An 'incredible' incipient change of activity token in a tabletop roleplaying game

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For my advisors Scott Barnes and Annabelle Lukin, my family, and everyone else who has offered their invaluable support.

You've been *incredible*.

Declaration

This thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree at any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)

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Abstract

This study uses conversation analysis to explore the use of a responsive practice for the purpose of changing activity within a campaign of Dungeons & Dragons, a multiplayer roleplaying game. Dungeons & Dragons has become the focus of a growing body of academic literature, and it is a significant part of the current and recent historical zeitgeist. It is a game where the goal is collaborative storytelling, and as such it offers insight into a uniquely non-competitive gaming dynamic. This study is interested in the way that players navigate this complex dynamic and manage the development of the gameplay. This study focuses on 18 episodes of the Dimension 20 Live series (published by CH Media), which captures more than 41 hours of live Dungeons & Dragons gameplay. This study qualitatively examines the use of the word *incredible* in order to signal an incipient shift in activity within gameplay. These analyses demonstrate that *incredible* can function as a change of activity token, with robust effects on the participation of all parties. Through these analyses, the present study reveals distinctions between participants' levels of autonomy and authority in gameplay, and demonstrates how this responsive practice efficiently manages progression in a complex, multi-activity environment.

1 Introduction

In this section, I will explore the foundations for this thesis as well as the previous literature. Firstly, I will examine the game of Dungeons & Dragons by presenting an explanation of the game and its historical relevance, as well as exploration of the previous academic literature on the topic of authorship in gameplay. Secondly, I will review literature within the field of Conversation Analysis, with a focus on responsive practices in interaction.

1.1   What is Dungeons & Dragons?

"D&D is driven by imagination. It's about picturing the towering castle beneath the stormy night sky and imagining how a fantasy adventurer might react to the challenges that scene presents." (Wyatt et al, 2014, p. 5)

Dungeons & Dragons is a tabletop fantasy roleplaying game. Simply put, it is a game in which the players gather around a table and play pretend in order to collaborate and tell a story. To enact this story, each player creates a character whose actions they will control throughout the game. One participant acts as the Dungeon Master whose role is to provide the main creative force; they are the one who has planned the setting in which the story will take place. As in the above quote, a Dungeon Master may tell the players that they find themselves standing before a towering castle on a stormy night. Should the players decide that they would like to enter the castle, it is the Dungeon Master's job to have decided what they will find inside. The Dungeon Master must have a general story plot pre-planned before the game begins, such as dropping them in front of a castle because they intend for the party to enter and save a princess from a dragon. Of course, the nature of this storytelling is collaborative, and

so the party may get distracted by, for instance, attempting to help a beleaguered servant escape the castle instead. As such, all participants contribute to the storytelling. The players decide how their characters will interact with the world, and the Dungeon Master relays how the world— and those within it, the non-player characters— are affected by the players' actions.

Unlike childhood games of pretend, Dungeons & Dragons applies structure and rules that limit what the players' characters are capable of doing. For example, a wizard may be good at casting spells, but may be too weak to swing a broadsword. Each character has their own strengths and weaknesses, and is limited by what is physically possible in the world around them. As such, these rules need to be prescribed prior to play. The basic rules of Dungeons & Dragons were devised by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and first published in 1974 (Williams et al, 2006), and have been revised in later editions. One of the core rules of Dungeons & Dragons is that the success of actions is decided by rolling dice; in order for a character to do something difficult, they must roll a sufficiently high number. These dice are the main item that is required to play Dungeons & Dragons, along with a sheet of statistics on each character— noting things such as their level of strength, charisma, wisdom, and so on— a grid map that represents battlefields and allows for organised combat, and a token to represent each character upon the map. Although all participants should have an understanding of the basic rules, the Dungeon Master performs the additional role of referee; they have a thorough understanding of the rules of Dungeons & Dragons and how to apply them to the world they have created. As in the above example, the players may choose to enter the castle, but the Dungeon Master has decided that the front door is locked. The Dungeon Master will then request that one player roll a twenty-sided dice to see how successful they are in picking the lock.

The first session of gameplay— the very beginning of the game and storyline— typically begins with the Dungeon Master introducing the party's characters to each other and setting the scene in which they find themselves. The typical setup is that the party are adventurers who have been hired to work a contract with the promise of pay at the end. For example, a Dungeon Master might tell the party that they find themselves standing before a castle on a stormy night, having been hired by a faraway king to rescue his daughter. At this point, the storytelling opens up to the players, and they may decide to try and open the front door, which the Dungeon Master will reveal is locked, and the party will have to roll dice to see how successful they are in picking the lock, or perhaps smashing a window if they so choose. Once the party is inside, the Dungeon Master will describe the new setting, the inside of the castle, and the ability to direct the storytelling is back in the hands of the players. This cycle of the players acting, and the world reacting, will continue until the players encounter an enemy non-player character, at which point they will enter into combat. Combat begins with all characters— including non-player characters— rolling dice to determine the order in which they will act in the fight. The highest roll goes first, and the combat turns cycle repeatedly in this order until the enemy has been defeated. Most sessions of Dungeons & Dragons are only several hours long, and so all participants will come to an agreement of a good place in the story to pause until the next session (unless the story is short enough to only be one session long). The next session will begin with the Dungeon Master recapping the events of the previous session and re-establishing the setting that the players currently find themselves in. This cycle of player-directed action, reaction from the Dungeon Master, and then combat, will continue until the party has successfully searched the castle and saved the princess, or have decided that they do not want to save the princess. Once this end state of the storyline has been reached, the Dungeon Master will narratively describe the party claiming their reward

from the king— or perhaps becoming fugitives as they leave the princess behind. At this point, either the adventuring campaign is ended, or the Dungeon Master may set up the opening for another story arc soon to follow; the party may have gone to a tavern to celebrate, only to be approached by a strange man who needs their help.

Dungeons & Dragons is unlike many other games, in that it is not competitive (Brace, 2012). Although the players may encounter a malevolent army that is controlled by the Dungeon Master, the Dungeon Master has no interest in winning that battle; if the players' characters die, the game— and thus the storytelling— is over.

1.2   History and growing relevance

Dungeons & Dragons holds an interesting position within the current and recent historical zeitgeist. By 1981, the game had over three million players worldwide (Alsop, 1982) and has since grown to over 40 million according to an infographic created by Dungeons & Dragons publishers Wizards of the Coast in 2019 (Morics, 2020). This infographic also boasts its references in popular media, such as the television series Community, The Big Bang Theory, and South Park. Dungeons & Dragons has influenced many of today's successful creatives, with players including George R. R. Martin, Stephen Colbert, and *The Simpsons'* Matt Groening (Gilsdorf, 2014). With the rise of the internet, people are increasingly able to play games of Dungeons & Dragons without having to be co-present. One of the most popular virtual tabletop platforms, Roll20, hit 10 million players in 2022 with over 100 million hours played per quarter (Zambrano, 2022). The internet also allows for accessibility of actual-play Dungeons & Dragons shows, such as Dimension 20, which will be the focus of this thesis. At the time of writing, it has over half a million subscribers on YouTube.

1.3   Authorship in gameplay and its implications

Previous academic studies into Dungeons & Dragons games have focused largely on the identities and power dynamics of the participants, and it is this existing literature that will provide a basis for the analysis in this thesis.

Hammer (2007) introduces the idea of primary, secondary, and tertiary authors in roleplaying, which will be of particular use in analysing the dynamics between participants playing Dungeons & Dragons. A primary author prescribes the rules and provides general world-building; in the case of Dungeons & Dragons, it would be the authors of the rule books. Hammer's (2007) concept of the secondary author aligns with the role of Dungeon Master in the game examined in this thesis. The secondary author takes the rules prescribed by the primary author and applies them to a specific world that they have built. The tertiary authors would then be aligned with the role of the players. When the secondary author presents them with a specific scenario, such as a castle on a stormy night, it is the job of the tertiary authors to tell the specifics of the story, such as describing how they attempt to enter the castle. "Within this structure, higher order authors leave room for lower order authors to contribute. Lower order authors accept the framework and agree to work within it" (Stricklin, 2017, p. 66).

Primary authors typically have a high level of authority over the gameplay, which is to say that participants of a game will largely defer to the prescribed rules so as to maintain order. However, the primary author is only able to exercise a limited degree of agency over the direction of the gameplay; if a rule book were to dictate what exactly should happen in the story, it would function as a typical storybook, and there would be no collaboration in its telling. Secondary and tertiary authors have particularly complicated and fluid degrees of agency and authority; they must allow each other to have sufficient control over the storytelling in order to truly collaborate

(Stricklin, 2017). A secondary author will typically have a higher degree of authority than the tertiary authors, as the Dungeon Master functions as a sort of game referee by judging how successful dice rolls are, and how the players' actions affect the world. However, secondary authors implicitly have little authority over players' characters' actions; the role of the player is to control their character, and it removes the element of collaboration if the Dungeon Master were to seize this control. Regarding agency, secondary authors must achieve a workable balance. They must create a scenario for the players and maintain control over the world and its inhabitants, but they must also allow the players to have sufficient agency to act as tertiary authors and contribute to the storytelling (Hammer, 2007). As Hammer explains, "Most groups limit their agency based on the nature of collaborative play: any participant must cede at least some agency to other members of the group, or those other members cannot meaningfully participate" (p. 74).

