

## Negotiation of Expertise in Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming

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*Scholars in the field of conversational interaction (Schlegloff, 1989; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991) propose that the distinction between expert and novice in an interaction is not a dichotomous relationship that is maintained throughout the interaction. Instead, the distribution of expertise among participants in an interaction can be seen as fluid and dynamic, where participants are seen as “more-knowing” or “less-knowing” at different moments in the interaction. Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) examine the distribution of expertise in the discourse of a university physics group, showing how moment-by-moment ratification of expertise is achieved through various strategies.*

### 1. Introduction

Scholars in the field of conversational interaction (Schegloff, 1989; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991; Matoesian, 1999) propose that the distinction between expert and novice in an interaction is not a dichotomous relationship that is maintained throughout the interaction. Instead, the distribution of expertise among participants in an interaction can be seen as fluid and dynamic, where participants are seen as “more-knowing” or “less-knowing” at different moments in the interaction. Jacoby and Gonzales (1991) examine the distribution of expertise in the discourse of a university physics group, showing how moment-by-moment ratification of expertise is achieved through various strategies. In this paper, I examine the distribution of expertise in the discourse of fantasy role-playing gaming (RPG). I will provide some background and contextual information regarding the RPG and its environment, both in a global sense and in the local sense, in section 2. In section 3, I will discuss three types of negotiation of expertise in a particular RPG: negotiation of environment (3.1), world conception versus character conception (3.2), and current referee versus experienced referee/player (3.3). Through these discussions, I will show that expertise is, indeed, fluid, and although the referee is often the acknowledged “expert,” the players also take on a “more-knowing” role with respect to the role taken by the referee at different points in the interaction.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Role-Playing Gaming Context

Fantasy role-playing gaming is a form of entertainment where a group of individuals gathers to create a narrative. It involves a combination of board gaming, storytelling, and acting. According to Fine (1983), RPGs have “parallels with war games, educational simulations, and *folie à deux*.” As described by Livingstone (1982), an RPG “is a sophisticated form of make believe in which each player creates a game persona, and verbally acts out the part of that persona in a specially designed game-world controlled by a referee.” In these role-playing games, there are two main categories of player: the Game Master (GM) and the Player. The primary role of the GM is twofold: to create the plot/storyline for the game, often creating game-specific environments and characters, and to adjudicate the actions of the Players’ characters with respect to the environment, acting as a referee. The role of the Player is also twofold: to create a Player Character (PC) through which the Player interacts with the environment created by the GM, and to provide the dialogue and determine the actions for that PC.

The type of RPG that forms the basis of this analysis is one that is very group-oriented, usually composed of a group of three to eight gamers: the GM and Players<sup>1</sup>. During the game, the GM does the job of setting the scene in which the session’s events are to take place. As PCs go to different places within the game world, the GM updates the scene. The Players determine actions and dialogue for their PCs, based upon the interactions with the game world. The GM and the Players cooperatively construct the game, which includes a complex negotiation between the GM, the Players, and the rules. It is the negotiation between the GM and the Players through the rules that this paper will focus on.

### 2.2. Context of Present Study

The present study is based upon the audio recording of an RPG session in May of 2002. This game is based on a fantasy setting designed by the GM. The world and its geography and culture are entirely constructed by the GM, as opposed to being based on source material created by a third party. The system of rules used in the game is known as the HERO system, a system which is not constrained to a single genre of game (medieval fantasy, western, etc.) and in which characters are created by the application of points, allowing for more individualized character creation.

The game consists of six gamers, a GM and five Players. Two of the gamers are over 30 years old: Stan (GM) and Mark. Two of the gamers were in their late 20s at the time of the game session, Chad and Peter, and two of the gamers are in their early 20s, Alex and Colin. Four of the players are accustomed to the game system and had played in the system various times before. These are the older gamers. The two youngest gamers are not as accustomed to the game system, although they had played games in the system before. The four oldest gamers had played together many times before and have known each other socially for between 10-15 years. The session lasted approximately 12 hours.

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<sup>1</sup> In some cases, the GM creates the PCs previous to the game, and the Players distribute the PCs among them. Such PCs are called Pre-Gens (pre-generated characters) and are often used when the game is meant to be a game of limited duration, which will not last longer than a single session.

### 3. Negotiation of Expertise

In the following subsections, I take transcripts from the aforementioned gaming session and analyze how the participants distribute expertise through the language of the interaction. Much of the analytical format of this paper takes as its departure point the principles of conversation analysis, a set of ideas and analytical tools based on the work of Sacks (1992), as well as others (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff, 1989; Schegloff, 2000).

