

Chapter 1: Resonance

Resonance is the first of the three pillars of good TTRPG design. By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Distinguish resonant characters from non-resonant ones
- Outline and implement resonant characters
- Create resonant characters corresponding to a given theme

What is Resonance?

A **resonance** is an emotion that a particular character makes your players feel. A character can have one or more resonances, including both **positive** and **negative** resonances.

- **Positive Resonances:** These leverage player values to make characters more likeable. Examples include amusement, comfort, curiosity, endearment, flattery, gratitude, respect, and sympathy.
- **Negative Resonances:** These leverage player values to make characters more unlikeable. Examples include anger, disgust, fear, irritation, and suspicion.

We can create resonances by leveraging player psychology and moral values. For example:

- a character can evoke **amusement** by acting in a way that the players find humorous, such as with a silly or eccentric voice, outfit, appearance, or behavior
- a character can evoke **comfort** by providing players with security and support in times of trouble
- a character can evoke **curiosity** by hinting at (but concealing) hidden motives, relationships, or capabilities
- a character can evoke **endearment** by acting with determination or compassion in the face of adversity
- a character can evoke **flattery** by inquiring into, recognizing, and praising the players' interests, goals, qualities, or achievements
- a character can evoke **gratitude** by acting fairly and generously toward the players in ways that fulfill the players' needs
- a character can evoke **respect** by displaying qualities that the players strive to exemplify (e.g., competence, self-awareness, or determination)
- a character can evoke **sympathy** by expressing vulnerability and seeking the players' counsel or guidance
- a character can evoke **anger** by attacking the players' egos or interests or by committing unjust acts against sympathetic victims
- a character can evoke **disgust** by displaying repulsive behavior, grotesque characteristics, or unethical philosophies
- a character can evoke **fear** by credibly threatening the players' interests in a way that the players find neither amusing, enraging, or irritating
- a character can evoke **irritation** by being annoying, obstructive, critical, or rude

- a character can evoke **suspicion** by being secretive, acting deceptively, or displaying interests that conflict with the players’.

In practice, some of these resonances might appear as follows:

- a friendly innkeeper may inspire **gratitude** by providing wounded players with free room and board
- a cunning noble may inspire **flattery** by inquiring into and complimenting the players’ goals and interests
- an obstructive bureaucrat may inspire **irritation** by directing the players to complete inane and meaningless tasks

Why Resonance Matters

Resonance matters, in part, because it keeps our players entertained. A character with no resonance is boring; a character with at least one resonance is interesting and engaging.

More importantly, however, resonance matters because it allows us to create **stakes** for our narratives. There are two kinds of narrative stakes:

- **Positive Stakes:** The players want to obtain a positive outcome (e.g., earn a large amount of money).
- **Negative Stakes:** The players want to avoid a negative outcome (e.g., lose their freedom or lives).

Stakes derive from two basic sources: internal motivations (e.g., self-interest) and external motivations (e.g., altruism). For example:

- **Internal:** The players wish to earn a large amount of money (positive stakes) or avoid losing a large amount of money (negative stakes).
- **External:** The players wish to help another character obtain a lost family heirloom (positive stakes) or rescue a kidnapped child (negative stakes). Alternatively, the players wish to defeat a hated foe (positive stakes) or prevent a rival from attaining greater power (negative stakes).

While many players are easily motivated by self-interest—especially in campaigns that predominantly focus on obtaining treasure and power—such internal stakes are often too limiting for Dungeon Masters who prefer more thematic, emotional narratives. Such narratives require external stakes, which connect players to a richer, broader tapestry of characters.

External stakes, however, require resonance to keep players motivated. A likeable character with positive resonance is one that players will more likely want to help. Conversely, an unlikeable character with negative resonance is one that players will more likely want to oppose.

