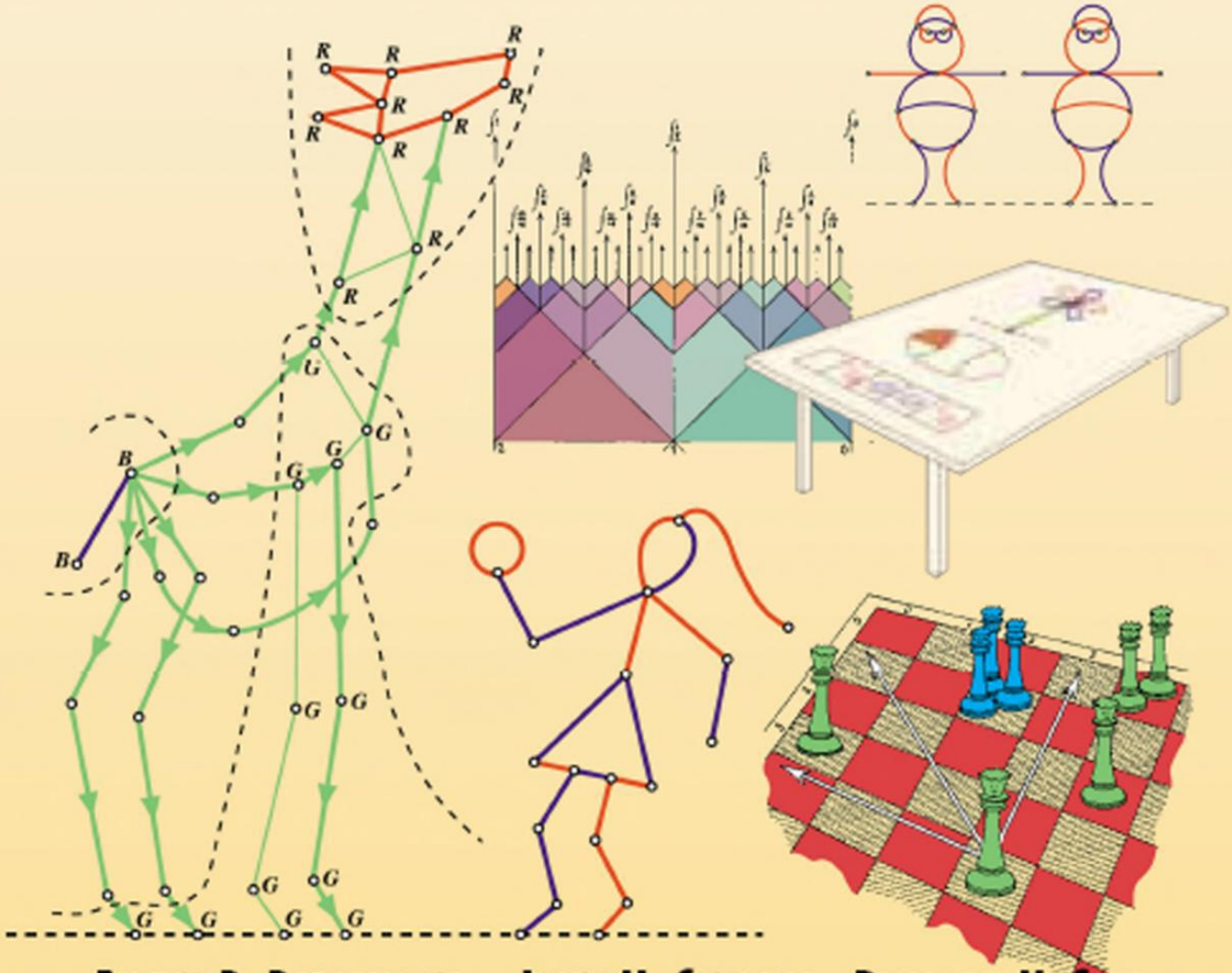
VOLUME 1 SECOND EDITION

WINNING WAYS

FOR YOUR MATHEMATICAL PLAYS



ELWYN R. BERLEKAMP • JOHN H. CONWAY • RICHARD K. GUY

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Winning Ways
for Your Mathematical Plays