#### 3.1. Delineation of Environment

One type of negotiation that occurs in RPGs between the GM and the Players is the delineation of the environment. As stated earlier, the environment is, to differing extents, a construction of the GM. In the current game, the entire world is drawn from a fictional setting created entirely by the GM. This world is detailed, and a packet was provided to the Players before the game that included information about geography, cultures, languages, politics, and history for the world. The Players were also made aware that the world is based on a swords-and-sorcery fantasy genre, and that the technology level was roughly that of 12<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

Although this information was given to the Players, there was still room for negotiation about what the world “really looks like.” This can happen for a number of reasons. One reason might be that the Players did not read the material given to them, or if they did, they did not memorize the relevant parts and thus do not have immediate mental access to the information. Another reason might be that the information given was very general, and not very specific about local contexts, such as towns, vehicles, local flora and fauna, local geological and hydrological aspects, and so forth. Often when the Players are playing their PCs, this more context-specific information must be negotiated, so that all involved have as close a depiction of the situation as possible and appropriate actions can be determined.

#### (1) Transcript 1

- 1 **Chad:** Actually (.) I go to a constable (.)  
they got constables around here?=  
2 **Stan:** =Yeah (.)  
there’s actually a coupla different (.)  
there’s actually the sheriff [who (.) is here
- 3 **Chad:** [Mm-hm
- 4 **Stan:** But there’s also (.) u:m (.) the confederate border patrol has an  
outpost here.
- 5 **Chad:** Who’s more likely to take care of like (.)  
you know (.)  
you know uh=
- 6 **Stan:** =uh
- 7 **Chad:** either (a),  
you know (.) these kind of like a domestic problem like this=
- 8 **Stan:** =(I guess) it’d probably (be) more likely the Sheriff

In Transcript 1, Chad is determining a course of action for his PC. Chad’s PC is searching for an individual that he has been told resides in the current locality, but who has

disappeared. He asserts that he will go to a constable, followed by a question as to whether or not such agencies exist in this locality.

Chad does not make any assumptions here, but uses a direct query. This use of a question situates him in a “less knowing” role. Stan, the GM, responds to the question in the positive, with a slight elaboration on the appropriate terminology for the local law enforcement agency (“sheriff” versus “constable”). Stan also adds that there is another law enforcement agency within the city limits, although it is of a different type. By answering the question, and elaborating, Stan can be situated in a “more knowing” role.

In turns 5 through 8, faced with a decision between two agencies, Chad directly asks which of the two would be more likely to handle “domestic problems,” referring, ostensibly, to missing persons or kidnapping, again situating himself more toward the novice end of the continuum. Stan, situating himself as expert, provides the “sheriff” option, although with a hedge (“probably” and “more likely”). This hedge may leave open the possibility for another participant to challenge his expertise, but that possibility remains unrealized.

This ratification of Stan’s expertise is perhaps not too surprising, as Stan as the GM is the creator of the world and is most knowledgeable about how the world’s societal structure is formed. However, as an RPG is a cooperative game, players also have control over aspects of the world. One may note that Chad does specify his PC’s actions, asserting control, and thus, maintains a position as “more knowing” with respect to his PC. As we will see in section 3.2, Players often use strategies to maintain an expert position with respect to aspects of their PC.

In the second transcript for this section, Colin’s PC has just been introduced to the setting, where Peter’s PC is also present. In this negotiation, Colin, Peter, and Chad negotiate with Stan to develop an intersection of the various interpretations of the current situation. There are a series of adjacency pairs, where Stan remains a participant, but the participant for the second pair part changes, as different Players take part in the negotiation.

(2) Transcript 2

- 1 **Stan:** Now (.) so you’re  
you ’re watching around  
and people do have that sort of guilt  
they they look around at you kind of like (.) making sure that  
they don’t have anything around that would (.) like
- 2 **Chad:** Kind of stop playing [ cards  
3 **Stan:** | you know  
No, they’ll (.) they’ll play cards  
but they’re (.) you know
- 4 **Colin:** So, they’re playing Go Fish
- 5 **Stan:** They’re trying  
No, they’re they’re they’re actually (.) still playing for money  
they’re not going to go that far (.)  
but they’re uh (.) they’re definitely uh (.) looking like they want  
to be on their best behavior
- 6 **Peter:** They’re not cussing as much

- 7 **Stan:** Yeah (.)  
 some of them don't care (.)  
 some of them are like (.)
- 8 **Colin:** [yeah
- 9 **Stan:** [fuck the priest  
 .pphh  
 They keep playing doing what they're doing.