Without resonance or self-interest, players have little reason to pursue any particular narrative. Moreover, external stakes, which directly leverage player values and social norms, can prove powerful sources of additional motivation even in the most self-interested campaign. As such, it’s

important to ensure that every character has a clear, well-chosen resonance that strengthens the stakes of your narrative.

Complex Resonance

Many characters can have complex combinations of both positive and negative resonances, adding layers to their personalities. These contrasts can make characters richer and more authentic, fostering deeper relationships with your players. For example:

- a devoted guard may inspire **endearment** for their loyalty and courage, but **irritation** for their mule-headed stubbornness
- a charming thief may inspire **amusement** for their love of bad puns and jokes, but **disgust** for their callous willingness to steal from the rich and poor alike

Often, allied characters will have more positive resonances than negative; hostile characters will have more negative resonances than positive; and neutral characters will have equal amounts of both. However, this won't always be the case. Indeed, because players take greater note of allies' negative resonances and enemies' positive resonances, you may occasionally choose to make an ally more negative or an enemy more positive to add further complexity and depth to your narrative.

Character resonances can also change over time, becoming more positive or more negative (or both) as the narrative unfolds. Such evolutions can strengthen or damage your players' relationships with those characters, pushing the narrative in new and different ways. For example:

- an **endearing** sidekick can suddenly inspire **pride** after independently making a courageous decision
- a **sympathetic** patron can suddenly inspire **anger** after betraying the players for financial gain
- an **irritating** rival can suddenly inspire **sympathy** after learning the reasons for their troublesome behavior

Who Feels Resonance?

Importantly, *players* feel emotions, not *characters*. (For example, if a player character fears a villain but the player doesn't, that villain has no **fear** resonance.) Similarly, a player can also never feel a resonance that they don't wish to feel. For example:

- a player with a large ego may refuse to admire admirable characters
- a player focused on strategy may fail to sympathize with sympathetic characters
- a player who dislikes appearing weak might resist fearing fearsome characters

(That's not to say, of course, that such players will *never* agree to feel those resonances. Many players, especially new players or those used to a certain style of campaign, may simply not expect to encounter certain resonances. A clear, friendly conversation can often encourage skeptical players to embrace resonances they haven't tried before. We'll discuss such conversations further when we discuss Session Zero in **Unit IV: Running the Table**.)

As such, when designing character resonances, always remember the *players* that you're designing for, rather than the *world* and *narrative* that those characters exist in. A princess is no more sympathetic because she's been trapped in a tower, nor less sympathetic because she's about to be married to the partner of her dreams. Instead, the players' sympathetic reaction must come from how the princess *acts* and *interacts* with the world around her.

Put simply: **Players care about people, not plots.**

Resonance & Theme

Character resonances can become far more powerful when they share or reflect a similar **theme** with other characters in the story, where a **theme** is a recurring moral concept or conflict that relates to a resonance. For example, potential themes might include:

- **Corruption & Redemption.** A person's capacity for darkness, and the means by which they can atone after falling from grace.
- **Power & Responsibility.** The ways in which a person uses power, and the responsibility they take or abdicate for their actions.
- **Courage & Cowardice.** The meanings and manifestations of bravery, and the ways in which people confront or avoid their fears.

These themes, when shared in common between resonant characters, accentuate the contrasts and comparisons between those characters, drawing both positive and negative resonances into sharper relief. For example, in a campaign with the theme of **power and responsibility**, players might compare and contrast:

- The positive **gratitude** resonance of a prince who chooses to grant the players sanctuary and aid;
- The positive **endearment** resonance of an urchin who takes responsibility for others despite her lack of strength;
- The negative **disgust** resonance of a wealthy merchant who uses his riches to satisfy his smallest, most demeaning whims; and
- The positive **sympathy** resonance of a necromancer who was abandoned by those with the power to help her—and the negative **anger** resonance she evokes by abusing the power she's now obtained.

Not every character resonance needs to tie into a theme. However, a character that plays a significant role in the campaign's narrative should generally have at least one thematic resonance that reflects their role in the story.