Volume 1, Second Edition

Elwyn R. Berlekamp, John H. Conway, Richard K. Guy

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Contents

Preface to Second Edition xv

Preface xvi

Spade-Work! xix

1 Whose Game? 1
- Blue-Red Hackenbush . . . 2
- The Tweedledum and Tweedledee Argument . . . 3
- How Can You Have Half a Move? . . . 4
- ... And Quarter Moves? . . . 6
- Ski-Jumps for Beginners . . . 8
- Don't Just Take the Average! . . . 10
- What Is a Jump Worth? . . . 11
- Toads-and-Frogs . . . 12
- Do Our Methods Work? . . . 12
- What is a Game? . . . 14
- When Is a Move Good? . . . 16
- Figure 8(d) Is Worth $\frac{3}{4}$ . . . 17
- References and Further Reading . . . 18

2 Finding the Correct Number is Simplicity Itself 19
- Which Numbers Are Which? . . . 19
- Simplicity's the Answer! . . . 21
- Simplest Forms for Numbers . . . 22
- Cutcake . . . 24
- Maundy Cake . . . 26
- A Few More Applications of the Simplicty Rule . . . 27
- Positive, Negative, Zero, and Fuzzy Positions . . . 28
- Hackenbush Hotchpotch . . . 29
- Sums of Arbitrary Games . . . 30
- The Outcome of a Sum . . . 31
- The Negative of a Game . . . 33
- Cancelling a Game with its Negative . . . 34
- Comparing Two Games . . . 35
- Comparing Hackenbush Positions . . . 35
- The Game of Col . . . 37
- A Star is Born! . . . 38
- Col Contains Such Values . . . 39
- Game Trees . . . 40

Copyrighted material

Green Hackenbush, The Game of Nim, and Nimbers . . . 40
Get Nimble with Nimbers . . . 42
Childish Hackenbush . . . 43
Seating Couples . . . 44
Winning Strategies . . . 46
The Sum of Two Finite Games Can Last Forever . . . 46
A Theorem about Col . . . 47
Col-lections and Col-lapsings . . . 48
Maundy Cake . . . 51
Another Cutcake Variant . . . 51
How Childish Can You Get? . . . 51
References and Further Reading . . . 52

3 Some Harder Games and How to Make Them Easier 53
Poker-Nim . . . 53
Northcott's Game . . . 54
Bogus Nim-Heaps and the Mex Rule . . . 55
The Sprague-Grundy Theory for Impartial Games . . . 56
The White Knight . . . 56
Adding Nimbers . . . 58
Wyt Queens . . . 59
Reversible Moves in General Games . . . 60
Deleting Dominated Options . . . 62
Toads-and-Frogs with Ups and Downs . . . 63
Game Tracking and Identification . . . 65
What Are Flowers Worth? . . . 66
A Gallimaufry of Games . . . 67
Who Wins Sums of Ups, Downs, Stars, and Numbers? . . . 68
A Closer Look at the Stars . . . 68
The Values $\{\uparrow \mid \uparrow\}$ and $\{0 \mid \uparrow\}$ . . . 69
The Upstart Equality . . . 71
Gift Horses . . . 72
The Nim-Addition Rule in Several Variations . . . 73
Wyt Queens and Wythoff's Game . . . 74
Answers to Figures 8, 9, and 11. . . . 75
Toad Versus Frog . . . 75
Two Theorems on Simplifying Games . . . 76
Berlekamp's Rule for Hackenbush Strings . . . 77
References and Further Reading . . . 78

4 Taking and Breaking 81
Kayles . . . 81
Games With Heaps . . . 82
$\mathcal{P}$-Positions and $\mathcal{N}$-Positions . . . 83
Subtraction Games . . . 83
Ferguson's Pairing Property . . . 86
Grundy Scales . . . 87
Other Take-Away Games . . . 87