These complex relationships between orders of authors, as well as their abilities to impact gameplay, will be a focus within this thesis. Given the collaborative nature of a game of Dungeons & Dragons, it is imperative that participants are able to effectively communicate and interact, and appropriately create the world at hand. Despite this, little academic work has been done on the use of language and interaction within games of Dungeons & Dragons. Hofstetter (2020a) draws attention to the fact that most interactional studies focussed on play have been conducted on data of participants playing video games, rather than board games. They have previously raised the point that studies on board games use them "as perspicuous settings to look at other interactional phenomena" (Hofstetter, 2020b, p. 251), rather than to study the action of playing the game. In this work, Hofstetter analyses the way in which thinking is embodied by players of several board games. They provide useful insight into how players use verbal and physical cues to convey not only that they are thinking over their

turn, but that the completion of their turn is, in fact, forthcoming. Through this, Hofstetter demonstrates a way in which board game players can communicate additional meaning beyond the surface meaning of their actions. While Dungeons & Dragons is not identical in form to traditional board games, this study aims to fill the identified gap in academic literature surrounding the actual playing of non-video games.

1.4   Conversation analysis and adjacency pairs

Conversation analysis is an empirical research method that seeks to describe how people accomplish social action. It focuses on authentic interactions and aims to describe how people make sense of one another. A key source of evidence in this approach is participants' responses (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 2007). Through the responses to a given turn-at-talk, participants show how they have understood that same turn, which then provides a resource for researchers to rely upon in developing an analysis and, ultimately, generating research findings. Responses in conversation always arise in a sequential context. This sequential context shapes how a response is understood, and subsequent actions that may follow. One of the strongest forms of sequential context is implemented by sequences of adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973).

Adjacency pairs are composed of two related, adjacent utterances spoken by different speakers. The sequence itself can be broken down into the first pair part— the initial utterance— and the second pair part— the fitted response which closes off the action sequence. With this first pair part, the initial speaker creates a context that constrains responsive actions by the other party, and encourages them to respond in certain ways, e.g., by answering, providing a return greeting, offering another assessment. By responding in certain ways, the recipient of the first pair part is able to

demonstrate their understanding of the preceding action, and their inclination to support it (i.e., align with it) or undermine it (i.e., disalign with it) (Schegloff, 2007). By choosing to provide an appropriate second pair part, or do something else, the recipient of the first pair part may also show how knowledgeable they are about the matter addressed, whether they have the right to give a response, or their analysis of the design of the initial turn. A key example of this is adjacency pairs involving assessments.

1.5 Assessments and response tokens

Assessments are actions that adopt an evaluative stance towards a matter. Upon the production of a first assessment via a first pair part, a second assessment is normatively implicated. Heritage and Raymond (2005) argue that aspects of the design of first and second assessments reflect the fact that a speaker requires insight into the affairs being addressed, i.e., they require knowledge of them. Moreover, they demonstrate that the rights to provide an assessment on a given subject is "ordinarily patrolled and defended" (Heritage & Raymond, 2005, p. 34) with reference to speakers' levels of knowledge (i.e., their "epistemic" status and stance) relative to each other. From these observations, subsequent research has demonstrated the fundamental role that epistemics plays in the formation of actions in conversation and the development of adjacency pair sequences (Heritage, 2012, 2013). Put simply, initiating and responsive assessments implicate participants' knowledge states, and require participants to commit to an epistemic stance. Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2014) contrast this "epistemic order" with the "deontic order". Deontics concerns the right to propose, determine, and undertake future actions. Through exerting deontic rights, participants demonstrate their entitlement to control future actions; perhaps even those of other people.

The contrasts between epistemics and deontics in assessments has been closely analysed by Seuren (2018). In this study, Seuren (2018) presents data from Dutch phone conversations and demonstrates the difference between two types of assessments. Firstly, he discusses assessments that convey an evaluative stance—that is, assessments that serve to respond to new information—in the form of terms that can be glossed as *fun/nice* and *lovely*. The second type is of particular interest; deontic assessments, in the form of the term glossed as *Ø is fine*. Seuren (2018) defines a participant's deontic authority as "their rights and obligations to determine their own and other's actions". He provides an example of a speaker proposing a future course of action and subsequently encroaching on the recipient's authority to determine their own actions. In these instances of deontic assessment, the assessments are utilised to provide feedback on the first pair part in an instance where the second speaker is orienting to their own authority regarding the first speaker. In doing so, they are adopting an authoritative deontic stance (see also Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014).

Seuren (2018) additionally discusses how a deontic assessment can be used to signal an understanding that the conversational topic has reached a point of possible completion. Antaki et al. (2000) offering a similar finding in a study of what they refer to as *high grade assessments* (e.g., *brilliant*, *terrific*), which may act as task-oriented devices when used to foreshadow movement through an interaction. This is further developed in Antaki's (2002, p. 10) later study, where he claims that that assessment "terms like *lovely*, *marvellous* and so on then, seem to do some specialist work in closings". He then uses this to support his conclusion that, by employing the format of assessment followed by a change of topic, a speaker is demonstrating a degree of control over the interaction. This conclusion regarding the deontic nature of assessments is again reflected in Antaki et al. (2000) as they conclude that they highlight an asymmetry in power between speakers.

Adjacency pairs and assessments provide an environment in which participants must navigate a variety of constraints to design a response. Not every responsive context in conversation will be as tightly constrained as these. Many conversational contexts involve complex, large, multi-part units that are sequentially organised, but not by adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007). When responding in these environments, recipients may need to simultaneously manage the local context while addressing a larger unit or activity (e.g., a storytelling, a series of topics, a complex explanation). A key resource for responding in these environments are response tokens, e.g., *mm*, *yeah*, *okay*, *right*, *alright* (see Gardner, 2001). Although, intuitively, we may think of these responses as interchangeable, recipients use them in systematic ways to show how they are supporting (or not supporting) the developing conversational activity.

Gardner (2001) states that response tokens are used to "indicate that a piece of talk by speaker has been registered by the recipient of that talk" (p. 13). He discusses how, in addition to other functions, response tokens can be used to mark incipient speakership. Gardner (2001, p. 52) proposes that some uses of *Okay* and *Alright* may be considered "change-of-activity tokens". He claims that these tokens serve the purpose of "the marking of junctures in the talk, and it proposes a move from one topic, activity or phase to another" (Gardner, 2001, p. 54). Betz et al. (2021) provide a similar examination, specifically on the use of the response *Okay* within everyday conversations. They discuss Beach's (1993) argument that the marker functions as both a response to prior units as well as a signal to others that there will be a change of topic to new, but relevant matters. Betz et al. (2021) present the previous findings that it is a turn-initial instance of the marker that is most commonly projecting a topic change, in addition to functioning as a response to the registered talk. They assert that the use of *okay* to mark a topic change is not treated as disruptive, as it unambiguously displays a "state-of-readiness" (p. 8). These assertions are supported by Schegloff's

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(1986) study into *okay* as a pre-closing used at conversational junctures, indicating a readiness to move on. Gardner (2007), in a later study, provides some comments on the response token *alright*. He analyses the way in which this token is similarly used to initiate movement to another topic, again calling it a change of activity token. Here, he contrasts this change of activity token with a more substantial analysis of *right*, which he argues may instead be used to mark epistemic progression in a course of action. In any case, with these kinds of tokens, participants are able to mark development in larger courses of action and, in the case of change of activity tokens, signal adequacy of the prior talk, and provide for transition in a topic or activity.

Betz et al. (2021) discuss how there is potential for more instances of change of activity tokens within institutional talk than there is in mundane conversation. Institutional talk differs from mundane conversation in that the goals of the participants are more limited, their identities are more constrained, and there is usually a structure in place to determine how participants are able to contribute (Heritage, 1998). Thus, there is potential for more instances of change of activity tokens due to the fact that these structured conversations tend to have distinctive phases that need to be addressed. Betz et al. (2021) also contend that response tokens used as change of activity tokens within institutional settings are often utilised by the persons managing the interaction (i.e., the party with deontic rights) in order to create incipient movement. This conclusion echoes Antaki et al. (2000) in their analysis of high grade assessments, about which they assert that there is "something irredeemably *institutional* in such an orientation" (p 258). They conclude that this is due to the fact that the speaker performing the assessment receives the prior talk not for its content, but for the work it does in completing the topic/activity.

I will now briefly turn to another form of institutional interaction: board games. There is a small body or research addressing these interactions. I will highlight

Hofstetter's (2020a) work on non-lexical "moaning". In this study, they describe the function of the observed moans as receipts that the events of the game have been complete and valid, rather than solely markers of the speaker's emotional reaction. They also note that these moans are often followed by a "lexical utterance that restates the reaction in a way that displays resistance to trouble or willingness to proceed" (Hofstetter, 2020a, p. 62). Although the focus of Hofstetter's study is on moans as contextualisation cues, rather than as a marker of change in activity, it provides useful insight into common conversation juncture utterances during play. Moreover, given the institutional nature of these interactions, and the defined tasks they involve, it seems likely that change of activity tokens may figure in regulating such gameplay.

1.6   The present study

The present study aims to answer the following research question:

"How does the Dungeon Master manage the development of gameplay in multiparty Dungeons & Dragons interactions?"