Stan is attempting to give Colin an idea of what kind of reaction his PC's presence will engender in the current setting, a rough-and-tumble tavern. His PC is a member of a religious sect. In the initial turn, Stan's description states that the inhabitants of the tavern feel somewhat guilty in his presence.

This interaction is composed of a number of adjacency pairs, which a Player initiates by making a statement that sums up the reaction of the individuals in the room to the priest's presence. These are direct statements, not questions, and as such provide the possibility for ratification of the Player's expertise. However, in turns 3 and 5, Stan responds with a direct negative, maintaining his own expertise and leaving each Player's potential expertise ratification as unrealized. In turn 7, however, Stan agrees to Peter's addition with one clarification: it is not monolithic. This maintains his expertise, while acknowledging Peter's position at a "more knowing" end of the continuum.

In both of the interactions shown here, the GM's expertise is maintained by the participants, either through the use of direct questions by the Players, or by the lack of a challenge to the GM's veto. However, this expert role for the GM is not always completely maintained. As the next section will show, Players do make more definitive bids for expertise when the topic is that of PC conception.

### 3.2. *World Conception versus PC Conception*

In this section, I highlight another aspect of negotiation in fantasy role-playing, that of PC conception vs. world conception. In an RPG of the current type, the GM has created much of the world and the cultures within it. He has provided a set of constraints within which the PCs designed by the Players must fit. The creation of the PCs in this case was a cooperative endeavor between the GM and each Player. Thus, the GM knows much of each Player's conception of his PC and ensures that the PC will fit within the world.

Unlike a situation in which Players are given a set of pre-generated PCs to choose from, in a game such as this, Players are given the opportunity to craft PCs that they would enjoy playing. Thus, Players are given a certain amount of autonomy in creating their PCs. In the following interaction, Chad and Stan must negotiate the appearance of Chad's PC. Although the concept was developed before the game, there are many other details that were not decided upon previously. This interaction shows how Stan and Chad arrange their areas of expertise with respect to the PC's appearance.

#### (3) Transcript 3

- 1 **Stan:** but thi those are the ones that really kind of stick out (.)  
 you know one of the things [people
- 2 **Mark:** [ (is he a big dude?)
- 3 **Chad:** N-um: (.) not particularly

- < I mean >
- 4 **Stan:** Do you act  
I can't remember do you actually have a: a caste mark? (0.675)
- 5 **Chad:** No, ah he chose no even though he won that fight he
- 6 **Stan:** right
- 7 **Chad:** Right  
Until he actually knows (.) you know (.) more  
He
- 8 **Stan:** Right=
- 9 **Mark:** =You just look like a swarthy Ay-Rab  
or do you have like a shaved head and tattoos and (.) spiked  
wristbands and stuff?
- 10 **Chad:** .hh ye:s. Looks like a gay (.) biker, actually
- 11 **Mark:** (How bout) a gay arab biker
- 12 **Chad:** He's
- 13 **Stan:** No tattoos (.) generally I mean it's it's not a cultural thing,  
if you have them you have them=
- 14 **Chad:** =No,  
but he has (.) a shaved head,  
but it's (.) probably wrapped  
so uh (.) you probably can't tell (.) uh (1.425)
- 15 **Stan:** Well there is sort of (.) kaffiyeh that he'd be wearing
- 16 **Mark:** Ok (.)  
got big old (.) like poofy robes on? (0.925)
- 17 **Stan:** Yeah
- 18 **Chad:** yeah  
bu essentially what what what the Arab
- 19 **Stan:** Yeah,  
I mean (0.575) you think Arabic you'll (.)  
that's pretty much what you'll see

In the initial turn, Stan has been giving a brief overview of how common the ethnic group called Ushadi would be in the local context. Mark asks a question about the PC's physical characteristics ("is he a big dude?"). Chad states somewhat negatively ("not particularly"). He self-selects, rather than allowing the GM to select himself for the next turn. By doing so, he is establishing himself as expert in this context.

The GM does not question this assertion, but goes on to ask information from Chad, continuing to ratify Chad's position as expert, by situating himself as "less knowing." This question is ostensibly about physical appearance, the presence or absence of a "caste mark", but the answer to the question has other social and historical implications with respect to the PC. In the next four turns, Chad gives the response, and some background PC context to support the response. Again, Stan does not challenge Chad's expertise, but overlaps and latches with supportive back-channeling.