Copyrighted material

Dawson's Chess . . . 88
The Periodicity of Kayles . . . 90
Other Take-and-Break Games . . . 91
Dawson's Kayles . . . 92
Variations . . . 93
Guiles . . . 93
Treblecross . . . 94
Officers . . . 95
Grundy's Game . . . 96
Prim and Dim . . . 97
Replication of Nim-Values . . . 98
Double and Quadruple Kayles . . . 98
Lasker's Nim . . . 99
Some Remarks on Periodicity . . . 100
Standard Form . . . 100
A Compendium of Octal Games . . . 101
Additional Remarks . . . 109
Sparse Spaces and Common Cosets . . . 109
Will Grundy's Game Be Ultimately Periodic? . . . 111
Sparse Space Spells Speed . . . 112
Games Displaying Arithmetic Periodicity . . . 113
A Non-Arithmetic-Periodicity Theorem . . . 115
Some Hexadecimal Games . . . 117
Further References and Reading . . . 117

5 Numbers, Nimbers and Numberless Wonders 119
Domineering . . . 119
Switch Games . . . 121
Cashing Cheques . . . 122
Some Simple Hot Games . . . 125
The Tiniest Games . . . 125
Modern Management of Cash Flow . . . 126
Tiny Toads-and-Frogs . . . 127
The Opening Dissection of Toads-and-Frogs . . . 127
Seating Boys and Girls . . . 131
Toads-and-Frogs Completely Dissected . . . 133
Toads-and-Frogs with Two Spaces . . . 136
More Domineering Values . . . 138
References . . . 143

6 The Heat of Battle 145
Snort . . . 145
A Graphic Picture of Farm Life . . . 145
Don't Move In A Number Unless There's Nothing Else To Do! . . . 147
What's in it for Me? . . . 148
The Left and Right Stops . . . 149
Cooling—and the Thermograph . . . 151
Cooling Settles the Mean Value . . . 152

Copyrighted material

How to Draw Thermographs . . . 153
When A Player Has Several Options . . . 154
Foundations for Thermographs . . . 155
Examples of Thermographs . . . 156
Who Is To Move From The Final Stop? . . . 157
A Four-Stop Example . . . 158
The Cheque-Market Exchange . . . 158
Equitable Games . . . 159
Excitable Games . . . 160
The Extended Thermograph . . . 161
Getting the Right Slant . . . 162
The Thermostatic Strategy . . . 163
Thermostrat's Not Often Wrong! . . . 165
Heating . . . 167
Does The Excitement Show? . . . 169
Selling Infinitesimal Values To Your Profit-Conscious Friends . . . 171
Nim, Remoteness and Suspense in Hot Games . . . 173
Overheating . . . 174
Cooling the Children's Party . . . 178
But How Do You Cool A Party By One Degree? . . . 179
Three Snort Lemmas . . . 180
A Snort Dictionary . . . 183
Proof of the Number Avoidance Theorem . . . 183
Why Thermostrat Works . . . 183
Blockbusting . . . 186
. . . An On We Go! . . . 186
Hotstrat, Thermostrat and Sentestrat . . . 187
References and Further Reading . . . 188

7 Hackenbush 189
Green Hackenbush . . . 189
Green Trees . . . 191
Fusion . . . 192
Proving The Fusion Principle . . . 193
A More Complicated Picture . . . 195
Impartial Maundy Cake . . . 196
Blue-Red Hackenbush . . . 197
Hackenbush Hotchpotch . . . 197
Flower Gardens . . . 198
The Blue Flower Ploy . . . 199
Atomic Weights . . . 200
Atomic Weights of Jungles . . . 201
Making Tracks in the Jungle . . . 202
Tracking Down an Animal . . . 204
Amazing Jungle . . . 208
Smart Game in the Jungle . . . 209
Unparted Jungles . . . 210
Blue-Red Hackenbush Can Be Hard, Too! . . . 211

Copyrighted material

Redwood Furniture . . . 211
Redwood Beds . . . 215
How Big Is A Redwood Bed? . . . 216
What's The Bottle . . . 218
Ordinal Addition, The Colon Principle, and Norton's Lemma . . . 219
Both Ways of Adding Impartial Games . . . 219
Many-Way Maundy Cake . . . 220
Solution to Figure 15 . . . 221
Tracks Cleared Through the Amazing Jungle . . . 222
How Hard Was The Bed? . . . 222
NP-Hardness . . . 223
The Bottle at the End of Chapter 7 . . . 225
References and Further Reading . . . 225