This research question will be addressed by exploring the Dungeon Master's use of *incredible* in the course Dungeons & Dragons gameplay. As well, this thesis aims to empirically investigate Hammer's (2007) concepts of authorship order and consider how the deontic relationships between participants are realised.

2 Method

2.1 Design

This study uses conversation analysis to conduct a descriptive qualitative analysis. The data studied are recordings of an unscripted live show focused on a game of Dungeons & Dragons. This show— Dimension 20— was produced by CollegeHumor and released on the network Dropout and was filmed on a roughly weekly schedule spanning from October 2019 to April of 2020. The selection and sampling of this dataset for the present study— as opposed to collecting recordings from games at which researchers could be in attendance— was primarily motivated by convenience. Secondarily, however, this show is suitable for study as it has been recorded live, and thus is unedited unlike many other actual-play Dungeons & Dragons shows. Additionally, it was recorded from 3 angles, which captures the participation of all participants at almost all times, and its commercial purpose ensures a good audio quality. This study has received ethics approval from the Macquarie University Human Sciences Subcommittee (reference: 520221086036571). Permission to use these materials for research was also granted by the CollegeHumor Chief Digital Officer.

2.2 Participants

This study focuses on the 7 cast members who take part in this game of Dungeons & Dragons. This cast is comprised of 4 male, 2 female, and 1 nonbinary participant; their ages range between 29 and 37. They speak English fluently and all currently reside in Los Angeles, California. At the time of filming, all participants were familiar with the game of Dungeons & Dragons, as well as their roles within the party and each other's characters. The game is headed and organised by Brennan, the Dungeon Master. He guides the players through the plotline that he has devised, and

ascertains the ways in which the players' actions influence the world around them. The players of this game are Ally, Emily, Lou, Murph, Siobhan, and Zac. Their role as players is to control characters within Brennan's world, and to write the story through their actions.

2.3   Data collection, processing, and transcription

All episodes of Dimension 20 are available on the Dropout.tv streaming service with a subscription, and basic transcripts of all episodes are available on their associated wiki. The total length of the episodes considered was approximately 41 hours, which included all live-action episodes where all parties were co-present. The media files for these episodes were accessed through the Dropout.tv streaming service with a subscription. These episodes were initially reviewed to observe noteworthy behaviours and develop a sense of potential candidate phenomena for analysis. Once a candidate analytic focus had been identified, data were transcribed using standard, conversation-analytic conventions for talk. The transcription was done by annotating the basic transcripts as taken from the wiki pages. ELAN was used to segment the transcripts and ascertain the length of pauses, as well as to identify parts of speech which had not been transcribed— either due to overlap or because they were non-lexical utterances. Additionally, some adjustments were made to the standard conversation-analytic transcriptions to allow for ease when parsing D&D-specific conversation. For example, if a player speaks in-character, they were marked as a new speaker, with an asterisk after their name. This was deemed necessary as in-character roleplaying serves different functions compared to out-of-character talk. Additionally, the participants are not named with pseudonyms as this data is commercially available, all participants are public figures, and the findings of this research are not of a sensitive nature.

Table 1

Coarse coding of incredible *in the present dataset.*

Coding question	Percentage Yes (*No*)
Does the Dungeon Master say *incredible*?	99 (1)
Does *incredible* occur during combat?	46 (54)
Does *incredible* occur after roleplay?	46 (54)
Does *incredible* occur before a multi-clausal turn?	60 (40)
Does *incredible* immediately result in a change in activity?	70 (30)
Is *incredible* the first lexical item in the turn?	83 (17)
Is *incredible* the only item in the turn?	30 (70)
Is *incredible* produced in overlap?	20 (80)
Is *incredible* a consistent volume to the surrounding talk?	74 (26)
Is *incredible* a consistent pitch with the surrounding talk?	84 (16)
Is *incredible* a consistent pace with the surrounding talk?	68 (32)

2.4   Data analysis

The response *incredible* was identified as a candidate analytic focus during data processing. Using publisher-prepared and researcher-prepared transcripts, all instances of this token were identified in the data. A total of 80 instances were identified. To support preliminary analysis of the token, a coding scheme was developed and employed to identify the coarse characteristics of each instance. This coding scheme included codes for stage in gameplay, conversational sequentiality,

turn-taking, turn design, and prosody. A summary of the key outcomes of this coding process is presented in Table 1.

Following coding, 7 instances were selected for detailed, exploratory qualitative analysis using conversation-analytic principles and practices. These instances were selected with a view to establishing candidate normative and non-normative aspects of the use of *incredible* in these interactions. Single episode conversation analytic methods (Schegloff, 1987) were used to describe the organisation of these instances and demonstrate how participants made sense of *incredible* in these moments. As such, this study did not aim to comprehensively describe this practice; instead, it aimed to offer preliminary conclusions to support future investigation.

3 Analysis

3.1 Introducing *incredible* as an analytic focus

This section will explore an initial example of *incredible* from the present data and introduce some candidate normative features of this practice. I will describe the features of this instance with regard to its positioning in gameplay and sequence, and its design and delivery. It should be noted, too, that each extract in this analysis chapter is marked with a clip code that is formatted *e[episode number]-[token number]*. For example, the upcoming Extract 1 has the clip code e15-5, indicating that it is the 5th time Brennan has used *incredible* in the 15th episode. Following the clip code, and in the leftmost column of the transcripts, there is a timestamp for where this clip occurs within the larger episode.

Extract 1 occurs during combat, which means that the players are acting in alternating gameplay turns mediated by Brennan. The transcript begins at the end of Siobhan's turn of combat, as she remarks in lines 3-4 about how her character has apparently just cast spells while laid prone. We will see that Brennan employs *incredible* at line 37 to signal an upcoming transition in gameplay.

Extract 1

Clip Code: e15-5 (1:06:02 – 1:07:17)

```
1:06:02 1  Sio -stand up from prone then.=
        2  Bre =.hh cool >you [stand up from prone.<]
        3  Sio                [i've done-          ] >i did all of that
        4      lying down.<=
        5  Mur =[huh huh.]
        6  Emi  [ahah    ] [hah hah hah ha ha] (  )]
        7  Bre  [uh ye[ah] [                  ]
        8  All       [a::h[hah                ]
        9  Lou            [dhhou:h¿           ]=
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```
        10 Bre =YOU:↑ SEE- [there's this   ] incredible-]=

        11 Emi            [( )            ]           ]

        12 Zac            [°counterspell.°]           ]

        13 Sio            [pss::h.                    ]

        14 Bre =.hh >you j'st- pew pow pow pew pew< .h lightning and you

        15     slap penelope's counterspell out; .hh the lightning bolt.

        16     (0.3) uh >hits her thing an she goes,<=

1:06:17 17 Bre* =↑.hhh oh my go:d are you like some kind of wi:zard now

        18     incredibl:e.=

        19 Sio* =↑oh my goodness are you some kind of me:an quee:n,

        20     [cuz yer] gonna die:;=

        21 All [hh     ]

        22 Mur =[mhuh   ]

        23 All  [huh huh] [hahahah ]

        24 Bre*          [uhm mine] [was bette:r.    ]

        25 Sio*                    [°f- i think that] didn't work,°

        26     (.) [i don't think] that worked.]

        27 Bre     [ahuh huh huh ]           ]

        28 Emi     [hah hah      ] [hah       ]

        29 All                    [ha ha huh] [huh huh] huh huh=

        30 Bre                               [uh:m    ]

        31 Emi =[AHAhahah     ]

        32 Sio* [i have t wr-] start writing these insults down before

        33     [we  ] [get into the fight.  ]

        34 Emi [ahah] [hah hah hah           ]

        35 Bre [.hh ] [                      ]

        36 All        [ahuh huh              ][huh hu:h_   ]

1:06:32 37 Bre                               [uh:        in]credibl:e,

        38     .hh at the end of adai:ne's tu:rn daybreak's >taking a

        39     legendary action.< (0.4) .hh uhm (0.2) [you see-   ]

        40 Zac                                        [°le↑gendary]

        41     action?°=

        42 Sio =°huh°=

        43 Bre =uh:, (1.2) .h (0.2) uhm, hh

        44     (0.7)

        45 Zac .hhh

        46     (0.2)

        47 Bre uh: (0.5) da:ybrea:k (0.3) is goi:ng to:: (0.5) uh: (.)
```

```
1:06:47 48      do comma:nd (.) a:lly:,=
        49 Mur =°aww°=
        50 Bre =.hh >and he's gonna have< dayne take a swing at fabian.=
        51 Zac =↑did any of them fall down?
        52     (0.4)
        53 Lou uh: (0.5) twenny four ac.=
        54 Bre =twenny four ac? .h (0.3) uh:m (0.4) .hh (0.5) uh: (1.1)
1:07:02 55     .hh (0.5) you: see:: (0.4) >that dayne's gonna take
        56     tha:t,< (0.3) .h uhm (0.4) .hh (.) >hold on one se:cond,<
        57      (0.8) .hh hh (2.5) THA'S A MISS:.=
        58 Lou =ri[poste.]=
        59 Mur    [nice. ]
        60 Bre =.hh AHUH [HUH HUH][HUH:   ]
        61 Lou          [uh::   ][        ]
        62 Mur                   [yea:h. ]
        63 Sio                   [nic:[::e    ]
        64 Emi                        [YEA::H. ]
        65 Zac                        [↑ss::in_]
1:07:17 66 Lou                        [grea:t. ]
```