Mark summarizes his current conception ("swarthy Ay-rab"), but follows immediately with further questioning about the PC's appearance. This interchange is interrupted by Stan's assertion that there is no Ushadi social aspect that would prescribe tattoos, so that is up to Chad. In this case, Stan sets himself up as "more knowing" about the world, but as "less knowing" with respect to the PC specifically. Chad goes with the idea of no tattoos, and then states firmly that his head is shaved.

However, he notes that the other PCs might not be able to notice the shaved head, because of the possible presence of a head covering. The hedge “probably” leaves it open for the GM to contradict the statement. It is interesting to note that Chad is not leaving the shaved head characteristic open to challenge, but the head covering. Thus, he is creating a distinction between what he considers his arena of expertise, and what can be contradicted by the GM. At this point, the characteristics that he considers as within his expertise are physical size, presence or absence of hair, and presence of caste mark. Outside his expertise is clothing style, particularly headgear, but as we will see, other clothing characteristics, as well. This distinction seems to be maintained by Stan.

In 15, Stan confirms the presence of headgear, establishing his expertise. When Mark asks about the presence of “poofy robes,” it is Stan this time who takes the reins, answering positively. Chad confirms this, a possible bid for expertise, but he is interrupted by Stan, who continues with more elaboration on the description of the robes, continuing to maintain his expertise.

In the next interaction which takes place soon after Transcript 2, Colin, Peter and Stan negotiate the appearance of Colin’s PC, who has recently been introduced into the game setting.

(4) Transcript 4

- 1 **Peter:** So (.) this guy’s a looks like a priest with a (.) starched  
(Roman) collar [ (.)
- 2 **Stan:** [No, actually the the priest’s robes are (.)  
they’re grey
- 3 **Peter:** Well I I was just saying the difference is he would be wearing  
[the uh
- 4 **Colin:** [yes he he=
- 5 **Peter:** =He ’d be the spotless priest with the
- 6 **Stan:** Yeah (.) oh, yeah=
- 7 **Colin:** =O::h [ (.) far be (.)
- 8 **Stan:** [ I mean its
- 9 **Colin:** Far [above and beyond
- 10 **Stan:** [you’ve s  
Yeah (.) you’ve seen priests before  
and (.) (.) he’s he’s like wearing it (.) exactly like it’s supposed  
to be worn (.) (\*extensive description removed for space  
reasons\*)
- 11 **Peter:** Ok
- 12 **Stan:** That’s what he is

Peter opens up this negotiation with a possible visual interpretation of Colin’s PC. Extrapolating from the term “priest” having been used in the introduction of the PC, Peter begins his candidate with an analogy to modern Catholic priests (“starched (Roman) collar”).

Stan does not take Peter’s description as an analogy, and provides a more game-centered description of the clothing worn by the PC, by stating that the robes are gray. Stan’s failure to treat the statement as an analogy rather than a direct descriptive assumption allows him to establish expertise early in the interaction. He places himself in

a role that has the power to correct such statements, positioning himself as more knowledgeable.

Peter attempts to clarify his analogical position in the next turn, and Colin follows this tack, overlapping with Peter as he states that his intention is to advocate the image of the priest as “spotless”, hence the “starched (Roman) collar.” Colin and Stan overlap as they agree with this image, both in 7-8 and 9-10. As Schegloff (2000) indicates, such multiple overlaps and competition for turn selection can indicate a vested interest in maintaining the turn. In this case, Colin and Stan can both be seen as having a vested interest in maintaining control of the turn. Stan has created the social and cultural group with which Colin’s PC is affiliated, and therefore has interest in asserting his vision of that group and the appearance of its members. On the other hand, Colin created the conception of the PC and is the motivating force behind the PC, hence his own interest.. Colin makes it clear that his PC is exceptional in his state of neatness, asserting his interest. In 10, Stan relinquishes the overlap, allowing Colin to complete his turn, ratifying Colin’s expertise over the PC. However, it is Stan who presents the most elaborate description of the PC’s dress in turn 10, establishing once again a level of expertise, but in a more general context.

It should be noted that, once again, Stan clearly establishes expertise in the clothing of the PC, but Colin competes with Stan in the establishing of expertise in terms of the way in which the clothing is worn by the PC. Thus, there is an expertise distinction between clothing and PC preference.

### 3.3. *Current GM versus Experienced GM*

In this section, I discuss another type of expertise negotiation, that between the GM of the current game and a Player who has been a GM for a number of previous games. In the game being analyzed here, Stan is the current GM, but Mark is a more experienced GM, both in terms of running RPGs in general and in terms of the current gaming system. In the following two transcripts, we will see ways in which Mark and Stan negotiate their expertise in the current game.