8 It's a Small Small Small Small World 229

Uppitiness and Uncertainty . . . 230
Computing Atomic Weights . . . 231
Eatcake . . . 233
Splitting The Atom . . . 234
Turn-and-Eatcake . . . 235
All You Need To Know About Atomic Weights But Were Afraid To Ask . . . 236
Childish Hackenbush Hotchpotch . . . 237
Atomic Weights of Lollipops . . . 238
Proving Things About Atomic Weights . . . 240
Playing Among the Flowers . . . 240
When is g as uppity as h? . . . 241
Go Fly A Kite! . . . 243
All Remote Stars Agree . . . 244
Large and Small Flowerbeds . . . 245
Playing Under a Lucky Star . . . 246
General Multiples of Up . . . 247
Proof of the Remote Star Rules . . . 248
Proof That Atomic Weight = Uppitiness . . . 249
The Wholeness of Hackenbush Hotchpotch . . . 251
Proper Care of the Eccentric . . . 251
Galvinized Games . . . 252
Trading Triangles . . . 253
Multiples of Positive Games . . . 255
Multiples Work! . . . 255
First for the "With" Rule . . . 256
Now for the "Without" Rule: . . . 257
Shifting Multiples Of Up By Stars . . . 258
A Theorem on Incentives . . . 258
Seating Families of Five . . . 260
References . . . 262

Index 263

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Preface to the Second Edition

It's high time that there was a second edition of *Winning Ways*.

Largely as a result of the first edition, and of John Conway's *On Numbers and Games*, which we are glad to say is also reappearing, the subject of combinatorial games has burgeoned into a vast area, bringing together artificial intelligence experts, combinatorists, and computer scientists, as well as practitioners and theoreticians of particular games such as Go, Chess, Amazons and Konane: games much more interesting to play than the simple examples that we needed to introduce our theory.

Just as the subject of combinatorics was slow to be accepted by many "serious" mathematicians, so, even more slowly, is that of combinatorial games. But now it has achieved considerable maturity and is giving rise to an extensive literature, documented by Aviezri Fraenkel and exemplified by the book *Mathematical Go: Chilling Gets the Last Point* by Berlekamp and Wolfe. Games are fun to play and it's more fun the better you are at playing them.

The subject has become too big for us to do it justice even in the four-volume work that we now offer. So we've contented ourselves with a minimum of necessary changes to the original text (we are proud that our first formulations have so well withstood the test of time), with additions to the Extras at the ends of the chapters, and with the insertion of many references to guide the more serious student to further reading. And we've corrected some of the one hundred and sixty-three mistakes.

We are delighted that Alice and Klaus Peters have agreed to publish this second edition. Their great experience, and their competent and cooperative staff, notably Sarah Gillis and Kathryn Maier, have been invaluable assets during its production. And of course we are indebted to the rapidly growing band of people interested in the subject. If we mention one name we should mention a hundred; browse through the Index and the References at the end of each chapter. As a start, try *Games of No Chance*, the book of the workshop that we organized a few years ago, and look out for its successor, *More Games of No Chance*, documenting the workshop that took place earlier this year.

Elwyn Berlekamp, University of California, Berkeley
John Conway, Princeton University
Richard Guy, The University of Calgary, Canada

November 3, 2000

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Preface

Does a book need a Preface? What more, after fifteen years of toil, do three talented authors have to add. We can reassure the bookstore browser, "Yes, this is just the book you want!" We can direct you, if you want to know quickly what's in the book, to the last pages of this preliminary material. This in turn directs you to Volume 1, Volume 2, Volume 3 and Volume 4.