At lines 5-9, Murph, Emily, Ally, and Lou laugh in response to Ally's turn at lines 3-4. Brennan then begins to narrate and summarise the events of Siobhan's turn of combat in line 7 and 10. Emily, Zac, and Siobhan add sound effects in lines 11 through 13, before Brennan is able to launch into an uninterrupted description at line 14. At line 17-18, Brennan roleplays as one of the enemy combatants, addressing Siobhan's character, who then responds in lines 19 and 20. Murph and Ally interject with laughter in lines 21-23. Brennan and Siobhan continue their roleplayed conversation through lines 24-26, which prompts further laughter. At line 30, Brennan says *uhm* in overlap with the laughter. Siobhan comments in-character that she should start writing down insults before fights, which prompts laughter again in lines 34-36. At line 37, Brennan produces *incredible* before narrating the following turn of events— a non-player character, Daybreak's combat turn—within gameplay in lines 38-39. Zac

quietly comments on Brennan's narration at lines 40-41. Brennan, at line 47-48 and 50, addresses Lou because the following turn in combat will be directed at his character. At line 53, Lou tells Brennan that he will have to roll a 24 on the dice in order to successfully land the attack. Lines 54-57 capture Brennan responding to Lou. As he rolls the dice, he asks for a moment's pause to find the non-player character's statistics to add to the dice roll, and then reports that the attack does not succeed in hitting Lou's character. At line 58, Lou responds with *riposte*— a reference to an ability his character possesses which allows him to return fire on a failed attack—which prompts cheers and celebration in lines 59 through 66.

In Extract 1, Brennan successfully brings about a change in activity with no resistance from the players. In terms of gameplay activity, the use of the token *incredible* occurs as one participant's combat turn ends, and another's— Brennan's own— begins. Siobhan's in-character comment at lines 25-26 acts as self-deprecation regarding her prior awkward comeback, but is designed to be comedic. In lines 27 through 29, Brennan, Emily, and Ally laugh in response, which seemingly completes the action sequence. In response, Brennan says *uhm* at line 30, likely making a bid for the floor. However, it appears to be insufficient in quelling others' talk when, at line 32, Siobhan overlaps with the continued laughter to make an additional in-character comment. This in-turn compels further laughter from Emily, Brennan, and Ally. At line 37, Brennan produces *uh*—apparently making a bid for the floor once again— following which he produces the *incredible*. Although it follows and partially overlaps with reactions to Siobahn's comment, the *incredible* does not seem to function entirely as an assessment of it. Immediately following the instance, Brennan produces a short in-breath and without pause begins to narrate the following (gameplay) turn. In this instance, others do not compete for the floor. This is reflected in Zac's comment in lines 40-41 in which he appears to attempt other-initiated repair. Generally, this other-

initiation of repair would be strongly response-mobilising. The fact that it does not receive a response is marked and indicative of asymmetrical rights to direct the gameplay, and the normative orientation of all other participants to its continuation as directed by Brennan. It is clear in this instance that *incredible* has marked an incipient change of activity as Brennan employs it in order to direct gameplay towards the following combat turn.

3.2 Accomplishing transition in various gameplay contexts using *incredible*

This section will provide examples of instances in which Brennan employs *incredible* in different gameplay contexts, as well as different turn and sequential contexts. Through this, I aim to demonstrate the flexibility of the token, and its potential to effect change in activity, and manage gameplay, in a variety of ways.

Extract 2 occurs while the players are experiencing downtime between battles and are preparing their supplies. Preceding it, Brennan has given Emily's character a weapon which he has created for her, and they have just gone through the features that this weapon has. The segment starts with Brennan explaining that the weapon (a bass guitar/axe hybrid) is particularly useful in combat when enemy combatants are using magic that she can redirect towards them. Brennan uses *incredible* at line 14 to change activity to resume an earlier, still pending, aspect of gameplay.

Extract 2

Clip Code: e17-3 (55:51 – 56:31)

```
55:51   1 Bre u:hm (0.5) uh (.) >so yeah< it's it's basically the- the-
        2     all the powers of the bass (.) have to do with you being
        3     like (0.3) extremely effective in like hellish combat_
```

```
      4      when like (.) .h lightning and fire and cold are all
      5      swingin around (.)=
      6 Emi  =hh=
      7 Bre  =and people are casting spells at you: y- it's it
56:06 8      becomes (.) very dangerous for other people.=
      9 Emi  =for a second i forget that my head whispered an told
     10      me it was all my fault.=
     11 Bre  =huh huh [hah hah] hu::h
     12 All          [hah hah]
     13      (0.4)
     14 Bre  .hhh uh incredible .hhh (0.2) [u:hm tsk u:h      ]
     15 Sio                                [heh heh heh heh heh]=
     16 Bre  =u:h (0.2) zac.=
     17 Zac  =okay.
     18      (0.3)
     19 Bre  yeah.
     20      (0.8)
     21 Zac  hhhhh we're gonna flip a coin.=
     22 All  =ya=
     23 Zac  =alright,=
     24 Lou  =flip
     25 All  =ya
     26 Lou  [flip flip flip flip flip_]
56:21 27 Zac [one i:s (.) one is       ] the first axe, (.) two
     28      is the thunder axe.
     29      (1.0)
     30 Zac  one.
     31      (0.4)
     32 Bre  .h
     33      (0.6)
     34 All  oh, you sounded [kind of £disappointe:d£,      ]
     35 Emi                  [is it gravity? [is it gravity?]
     36 Zac                                 [i think it's  ] the
     37      gravity one.
     38 Bre  the gravity one.
```

In earlier scenes, Emily's character had heard a magical voice whispering inside

her head, telling her that it's her fault that her friends have been suffering. Thus, at

lines 9 and 10, Emily jokes that receiving this weapon is so good that it makes her forget this disconcerting occurrence. Brennan and Ally respond to Emily's assertion with laughter, and at line 14, Brennan says *incredible* before immediately selecting the next speaker, Zac. Immediately prior to the discussion about Emily's weapon, Zac had been trying to decide between two weapons to take for his character, and from this point, the conversation returns to that topic. At line 21, Zac says that he will flip a coin to make the decision, which spurs responses from both Ally and Lou. Ally says *ya* at lines 22 and 25, and Lou begins to chant *flip* repeatedly at lines 24 and 26. Once Zac has flipped the coin, Ally and Emily respond in rather different ways to the outcome of the toss; Ally by questioning Zac's stance towards the outcome, and Emily by asking which axe Zac has now acquired. In line 36, Zac takes up Emily's question, indicating that it is *the gravity one*, which Brennan also confirms at line 38.

In Extract 2, Emily's assertion at 9-10 arises following Brennan's explanation of her new weapon. Here, she offers a stance on behalf of her character, but it is designed for non-serious uptake by her recipients. It receives fitted laughter from Brennan and Ally, which potentially closes the action sequence Emily has initiated. Brennan produces *incredible* in the moments following his and Ally's laughter. It is the third component in his turn at talk, following a long in-breath and *uh*. Although it is adjacent to it, this *incredible* does not appear to be addressing Emily's assertion (or at least not solely). After *incredible*, Brennan produces another long in-breath and *uhm*, projecting the production of another turn-constructional unit (TCU) in his turn. Despite Brennan's lack of prompt progress following *incredible*, no other interactants exploit this space to make a bid for the floor, yielding speakership to him. Brennan's selection of Zac as next-speaker resumes a gameplay activity that had been suspended by his explanation of Emily's new weapon, and incidentally interrupted by Emily's assertion and its responses. It is also noteworthy that this resumption is treated as

straightforwardly transparent by Zac, who simply receipts his selection with *okay*, before proposing how to proceed (i.e., by flipping a coin). Therefore, with *incredible*, Brennan foreshadows an incipient transition in activity; in this instance, away from Emily's character-based response to her new weapon, and towards the projected next gameplay task, i.e., Zac selecting a new weapon.

Extract 3 occurs within combat, towards the end of the battle as most enemy combatants—all non-player characters—have been fought. The remaining enemies—a group of demons—are attempting to flee the scene, having kidnapped Emily's character's father. Brennan uses the *incredible* twice here; first at line 17 to move between Lou's turn and his own turn, and then again at line 17 to move between two phases of his own turn.

