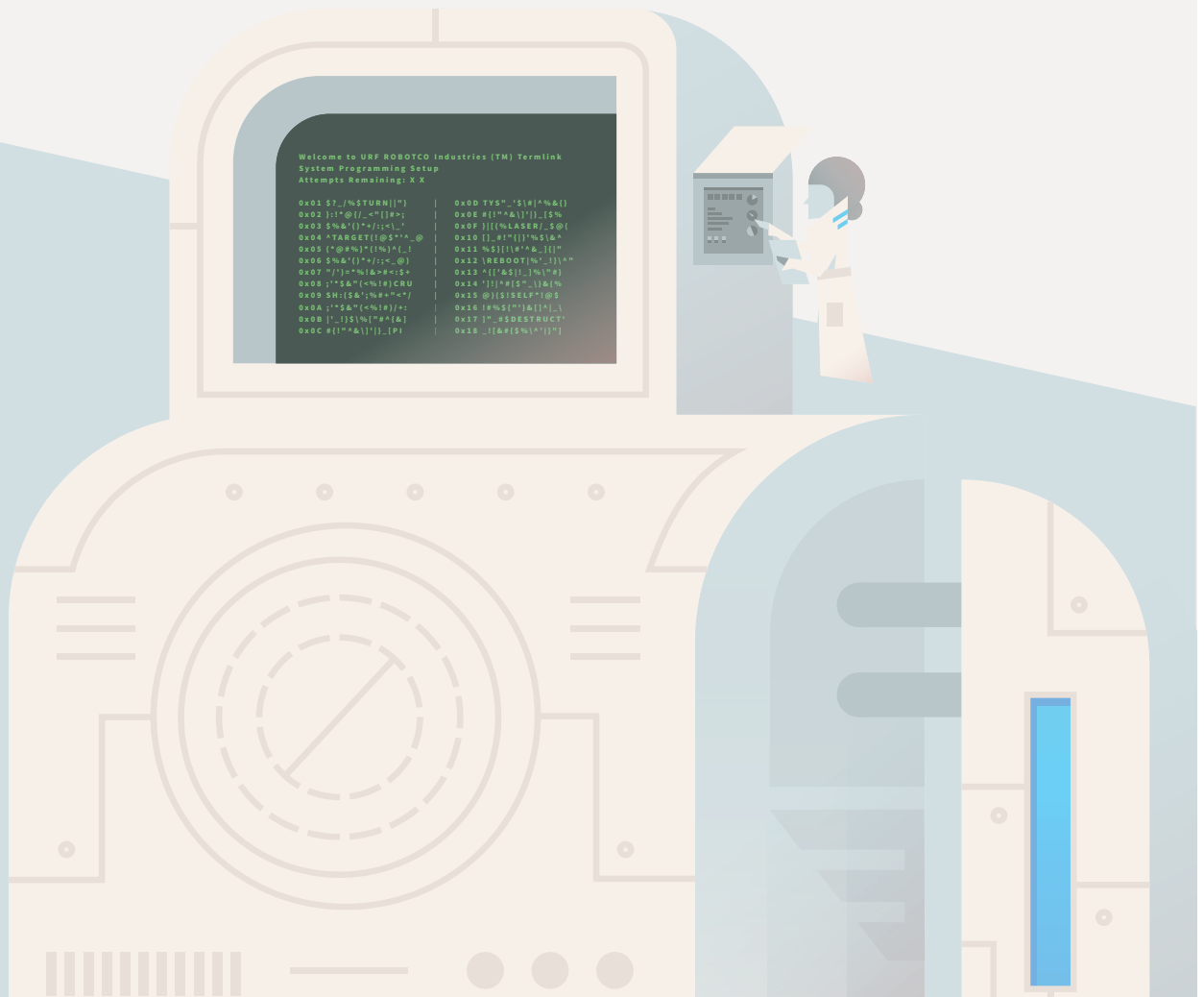# Module 4: Rules, Thematics, & Complexity
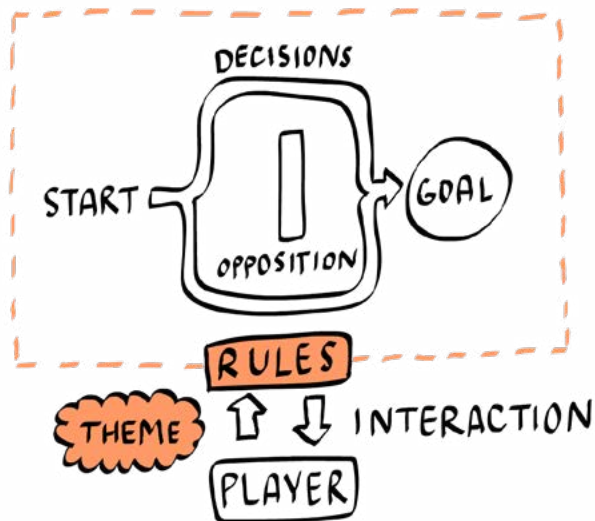
Big Ideas