We can supply the reviewer, faced with the task of ploughing through nearly a thousand information-packed pages, with some pithy criticisms by indicating the horns of the polylemma the book finds itself on. It is not an encyclopedia. It is encyclopedic, but there are still too many games missing for it to claim to be complete. It is not a book on recreational mathematics because there's too much serious mathematics in it. On the other hand, for us, as for our predecessors Rouse Ball, Dudeney, Martin Gardner, Kraitchik, Sam Loyd, Lucas, Tom O'Beirne and Fred. Schuh, mathematics itself is a recreation. It is not an undergraduate text, since the exercises are not set out in an orderly fashion, with the easy ones at the beginning. They are there though, and with the hundred and sixty-three mistakes we've left in, provide plenty of opportunity for reader participation. So don't just stand back and admire it, work of art though it is. It is not a graduate text, since it's too expensive and contains far more than any graduate student can be expected to learn. But it does carry you to the frontiers of research in combinatorial game theory and the many unsolved problems will stimulate further discoveries.

We thank Patrick Browne for our title. This exercised us for quite a time. One morning, while walking to the university, John and Richard came up with "Whose game?" but realized they couldn't spell it (there are three tooze in English) so it became a one-line joke on line one of the text. There isn't room to explain all the jokes, not even the fifty-nine private ones (each of our birthdays appears more than once in the book).

Omar started as a joke, but soon materialized as Kimberley King. Louise Guy also helped with proof-reading, but her greater contribution was the hospitality which enabled the three of us to work together on several occasions. Louise also did technical typing after many drafts had been made by Karen McDermid and Betty Teare.

Our thanks for many contributions to content may be measured by the number of names in the index. To do real justice would take too much space. Here's an abridged list of helpers: Richard Austin, Clive Bach, John Beasley, Aviezri Fraenkel, David Fremlin, Solomon Golomb,

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Steve Grantham, Mike Guy, Dean Hickerson, Hendrik Lenstra, Richard Nowakowski, Anne Scott, David Seal, John Selfridge, Cedric Smith and Steve Tschantz.

No small part of the reason for the assured success of the book is owed to the well-informed and sympathetic guidance of Len Cegielka and the willingness of the staff of Academic Press and of Page Bros. to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of the authors, who grasped every opportunity to modify grammar, strain semantics, pervert punctuation, alter orthography, tamper with traditional typography and commit outrageous puns and inside jokes.

Thanks also to the Isaak Walton Killam Foundation for Richard's Resident Fellowship at The University of Calgary during the compilation of a critical draft, and to the National (Science & Engineering) Research Council of Canada for a grant which enabled Elwyn and John to visit him more frequently than our widely scattered habitats would normally allow.

And thank you, Simon!

University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720 — *Elwyn Berlekamp*
University of Cambridge, England, CB2 1SB — *John H. Conway*
University of Calgary, Canada, T2N 1N4 — *Richard Guy*

November 1981

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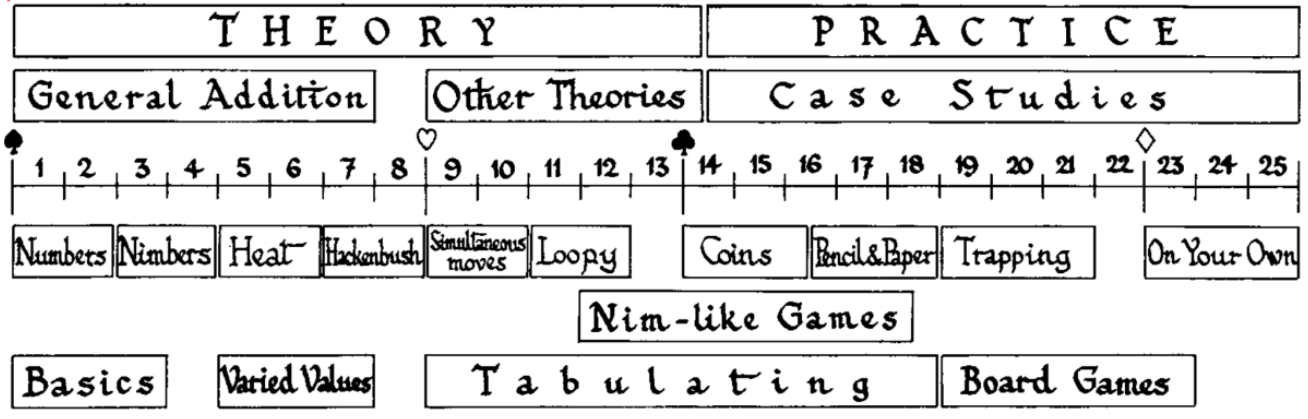
You are now here