Extract 3

Clip Code: e3-5 (1:20:35 - 1:21:33)

```
1:20:35 1 Lou* uh: .hhh <hangman, there's a demon .hh coming out the
        2      door .hh with a very important person .hhh I need
        3      you to attack him with your slam attack.=
        4 Bre  =hhh .hh=
        5 Bre* =#sire, [it would] be my honou::r=
        6 Emi          [ahuh    ]
        7      (0.2)
        8 Bre* =.hh i wish to sla:m the [de ]mon:s#=
        9 All                          [.hh]
       10 Lou* =slam awhhay .hh=
1:20:50 11 Bre* =#long have the devils of the nine hells and the demons
       12      of the abyss wa::rred<.hhh let the war continue he::re
       13      .hh >in front of the hotel< cava[lie::r# ]
       14 Sio                                 [huh huh ][huh  ]
       15 Lou*                                          [YhhES] YES [hh]
       16 Bre                                                      [uh]
       17      (0.4) tsk .hh ↑UH >INCREDIBLE< (0.3) uhm tsk uh: so the-
```

```
        18     yer hangmans gonna act on your initiati:ve .hh u:hm
1:21:05 19     °tsk we now s:ee: (0.3) uh: that is going to be: (0.4)
        20     uh s:andra° lynn: .hhh uhm (0.4) tsk uh sandra lynn sees
        21     her (0.2) uh: she's like
        22     (0.2)
23 Bre* >MY EX-HUSBAND<=
24 Bre =[and ru: ][ns out the doo:r .hh uh [hhuh ] .hh=
25 Mur  [huh huh ][                         [     ]
26 Emi          [huh hah hah hah hah hh  [     ]
27 All                                  [°↑hm°]
1:21:20 28 Bre =uh: (.) incredibl:e,=
29 Emi* =<i knew you still loved im
30      (0.4)
31 Bre tsk uh:m=
32 Lou =oh [ho hoh]
33 Zac     [aw hoh]=
34 Bre =.hh tsk uh: (0.9) tsk uh- she: (0.4) runs out (0.3) uhm=
35 Zac =.hh=
36 Bre =tsk and she's gonna [go twi]ce he:re
37 Zac                      [hh mmm]
```

The extract begins with Lou roleplaying, using his turn in the combat order to instruct his magical, sentient motorbike to stop the fleeing enemies. Brennan responds in-character as the motorbike at line 5, which prompts a laugh from Emily.[1] Lou encourages the motorbike's plans with a *slam away*, and Brennan continues with an in-character speech about his distaste for demons in lines 11-13. This again prompts a laugh from Siobhan, and another encouragement from Lou's character. At line 17, Brennan says *incredible* and concludes that the motorbike will be acting on Lou's next turn. He then, at line 19, begins a narration of the following combat turn, which is his own. In this turn, he acts on behalf of the non-player character Sandra Lynn, who is

---

[1] In this extract, hash signs are used at lines 5, 8, 11, and 13 surrounding Brennan's in-character talk. This was a stylistic choice made due to the fact that the "creaky voice" indicator is the closest approximation that Jeffersonian transcription has to "scary demon motorcycle voice".

Emily's character's mother, and Gilear's ex-wife. Brennan introduces the start of this non-player character's turn, through to line 23 at which point he offers an in-character quote as Sandra Lynn. He returns to out-of-character narration at line 24. Murph, Emily and Ally laugh in response, following which Brennan uses *incredible* for the second time in this extract at line 28. Emily roleplays at line 29; she is responding in-character to Brennan's character's actions. This receives laughter from Lou and Zac. At lines 34 and 36, Brennan continues to narrate his unfinished combat turn.

Extract 3 is of interest to consider given that there are two instances of *incredible* within a short period. The first instance is set up by Brennan's roleplaying in lines 11-13. This roleplay functions as his character— the sentient motorbike— agreeing to the plan of attack devised by Lou's character. The interactional sequence is completed by Ally and Siobhan laughing at Brennan's response, as well as Lou's in-character celebration of Brennan's enthusiasm at line 15. At line 17, Brennan produces *incredible* following two instances of *uh* and an in-breath, and preceding *uhm uh*. Unlike Extract 2, the adjacent talk at lines 11-13 was produced by Brennan himself. Thus, *incredible* is not obviously acting as an assessment of another participant's conduct. It may, however, be broadly understood as adopting an evaluative stance towards the in-game happenings he has just reported (as Siobhan and Lou have begun to similarly react too). In addition to this, and likely principally, Brennan's *incredible* appears to be marking the closing of Lou's combat turn, and ushering in his own. It is also worth noting that this *incredible* is prosodically marked. The second instance of *incredible* within this extract seems to be serving a different purpose. Whereas the first instance marks a change in activity between combat turns, the second appears to mark a return to Brennan's current combat turn as it has been derailed. His in-character talk at line 23 receives a substantial response, which threatens to derail Brennan's narration. Principal evidence of this can be seen in the overlap at line 24, as Brennan

must compete with laughter from Murph, Emily, and Ally. Further evidence of this is found at line 29 with Emily's comment, which is a direct response to Brennan's in-character talk. As such, this second instance sees Brennan prospectively managing the potential derailment of his narration, which is occasioned by the response to his roleplaying.

Extract 4 occurs shortly after the adventuring party has landed in a new, unfamiliar town. They have just decided that they will make their way to a specific tavern to track down their local contact. They have discussed how they will get there, with Emily and Siobhan's characters having resolved to fly. Brennan uses *incredible* at line 25 to create movement away from the preparation for travel, towards a narration of the travel itself.

Extract 4

Clip Code: e5-3 (1:45:30 - 1:46:11)

```
1:45:30  1 Emi  [oka:y   ]
         2 Bre  [uh y'guy]s fly over the sternwood in the even[i:ng- ]
         3 Mur                                            [<CAN I]
         4      hang onto somebody's ba:ck [and ride] [with em]=
         5 Emi                            [oh yah  ] [       ]
         6 Sio                            [YEAH    ] [       ]
         7 Lou                                      [yeah:  ]
         8 Sio  =[fer    ]sure=
         9 Bre   [tsk .hh]
        10 Mur  =thank you=
        11 Bre  =[tsk .hh] [uhm khm      ]
        12 Emi   [ahh    ] [             ]
        13 Zac*            [<look out fer] a:rr[o:ws]
        14 Bre                               [.hh ]=
        15 Emi  =ha hah .hhh=
        16 Bre  =tsk u:hm=
        17 Sio  =>oh yeah then maybe i should cast it< on: u:[hm-  ]
```

```
        18 Emi                                              [>bt i]
               can
        19     also cast< darkness on us=

        20 ?    =hhh[uh]

        21 Sio    [oh] [great  ]

1:45:45 22 Emi         [£so wer] just a flying:£-=

        23 Sio  =okay <an i have dark vision bcus of £boggy£=

        24 Emi  =huh ha ha ha ha [.hhh]

        25 Bre               [tsk ] uh: incredible .hh uhm (0.3)

        26     °tsk so (0.4) u:hh° (1.1) .h ↑you: (0.3) thhake off

        27     fly:ing >into the night sky< .hh you see thuh
               headlights
1:46:00 28     of the va:n moving through four [castles .h (this)]=

        29 Emi                              [.hhh hh          ]

        30 Bre  =.hh buh [buh boom] running over pirates=

        31 Emi          [hahh    ]

        32 Bre* =#yarr#=

        33 Bre  =[pshh pwch] phm ↑beep beep [.hh gilear going]

        34 Emi   [.hh      ]                [               ]

        35 Lou                              [mm huh huh      ]=

        36 Bre* =.hhh i'm crying so [hard that i can't] see::=

        37 Lou                     [huh huh           ]

        38 Emi  =ahah [hah ]

        39 Bre        [u:hm]
```

As the extract commences, Brennan's turn at line 2 beginning with *uh* narrates
the party's actions as they fly over the Sternwood forest. He is overlapped by Murph at
line 3, however, who asks if he can ride with the party members who will be flying to
their location. In lines 5-7, Emily, Siobhan, and Lou voice their support for this idea,
which Murph thanks them for in line 10. After this, Brennan takes an audible in-breath
and says *uhm*, following which Zac speaks in-character as he warns the flying party to
look out for arrows shot at them. Emily laughs in response, and Brennan once again
produces an audible in-breath and an *uhm*. At line 17, Siobhan questions the logistics
of their plan; namely what object she should cast the flying spell upon. Emily replies
that she can *cast darkness* to shroud the players from danger. At line 20, a crew

member off camera clears their throat audibly. Siobhan positively assesses this proposal in line 21, following which Emily begins to produce a turn, but cuts herself off. Siobhan then takes the floor and comments that she will be able to see in the darkness because of her animal companion, Boggy the frog. At line 25, Brennan produces *uh incredible*. Following this, he begins a narration of the party's actions which spans lines 26 to 28. This narration includes sound effects in lines 30 and 33, as well as in-character talk from a nameless pirate being run over in line 32, and from the van-driving non-player character Gilear in line 36.

The instances in Extract 4 where Brennan fails to assume and maintain the floor are essential for understanding the functions of *incredible* at line 25. The first such instance occurs in line 2; Brennan gains the floor with *uh*, after which he begins to narrate the following scene— thus attempting to initiate a change in activity. Brennan's TCU, and hence this change in activity, is then interrupted by Murph, who resists the conversational movement. The second instance occurs at line 11, as Brennan again bids for the floor with an in-breath and an *uhm*. This bid is similarly resisted, this time by Zac who speaks in-character about his concern that the party may be open to attacks. Brennan appears to clear his throat at the end of line 11 as he allows Zac's resistance. Zac's in-character line is designed for non-serious uptake, however, and it is met with laughs at line 15 from Emily. At line 16, Brennan once more attempts to bid for the floor with another in-breath and *uhm*. In this instance, his bid is resisted by Siobhan, as she discusses the logistics of getting the party across town, which sparks a discussion through to line 24. At line 25, Brennan makes yet another bid for the floor, this time with his *uh* followed by *incredible*. In this instance, there is no competition for the floor and no resistance to his bid. As in the previous extracts, *incredible* is used here to foreshadow a change in activity towards plot progression. However, this extract is particularly noteworthy given that Brennan's bids for the floor— and thus his bids

to signal incipient transition— are all resisted until he uses *incredible*. This is evidence that this bid functions differently, in that it serves as a closing marker for the character talk, while also projecting Brennan's change of activity. It is also worth noting that Brennan's post-*incredible* narration at line 24 is not an exact repeat of his first attempt at line 2. This is evidence that this *incredible* does not function to mark a resumption of a derailed TCU, but rather to mark a change in activity in a way that is consistent with what he began prior.