Purpose

This module **focuses on the Rules and Thematics** portion of the Game Design Framework. Rules include elements such as game mechanics and game systems. They're the guidelines by which a game operates and through which gameplay is created.

Student Objectives

Thematics allow mechanics to be easily explained through piggybacking and increase immersion through resonance.

Overview

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Materials

Teacher

- Computer / Projector
  To present external links

Students

- Paper / Pen

TOTAL TIME: 60 MINUTES

Lesson 1

Teacher's Context: Thematic   5 MINUTE READ

THEMATIC

A thematic is a unifying idea that is present throughout a game's mechanics, narrative, audio, visual effects, and general aesthetic.

A strong thematic that is consistent across all of these pieces of content aids immersion for the players through resonance.

Examples of thematics used in games include:

- Medieval with High Fantasy (E.g., Dragons)
- Space
- Modern Day
- Futuristic

RESONANCE AND DISSONANCE

The ability of a game to evoke a desired response in a player of heightened intensity and feeling (either positive or negative).

Resonance does not necessarily need to create positive emotions. For example, games with a horror aesthetic have strong resonance, despite creating fear and dread.

Dissonance through thematic typically pulls the player out of immersion and causes them to disengage with the game experience.

For example: Matching an aesthetic for younger audiences with high complexity gameplay is likely to be dissonant. Similarly, matching a horror aesthetic with happy music is likely to be dissonant.

COMPLEXITY

Complexity is the amount of information **a player needs to know** in order to make a decision. Colloquially, it can be thought of as the number of sentences it would take to explain how to play the game or take an action (I.e., how complicated it is).

Complexity is commonly mistaken for difficulty. While content with high complexity is usually more difficult, difficulty is not what designers are talking about when they mention complexity.

Complexity in game design is a cost as it influences how accessible a game is, the amount of time it takes before players start to have fun, and the time for players to meaningfully understand gameplay implications.

A common tactic in game design to reduce complexity is to **take advantage of the known behavior of a common object or idea** (piggybacking) to expedite learning of game rules or to explain arbitrary events.

For example: It's common knowledge that fire spreads. If you had a game mechanic where parts of the game board became progressively unable to be used, fire could be a great thematic to explain this mechanic without large increases in complexity.

NARRATIVE

Narrative is the glue that ties gameplay and theme together. It can easily explain the motivation for characters in your game or simply provide an explanation for the overall setting (E.g., "Why would the Dragon in the example above want to breathe fire on the city?" Or "Why is the world set in this place and time?").

Two experiences can have the same narrative, but the chosen thematic can alter the feeling of the entire experience and tone. Here are some examples:

> *Finding Nemo* **vs** *Taken*: Overprotective father gets into dangerous situations in search of his abducted child.

> *Aladdin* **vs** *Les Miserables*: Poor person steals bread, goes to prison, given riches, rebels against the government, and ultimately makes their nemesis defeat themselves.

Many games share the same premise, but the actions taken and the thematic wrapper differentiate the game feeling and experience.

In order to create an immersive and resonant game, the narrative, thematic, sound, art, and gameplay mechanics all need to work together to create a cohesive package.

20 MINUTES

Thematics Primer

1. **Explain to the students that their next task is to come up with a new theme for Us vs It.**

   - The game is not selling well and the publisher has decided that the current theme is too masculine and wants a more exciting and equitable theme.

   - This involves re-doing the **narrative, renaming the game, renaming each ability** (including their custom ability), and **re-theming the player controlled characters** (the tanks). The game's mechanics must remain intact.

2. **In order to help the students re-theme their game, write some of the tips from the following page on the board. Also share as much supplementary information from the Teacher's Context as necessary.**

RESONANCE
Show this video to illustrate the points below:

▷ 3 MINUTES

Magic the Gathering: Twenty Years, Twenty Lessons Learned
Resonance is important
https://www.youtube.com/embed/QHHg99hwQGY?start=466&end=584

Think about resonance and dissonance.

- Is this something that a player can imagine role-playing (acting as if they were that character)?