The first transcript illustrates how expertise with respect to the rules of the game system is negotiated.

#### (5) Transcript 5

- 11 **Alex:** If I’m half DV s- DCV or whatever (the) dodge would add=  
 12 **Stan:** =I think (it’s) you actually add the:  
 13 **Alex:** [ Or do you add a (dice) and a half?  
 14 **Mark:** [ (no) ( ) are you aborting to a dodge?  
 15 **Alex:** [ Yes.  
 16 **Stan:** [ Yes.  
 17 **Mark:** Then you will get your full dodge.  
 18 **Stan:** There you go.  
 19 **Mark:** [ It’s a ne::w  
 20 **Peter:** [ Is this the same phase you shot him?  
 21 **Mark:** It’s a new action.  
 22 **Stan:** Right.  
 Makes sense.



In this interaction, Alex is asking a question regarding his PC's defensive capabilities in the current combat situation. Stan self-selects, anticipating the question, and begins to answer the question. Alex continues his question after Stan draws out the last word in turn 12, overlapping with Mark. Both Alex and Mark identify the drawn-out vowel in 12 as a possible transition-relevance place and self-select, in accordance to the rules of turn-taking proposed in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). It is Mark's uptake that is of particular interest here, as he "takes charge" of the situation, asking the question "are you aborting to a dodge?"

Both Stan and Alex overlap in their response to Mark's question, whereupon Mark makes the straightforward statement, "Then you will get your full dodge." There is no hedging here, no statement of "house rules" (see below), signifying a certainty in the validity of the statement. Stan ratifies this expertise by the phrase in the next turn, "There you go." He does not question the validity of Mark's statement. In line 19, Stan states that Mark's statement "makes sense", giving more credence to Mark's expertise.

In the next interaction, we will see that the negotiation of GM expertise does not always result in the identification of the experienced GM as the sole expert. In the following interaction, both the experienced and the inexperienced GM are ratified as expert in different contexts.

(6) Transcript 6

- 1 **Peter:** You're stunned ( )  
 2 **Stan:** Ok, so what's what **is** the rule for this  
 3 **Mark:** The standard rule for stunned is  
     [ ( )  
 4 **Stan:** [I mean  
     Stunned I know yeah  
     But I mean in terms of  
     He's still standing once he goes unconscious, right?  
 5 **Mark:** Yeah (technically)  
 6 **Stan:** There you go  
 7 **Chad:** Ah, ok.  
 8 **Mark:** I have house rules about it but uh=  
 9 **Stan:** =Well, I'm gonna stick with the  
 10 **Alex:** ( )  
 11 **Stan:** [You're (on your) feet until ( ) unconscious  
 12 **Mark:** [By Hero system, straight Hero system, stunned all you are is  
     You just have to take your next action.

In (7), Chad's PC is in a condition known as "stunned," and the interaction is centered around the specific rules regarding this condition. Stan asks a direct question in 2, identifying himself as "less knowing." Mark self-selects for the next turn, and begins to outline the rule, identifying himself as "more knowing."

Mark and Stan overlap in 3 and 4, where Stan begins a kind of repair, in which he clarifies the question. His statements resituate his status to a "more knowing" area of the continuum by showing that he has some information regarding the rule. He then restates the question, using a tag question, limiting the possible answers to "yes" or "no." Thus,

the question becomes less of a request or information, and more of a confirmation of his expertise, a confirmation he gets from Mark in the following turn.

Mark's turn in 8 begins a possible movement of Mark to a "more knowing" position, but Stan's latched response in 9 seems to anticipate the move, and Stan is identified as having authority. This authority is a type of expertise, in that the interpretation of the rules is often genre-specific, or world-specific. By asserting authority, Stan is also asserting expertise with respect to the particular game.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed different types of interactions within fantasy role-playing gaming that illustrate the negotiation of expertise among the GM, the Players, and the rules. In each case, the status of a participant as "more knowing" or "less knowing" is fluid, shifting as the interaction proceeds. Also, the positions of "expert" and "novice" are not dichotomous classifications that are in complementary distribution among the Players and the GM. Instead, as described in Jacoby & Gonzales (1991) for academic discussion groups, each gamer takes on a different status ranging from "more knowing" and "less knowing" through various strategies. Concurrently, multiple participants can shift status to "more knowing," with each ratification of expertise being relative to different contexts.

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