3.3   Resisting transition following *incredible*

This section will provide examples of instances of *incredible* that were used to foreshadow a change in activity, but this movement was resisted by other participants. Through analysis of these examples, I aim to demonstrate the varied ways in which participants respond to the use of *incredible*, as well as how Brennan adapts to resistance to activity change.

Extract 5 occurs as the party has just arrived in an unfamiliar city that is full of pirates. They have had a run-in with a non-player character who had a racism-like problem with Murph's character over the fact that Murph is playing as a goblin; Emily's character drove the non-player character away by adopting a disguise as the non-player character himself, which scared him away. Brennan employs *incredible* at line 18, but is resisted at line 19.

Extract 5

Clip Code: e5-1 (57:45 – 58:35)

```
57:45  1  Bre  =↑UH >↑↑yeah y'guys 're-< ↓realising you are extremely not
       2       in your progressive homel[and.]
       3  All                          [₀.hh] [no₀]
```

```
      4  Sio                                    [i  ] pull a tricorn hat-

      5       out of my[:

      6  All          [>phnhnh[n<

      7                      [$m[(h)y co(h)at$]

      8  Emi                  [hh hih      ] heh=

      9  Bre  =thhh:=$↑y' p(h)u:ll a tricorn-↑$=

     10  All  =SO YOU LOOK IN YER PREP >SCHOOL [UNIFORM< BUT [YOU HAVE] A=

     11  Emi                                  [(h)           [       ]

     12  Sio                                                [no     ]

     13       =[TRICORN HA(h):T_ ]

58:00 14  Sio  [NO I HAVE A DENIM] JACKET an a [tr(h)i]corn ha:t which is=

     15  Bre                              [hh    ]

     16  Sio  =much more [regular.]

     17  Lou             [mm hm.  ]=

     18  Bre  =.HH incredible:_ uh:m=

     19  Emi  =>I'M JUST GONNA KEEP ON< ↓this (.) this mans (0.2) as my

     20       disguise.

     21       (0.2)

     22  Bre  cool. >you: guys continue to walk through canon court,<
             (0.5)

     23       uhm=

     24  All  =uh i cast £light on my tie dye shirt£ so it glo(h)ws.

58:15 25       (0.3)

     26  Bre  bv[v::m just glo:win:g (.) y'see allister says]=

     27  Emi    [hoh hoh hoh hoh huh huh .hhh              ]

     28  Bre* =.hh wow you guys are a whole lot_

     29       (0.4)

     30  Emi  hhuh=

     31  Mur  =£a[righ£]

     32  All*   [.hh ]let's go, [baby: ]

     33  Zac*               [buddy ]

     34  Emi               [.hh   ][aha hah        ]

     35  All*                      [let's [find ge:r]by:.    ]

     36  Zac*                            [let'[s keep going.]

     37  Mur                                 [hhuh khuh huh] huh

     38       huh  [huh ]

     39  Bre       [u:hm] yo(h)u: (0.4) head through the rest of canon uh

     40       (0.2) court .hh=
```

31

```
58:30 41 Emi  =hh=
      42 Bre  =and you emerge from underground (0.2) uhm (1.3) in the
      43       neighbourhood of galleyard. .hh
```

The extract begins with Brennan noting that the party is not in their progressive homeland, given that they have already had to face fantasy-bigotry towards their goblin character player. At line 4, Siobhan says that her character pulls out a tricorn hat in order to fit in with the pirates. Ally, Emily, and Brennan react with laughter. Brennan and Ally react by drawing attention to this premise in lines 9 and 10 respectively. In line 14 and 16, Siobhan reasserts her character's choice by jokingly arguing that her tricorn hat does not look strange with her current outfit. At line 18, Brennan uses *incredible*, but his developing turn is truncated as Emily mentions that her character will be keeping on her disguise as the earlier non-player character. After a brief pause, Brennan says *cool* and begins to narrate the party's movement through the city district of canon court. At line 24, Ally says that they will cast the spell *light* on their tie dye shirt so that it glows; this acts as a non-serious commentary on how poorly the party is attempting to lay low. At line 26, Brennan provides a sound effect for the spell being cast, and roleplays as a friendly non-player character— Allister— who comments that the party is *a whole lot*. Murph, Ally, and Zac respond to this dialogue by suggesting movement. In-character at lines 32 and 35, Ally says they should go and find their next contact, Gerby. At 33 and 36, Zac suggests that they keep going. Brennan then, at line 39, is able to restart his narration of the party's movement which was previously attempted at line 22. This time he is successful, and he brings them to their next scene at lines 42-43.

Extract 5 is a particularly interesting example of participants resisting activity change, with Brennan allowing their resistance. Siobhan's joke at lines 14 and 16 receives the fitted response from Lou at line 17 in his *mm hm*, which appears to close

the action sequence. Brennan takes this opportunity to use *incredible* after a particularly audible in-breath. Following it, Brennan employs *uhm* as an attempt to keep the floor, but Emily reclaims it. The start of Emily's turn at line 19 is both faster and louder than her surrounding talk; this suggests some sensitivity to Brennan marking a change in activity, and she was rushed in producing her turn which was relevant to the previous activity. Emily's turn is followed by a brief silence which Brennan follows with *cool*, and then a similarly rushed start to his next TCU. In this instance, *cool* appears similar to *incredible*, and it does end up prefacing an attempted change in activity towards narration of the following scene. However, it appears to function more locally in assessing Emily's contribution to the previous scene. Brennan then employs *uhm* following a silence at the end of 22, which again attempts to hold the floor, but at line 24 Ally inserts their commentary on their character's actions. Brennan plays into this resistance and roleplays an in-character response to the players' actions. Brennan's roleplay receives fitted laughter from Emily at line 30, and embedded laughter from Murph and Ally at lines 31 and 32. This closes the action sequence and provides an environment in which change in activity may occur. It is at this point that Zac and Ally appear to prompt movement away from the current activity; this is of particular interest as it is very rarely the players who prompt the change in activity. This demonstrates their orientation to Brennan's previous attempts to move on, i.e., their understanding of the normative implications of *incredible*. Although this eventual change in activity was prompted by the players, it is actually performed by Brennan, again showing asymmetrical rights to direct the gameplay.

Extract 6 occurs before any gameplay has actually begun. Prior to the extract, the players were performing general set-up. They had been introducing the show, greeting the audience, and had begun addressing recent fan-works made for the show. There had been a recent trend in drawing one of the non-player characters—Gilear, a

character's dad—as attractive, and this extract begins with players offering their opinions on this matter. Brennan uses *incredible* at line 18 in an attempt to move towards a change of activity and begin the actual gameplay.

Extract 6

Clip Code: e14-1 (2:50 – 3:20)

```
2:50  1 Sio  [HA HA HAH HAH ]
      2 All  [hah hah hah    ]
      3 Lou  [there's no::  ] [chance. ]
      4 Bre             [THE CHA:][LLENGE] HAS BEEN PUT F[O:RTH]=
      5 Emi                 [.hh  ]                [I'M ]
      6       [rooting] hard for [hot gilear; i][be ]lieve it,
      7 All  =[wo:w   ]          [           ][   ]
      8 Sio             [hee hee hee ][   ]
      9 All                              [yah]
     10      (0.4)
     11 Bre  [.hh  ]
     12 Lou  [>imma] start a twitter account< just to [evaluate hot]=
     13 Sio                                      [hey he he   ]
     14 Lou  =[gilear fanart,]
     15 Emi  [HH [HAH] HAH  ] HAA:=
     16 Mur      [heh]
     17 All  =hah hah [do i:t]
     18 Bre          [uh:  ] [incredible] we have [our first-      ]
     19 Lou          [uh:  ] [y(h)eah   ]        [                ]
     20 Sio                               [<why dyou have a]
     21      [finsta?]
     22 Lou  [hheh   ]=
     23 Bre  =ah [hah hah hah     ]
3:05 24 Sio     [we:ll lemme tell] you:_=
     25 Bre  =.hh uhm (.) tsk (0.2) [u:hh-   ]
     26 All                         [gilear's] pouty lips.=
     27 Lou  =[yes.   ]
     28 Emi   [mm hm  ]
     29 Bre  [S:PEAhh]KING OF HOT GILEAR,=
```

```
   30 Sio  =mm ha [ha:          ]
   31 Bre        [GILEAR'S FEEL]IN >PRETTY HOT RIGHT NO:W<=
   32 Zac  =[wo:w  ]
   33 Bre   [ON THE] #↓FIRST [CIRCLE] [OF HELL::#.]
   34 Emi              [.hhh  ] [             ]
   35 All                    [wo[:w     ]
   36 Sio                        [woa:h   ][smokin::_   ]
   37 Lou                        [mmmm   ][             ]
   38 Zac                              [clean, solid]
   39      segue. hh=
   40 All  =[heh heh        ]
   41 Sio   [hah [hah hah    ]
   42 Bre        [↑↑honestly] th- i- that [wasn't planned.]
   43 Emi        [hhh        ]            [              ]
3:20 44 Zac                              [yeah yeah_    ]
```

At line 3, Lou says that there is no chance of Gilear being attractive. At line 4, Brennan announces that a challenge has been put forth, in reference to convincing Lou that it could be possible. Emily offers her position at lines 5 and 6, saying that she is *rooting hard* for it. At lines 12 and 13, Lou says he will start a twitter just for evaluating this fanart. At line 18, Brennan uses *incredible*, and begins a TCU that is truncated and in overlap with Siobhan at line 20. At this point, Siobhan asks a rhetorical question, which she then answers at line 24. Ally offers their own response to this question at line 26. At lines 29 and 31, Brennan comments that Gilear is feeling *pretty hot right now*, as the party had previously left off in the circles of hell, and that is where the episode will begin today. Emily, Ally, Siobhan, and Lou react to this in lines 34-37, and in lines 38-39, Zac comments that Brennan has created a *clean solid segue*. At line 42, Brennan mentions that this segue was not planned.