- If the theme is "dragon," the ability to replace is laser and the student chose "throw a rock," it is not as thematically resonant as "breathe fire" or "shoot a fireball."

- Breathing fire makes you feel like a dragon (you could imagine being that character), whereas throwing rocks feels lame and is unlikely to immerse a player.

- Resonant designs use the **narrative, art, sound, theme, and mechanics (game rules)** together to reinforce the tone and themes of a game and create a greater sense of immersion.

- In dissonant designs, the narrative, thematic, and mechanics clash, which reduce immersion.

- Players come with expectations preset for thematics, that will differ by culture.

  For example, Western dragons and Eastern dragons carry different expectations within their audiences.

  A game that depicts a dragon as having a fiery temperament or being greedy may run afoul of a primarily Eastern audience that perceives dragons as being auspicious or lucky.

PIGGYBACKING
Show this video to illustrate some of the points below:

▷ 3 MINUTES

Magic the Gathering: Twenty Years, Twenty Lessons Learned
Make use of piggybacking
https://www.youtube.com/embed/QHHg99hwQGY?start=649&end=790

Think about how choosing your theme can explain otherwise nonsensical behavior.

- If our new theme is "library," it is unlikely that the students will find a good fit for the "laser" ability, because it has long range.

- If our new theme is "dragons," laser could easily be replaced by "shoot a fireball."

MOTIVATIONS AND NARRATIVE
Think about the motivations of the characters and the overall narrative.

- Who would be invading an area (the robot) and who would want to stop them (the tanks)?

- Perhaps it's a territorial dispute between cats and dogs.

- We wouldn't choose a theme where two sides don't like fighting as it is likely to be **dissonant** (E.g., two villages of pacifists who live near each other).

40 MINUTES

Thematics Exercise

1. **Explain that students will be brainstorming in this activity.**

2. **Show this video to the students to assist them with their brainstorming:**

▷ 3 MINUTES

Magic the Gathering: Twenty Years, Twenty Lessons Learned
Restrictions breed creativity
https://www.youtube.com/embed/QHHg99hwQGY?start=3200&end=335410

BRAINSTORM: 15 MINUTES

3. **Students populate a list of all the ideas for themes they can think of.**
   There are no bad ideas. Encourage them to create a list of at least 10 ideas.

   EXAMPLES
   - Cats vs Dogs
   - Good vs Evil
   - Nature vs Society
   - Diseases (The Plague) vs Humanity

   Encourage students to think back to experiences they've enjoyed, popular media, etc.

   Using the "**restrictions breed creativity**" tip, impose restrictions on the group before each brainstorm session:

   If students are stuck, some of these themes may be helpful:
   3 minutes on any of:

   - Popular Media, Fantasy, Society, Whacky Themes, Sports, Romance, Genres, Friends, etc.

CUT: 10 MINUTES

4. **Students cut their list down to the top 1 or 2 ideas.**
   Students should spend the next 10 minutes debating within their groups and cutting
   ideas that are not going to work, due to the criteria below (or some other criteria).

   CHECKLIST
   ☑ Narrative is resonant.
      ▪ Are these two parties likely to be in conflict?
   ☑ Able to re-theme the mechanics appropriately.
   ☑ Appropriate theming for the player controlled characters
      (tanks) and the main character (robot).
   ☑ Ability to create new abilities.

COMPLETE: 10 MINUTES

5. **Students take one of the ideas to completion, including
   the following components:**

   ▪ Narrative
   ▪ Game Name
   ▪ "Robot Name"
   ▪ "Robot" (should no longer be a robot)
   ▪ Ability Names
   ▪ "Tanks" (these should no longer be tanks)

If a group is quick to finish, have them
create multiple themes. It will be good
practice for the final project.
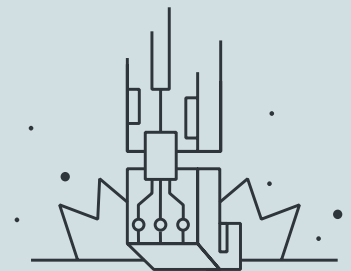
Homework

Game Design Framework Worksheet

1. Students are to fill out what they learned from the Rules and Thematic portion and important takeaways (at least 3).

   - The focus should be on how these learnings apply to games generally or to the game they will create in the final module.

   - The responses should be open ended.

Thematic Brainstorm Documentation

1. List the themes created in the brainstorm.

2. Describe why the final theme was chosen as the best.

3. Which themes were close, but didn't end up getting used. Why weren't they good enough?