Extract 6 sees Brennan use *incredible* after what appears to be a closed action sequence. At lines 12-13, Lou comments about making a Twitter account just for evaluating fanart of this character. This was clearly designed to be taken up non-

seriously, and it received the appropriate laughter in response at lines 14 through 17. At line 18, Brennan uses *incredible* preceded by *uh*. However, he is unable to keep the floor as, at line 20, Siobhan overlaps with a joke about Lou's hypothetical Twitter account, effectively resisting Brennan's bid for the floor and any possible movement away from the topic that it may initiate. It is not until line 29 that Brennan makes another bid for the floor. At this point, he initiates a change in activity away from the episode set-up and towards actual gameplay by using *speaking of* to transition. Additionally, he raises the volume of his voice in order to be heard over the overlap, and to assert himself in this bid for the floor. Despite the players still overlapping his talk at lines 30 and 32, Brennan holds the floor with his voice still raised, and effectively initiates a change in activity. This is dissimilar to Extract 5 in which Brennan allowed for— and roleplayed along with— the players' resistance to activity change. As well, in Extract 5, Brennan freely allows the players their rights to direct the gameplay. In Extract 6 however, he employs more direct, explicit, and overtly competitive techniques to gain the floor and initiate change. That is, eventually asserts his authority over the players regarding when gameplay should progress. Extract 6 further reflects the phenomenon seen in Extract 4, where *incredible* clearly does not mark a resumption of a derailed TCU, but instead marks an incipient change of activity. The forceful and explicit nature of Brennan's change in activity is further evidenced through Zac's formulation of Brennan's practices as accomplishing a *clean solid segue*. This is an interesting contrast to *incredible*, in the sense that *incredible* provides an environment in which such transition can be handled more tacitly.

The final extract, Extract 7, occurs in the aftermath of a battle within combat. The party has just slain an ex-classmate of theirs— Dayne— who had previously been unfriendly towards them. Zac's character has asked to throw Dayne's head like a football, which is an allusion to the fact that Dayne had been the high school

quarterback. Brennan employs *incredible* at line 24 to work towards changing activity

from Siobhan's roleplaying, but ends up returning to the prior activity to engage in a

meta-gaming discussion about Zac's character.

Extract 7

Clip Code: e15-8 (1:21:13 – 1:21:35)

```
1:21:13  1  Bre  >(so)< ragh gorgug and fabian are all here over £dayne's
         2       dead body as you go for the long one£, (0.2) >and
         3       you [↑see he] g↑oes<=
         4  Zac     [and i- ]
         5  Bre* =~.hhh (0.4) fuck that dude (0.2) hoot gro:wl~=
         6  Bre  =£and goes for a three way chest bu(h)mp£.
         7       (0.2)
         8  Zac  [hu:h]
         9  Lou  [hoo:]ah_ i- i-             ]
        10  Bre  [ba::h::                    ]
        11  All  [hu:h hu:[:h                ]
        12  Zac          =[can I throw his head] at a missile?=
        13  Sio  =i [duck i'm like] right [in the middle of all of this_]
        14  Bre     [hhh hah hah ]        [                             ]
1:21:18 15  Emi                           [ah ha h[ah hah                ]
        16  Bre                                   [yeah                  ]
        17  Sio* [oh god]
        18  Emi  [ah↑↑ ]
        19  Bre  [ah↑  ] £oh [god sports-£   ]
        20  All            [huh hu::h       ]
        21  Sio*          [oh (0.3) oh the] jocks are being feisty,=
        22  Emi  =[ah hah hah hah hah hah hah[hah hah hah hah hah .hhh]
        23  All   [huh hah hah hah hah hah hah                       ]
        24  Bre   [huh ↑↑hah hah hah hah hah [hah .hh uh: incredible  ] .hh=
        25  Mur                             [huh huh heh heh heh heh ]
        26  Bre  =(0.3) uh >oh by the way gorgug at the beginn[ing of-<
        27  Mur*                                             [adaine, get
        28       outta [there.      ]
        29  Emi        [hah .hh hah ]
```

37

```
        30 Sio*      [i'm try:ing.]
        31 Emi   [hah hah .hh                     ]
        32 Bre   =[>uh: beginning of your turn you have] >( )< uh:
        33      potential for three temp [haitch pee if you want,<]
1:21:33 34 Zac                              [i won't          ] take it
        35      [£i'll ] stay£.=
        36 Bre  [>cool<]
        37 Bre  =[you'll s:tay   ]
        38 Sio   [hh huh huh huh]
```

The extract begins with Brennan describing the scene as three characters stand over Dayne's dead body and Zac's character *goes for the long one*, throwing Dayne's head like an American football. Zac attempts a TCU which is abandoned as Brennan roleplays an allied non-player character cussing Dayne out and using their high school's rallying cry, *hoot growl*, before he attempts a three-way chest bump. At lines 8-10 Zac, Lou, and Brennan provide sound effects of this chest bump. At line 12, Zac asks if his character can throw Dayne's head at a missile— another element of danger present in the current combat— but does not receive a response. At line 13, Siobhan says that her character ducks, drawing attention to the fact that she had been standing in the middle of the three chest-bumping characters, which receives laughter and agreement from Brennan and Emily. At lines 17 and 21, Siobhan cries out in-character, voicing her concern that *the jocks are being feisty*. Emily and Brennan cry out alongside her at lines 18 and 19 respectively, and the roleplay receives choral laughter in response. At lines 24/26, Brennan uses *incredible* and addresses Zac's character, Gorgug, as it is the end of Gorgug's turn in combat, and there is a matter to be addressed before progressing to the next combat turn. Brennan's turn is interrupted however, as Murph roleplays, addressing Siobhan's character Adaine, who then replies at line 30. At line 32, Brennan attempts his TCU again, and in this instance successfully

tells Zac that his character is allowed to claim extra hit points if he chooses. Zac declines at lines 34 and 35, which Brennan confirms at line 36 and 37.

At lines 17 and 21, Siobhan cries out in-character about how *the jocks are being feisty* around her. Emily and Brennan roleplay along with her, and the interaction receives fitted laughter in lines 22 through 25. At line 24, Brennan leaves no silence between his laughter and *uh*, which he immediately follows with *incredible*. Following this, he addresses Zac's character to discuss a meta-game issue, ensuring Zac knows his character is allowed to take three extra hit points. However, before doing so, he produces an *oh*-prefaced misplacement marker (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) *oh by the way*. In doing this, Brennan demonstrates his own orientation to the upcoming transition signalled by *incredible*. That is, the detail about Zac's choice for Gorgug is no longer fitted to the sequential environment created by *incredible* (and the preceding talk), which means Brennan must re-position it using *by the way*. Despite this effort, Murph continues the roleplay and receives a fitted response from Siobhan at line 30. Brennan persists in offering this opportunity to Zac, which he ultimately declines at lines 34-35. In summary, this instance, Brennan uses *incredible* to foreshadow a shift in activity, but ends up returning to a prior one. This requires him to employ *by the way* to position his upcoming talk as misplaced, and as not emerging from the projected development of talk indicated using *incredible*.

4 Discussion

This thesis reports on a preliminary study investigating the interactional practices used to facilitate playing of Dungeons & Dragons. Specifically, it focused on the research question:

"How does the Dungeon Master manage the development of gameplay in

multiparty Dungeons & Dragons interactions?"

This thesis has attempted to address this research question by using conversation analytic methods to analyse the use of *incredible* in these interactions, and found that it shares properties with change of activity tokens as previously described by Gardner (2001), *inter alia*.

4.1   Discussion of key findings

Extract 1 was selected for analysis initially for its typicality; both in quantitative terms (see Table 1) and for the unproblematic nature of gameplay management that Brennan accomplishes. Extract 1 occurred during combat and *incredible* was employed in order to signal a transition in gameplay away from one character's turn in the fight, into another's. Brennan employed *incredible* to instigate this transition, providing an initial demonstration of the properties of this token, and the asymmetrical rights to manage the development of gameplay.

Extracts 2, 3, and 4 were selected to offer further examples of *incredible* being employed as a change of activity token that is not resisted by the players. They provide instances for analysis that occur during differing gameplay and sequential contexts. As such, analysis of these extracts allows for an illustration of the variety of activities that *incredible* is able to mark a transition between. Extract 2 occurs during the downtime between combat— which in itself contrasts with Extract 1— and *incredible* in this

instance is used to foreshadow incipient movement between a discussion of Emily's weapon and an upcoming discussion about Zac's weapon.

Extract 3 is interesting in that it is one of very few examples where *incredible* is employed twice within a short period. Additionally, the first instance of *incredible* follows after Brennan's own turn, which indicates that it is not acting as an assessment of another player, and is likely principally marking the closing of Lou's combat turn. The second instance of *incredible* within Extract 3, contrastively, does not mark a change in combat turns, but appears to mark a return to Brennan's combat turn as he manages a possible derailment to his incipient change of activity. Thus, Extract 3 allows for a demonstration of both a movement towards incipient change of activity, and a return to it when its basis has been potentially compromised.

Extract 4 is an example of the comparative success of projecting activity transitions with and without *incredible*. Brennan appears to make three bids for the floor— one of which is successful but interrupted, two of which are resisted after he employs *uhm*— which do not succeed in signalling an upcoming a transition between activities. After these attempts, Brennan employs *incredible*, and this bid for the floor is not resisted. This comparative success again provides evidence that *incredible* is effective in foreshadowing a change of activity, and that its recipients distinguish it from other practices that may accomplish similar work.

Extracts 5, 6, and 7 were selected because they demonstrate instances in which Brennan employs *incredible*, but the forthcoming change of activity was resisted by the players. Although resistance to this movement is atypical— occurring in 30% of cases (see Table 1)— these instances demonstrate that participants may evidence their understanding of *incredible* through resisting its foreshadowed change in activity. These instances also allow for analysis of Brennan's adaptation to the players' resistance. Extract 5 sees Brennan respond to resistance by continuing the roleplay

and settling back into the activity which was going to be transitioned away from. In this way, he is enacting, and engaging with, the complex levels of agency between secondary and tertiary-order authors, allowing the players to continue the scene they seem reluctant to move away from. Furthering this, it is then the players that initiate the successful movement when it does occur; Brennan has ceded a measure of autonomy to allow the players to dictate the speed at which they wish the gameplay to move, given they resisted his proposed gameplay management. Although the players may have initiated the movement, they do so by prompting Brennan to continue the narration of the following scene. Brennan may have ceded some autonomy, but— as the creator of the world and the overarching plot— he has an inalienable level of authority (i.e., a deontic status) that all players may invoke.

Extract 6 is of interest as it occurs outside of gameplay, while the participants are preparing to begin playing, and the resisted change of activity would have brought about the beginning of gameplay for the session. This extract sees Brennan use *incredible* after what appears to be a closed action sequence, though Siobhan overlaps with his talk and interrupts the movement that it foreshadowed. Unlike Extract 5, Brennan does not cede autonomy in this instance; instead, he raises his volume to compete for the floor more forcefully, and employs *speaking of* to explicitly mark forthcoming transition. This forcefulness is addressed explicitly as Zac comments that Brennan has performed a *clean, solid segue*. The fact that Brennan is able to do this— to decline in ceding his autonomy in this instance— speaks once again to the asymmetrical deontic rights he, as Dungeon Master, has to manage the development of gameplay.

Extract 7 is of note as Brennan uses *incredible* to signal a change of activity, but must return to the prior talk, and thus resists his own movement. The extract occurs at the end of Zac's turn, where Brennan uses *incredible* and creates a sequential

environment where transition to the next combat turn would projectedly follow. However, he has omitted some important details—a final note to end Zac's combat turn—which he returns to with the *oh by the way* because the environment he has created does not suit a return to the prior activity. Interestingly, Murph also resists this instance of *incredible*, by overlapping with Brennan's speech to continue roleplaying the prior scene with Siobhan.

Together, the findings of this study offer preliminary insight into the normative basis for employing *incredible* to direct the development of Dungeons & Dragons gameplay. With *incredible*, we can posit that Brennan manages the local constraints of prior talk, while at the same time signalling a coming shift in the broader activity; the precise nature of which is realised with reference to the stage of gameplay at hand. Of course, based on the evidence gathered here, it may be that this particular practice is idiosyncratic to Brennan. Even if this is the case, the interactional and gameplay contingencies he is managing are far more generic. For example, as discussed by Antaki et al. (2000), high grade assessments can have an important role in some kinds of institutional interaction, and may be employed to exercise a degree of control over the movement of the conversation by marking a forthcoming—and incipient—change in activity. Put another way, both high grade assessments and Brennan's *incredible* appear to have a strong deontic dimension. It is also interesting to consider these practices with reference to other response tokens implicated in managing change of activity, e.g., *okay, alright* (Betz et al., 2021; Gardner, 2001). With such response tokens, the speaker conveys a more neutral stance towards the matters at hand. With high grade assessments and *incredible*, the deontic status of the speaker is presented via positively-valenced lexical items, obscuring the potentially disaffilative and/or disruptive implications of implementing deontic rights more forcefully, i.e., it may effectively downgrade Brennan's deontic stance (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). This is

noteworthy, too, in the context of this particular Dungeons & Dragons gameplay, which is designed to be viewed by a wide audience. Perhaps Brennan's choice of practice is also (implicitly) influenced by the need to generate a joyful and engaging media product for its fans.[2]

Dungeons & Dragons offers an interesting site of interactional research because it involves a mediated turn-taking system. Hofstetter (2021) has addressed the previous academic literature which contends that turn allocation is not locally managed, and thus is of less investigative interest. Hofstetter argues instead that preallocation should not be dismissed from investigation, as many activities involve delimiting rights to next turns. It is for this reason that they suggest that games are a useful activity to analyse with reference to turn allocation. Dungeons & Dragons may offer a unique site for exploring mediated turn-taking in differing gameplay contexts. Within the context of combat, gameplay turn-taking is incredibly structured, though outside of combat—when the players are planning or roleplaying—bids for the floor from any speaker (i.e., self-selection) are much more acceptable. It is also in this respect that Dungeons & Dragons is unique; it is a collaborative experience. At no point does a player gain an advantage by stifling or short-changing their co-players or their Dungeon Master. And in this way, turn-taking within a game of Dungeons & Dragons is a matter of selectively ceding (and asserting!) authority and autonomy in order to collaborate successfully. Through analysing these practices, we can gain insight into the ways that participants accomplish the digress of agency that Hammer (2007) describes.

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[2] Brennan's use of *incredible* has not gone unnoticed among fans. For example, see here for a fan's impression of Brennan: https://vm.tiktok.com/ZSddYHknU/?k=1

4.2 Study limitations and future investigation

The present study is limited in a number of ways. Firstly, it has focused on a single source of recordings, collected from one group of participants, of whom only one is the Dungeon Master. This source was selected because, although there is a growing base of actual-play Dungeons & Dragons shows available online, very few are unedited. For this reason, few shows other than the present one are able to provide comprehensive, real-time video recordings of Dungeons & Dragons gameplay between co-present participants. Nonetheless, this limitation must be recognised. Secondly, the present study employed single episode conversation analytic methods rather than collection-based conversation analytic methods. With a collection-based approach, it would have been possible to more clearly delineate the normative basis for using *incredible*, and compare it to similar or alternative practices used in equivalent sequential environments. A collection-based approach could have also facilitated a deeper focus on turn design and *incredible*. The findings of the present study have provided preliminary evidence on important parameters for collection-based work on *incredible*. This should involve systematic comparison with other change of activity tokens, high grade assessments, weaker assessments and, if they occur, unmarked attempts to change activity. It would also involve comparing and contrasting various turn designs involving *incredible*, e.g., stand-alone *incredible* vs. *uhm incredible*. Thirdly, and very importantly, this preliminary study has focused exclusively on participants' talk, with little systematic analysis of embodiment. It seems likely that Brennan's use of *incredible* and management of gameplay is highly multimodal. The ways that Brennan packages *incredible* with, e.g., facial expression, gaze, engagement with objects, should be systematically investigated.

In summary, the findings of this study are strongly suggestive of the potential for further, future investigations of interactions in Dungeons & Dragons gameplay.

The present dataset remains appropriate for continued investigation, but it would likely be worthwhile to sample more broadly, including in those playing Dungeons & Dragons in private (as opposed to public) settings, e.g., at participants' homes, in private online settings. Ethnographic methods have previously been employed in studying Dungeons & Dragons (e.g., Brace, 2012), and direct researcher engagement with participants would provide opportunities for a more multidimensional methodology to be employed.

4.3   Conclusion

This study has sought to address the ways that Brennan, as a Dungeon Master, employed *incredible* in order to manage the development of gameplay within a game of Dungeons & Dragons. I have drawn the preliminary conclusion that *incredible* can function as a change of activity token, although the precise characteristics of this token must be explored using further, collection-based conversation analytic research methods. Through this study, it was observed that Brennan exercises his asymmetrical right to direct gameplay—as afforded to him by his comparatively high deontic status— and can use *incredible* to foreshadow incipient movement towards other activities.

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Appendix A

Links to Extract video clips

OneDrive folder:

https://mqoutlook-my.sharepoint.com/:f:/g/personal/alice_kneipp_hdr_mq_edu_au/Es3fZP0-2U5BnoPB6TDeQREBSp0cc9_ALyJaM023xsgfIw?e=Gno8Qx

Google Docs folder:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1yXhj0lfe8TT-sXrXqQQlJTG1ZxkigaVp?usp=sharing