If you want to know roughly what's elsewhere, turn to the little notes about our four main themes:

Adding Games	♠ Volume 1
Bending the Rules	♡ Volume 2
Case Studies	♣ Volume 3
Doing It Yourself	◇ Volume 4

There are a number of other connexions between various chapters of the book:



However, you should be able to pick any chapter and read almost all of it without reference to anything earlier, except perhaps the basic ideas at the start of the book.

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Spade-Work!

Let spades be trumps! she said, and trumps they were.
Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, c.iii, I.46.

CECILY: When I see a spade I call it a spade.
GWENDOLEN: I am glad to say I have never seen a spade.
Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, II.

Our first few chapters do the spade-work for the rest by telling how to add games together and how to work out their values.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce these ideas and show that some simple examples have ordinary numbers for values while others don't.

In Chapter 3 you'll see how the special values called nimbers, that arise in the game of Nim, suffice for *all* impartial games, and lots of examples are tackled in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 has some very small games, and some others which, because they are both big (unlike nimbers) and hot (unlike numbers), really need the theory of Chapter 6.

Finally, Chapter 7 discusses the small games to within an atom or two, and Chapter 8 show how such values arise along with ordinary numbers in the game of Hackenbush.

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-1-

Whose Game?

'Begin at the beginning,' the King said, gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end, then stop.'
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ch. 12

It is hard if I cannot start some game on these lone heaths.
William Hazlitt, *On Going a Journey*

Who's game for an easy pencil-and-paper (or chalk-and-blackboard) game?

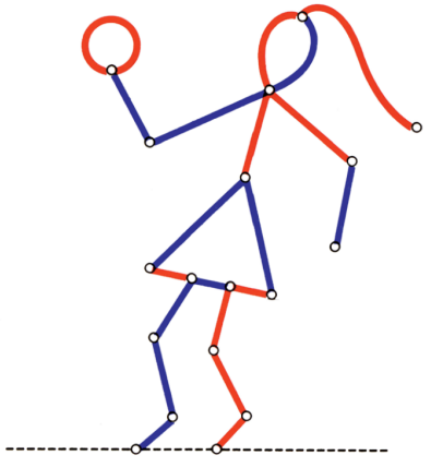

Figure 1. A Blue-Red Hackenbush Picture.

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Blue-Red Hackenbush

Blue-Red Hackenbush is played with a picture such as that of Fig. 1. We shall call the two players **Left** and **Right**. Left moves by deleting any bLue edge, together with any edges that are no longer connected to the ground (which is the dotted line in the figure), and Right moves by deleting a Red edge in a similar way. (Play it on a blackboard if you can, because it's easier to rub the edges out.) Quite soon, one of the players will find he can't move because there are no edges of his color in what remains of the picture, and whoever is first trapped in this way is the loser. You must make sure that doesn't happen to you!

Well, what can you do about it? Perhaps it would be a good idea to sit back and watch a game first, to make sure you quite understand the rules of the game before playing with the professionals, so let's watch the effect of a few simple moves. Left might move first and rub out the girl's left foot. This would leave the rest of her left leg dangling rather lamely, but no other edges would actually disappear because every edge of the girl is still connected to the ground through her right leg. But Right at his next move could remove the girl completely, if he so wished, by rubbing out her right foot. Or Left could instead have used his first move to remove the girl's upper arm, when the rest of her arm and the apple would also disappear. So now you really understand the rules, and want to start winning. We think Fig. 1 might be a bit hard for you just yet, so let's look at Fig. 2, in which the blue and red edges are separated into parts that can't interact. Plainly the girl belongs to Left, in some sense, and the boy to Right, and the two players will alternately delete edges of their two people. Since the girl has more edges, Left can survive longer than Right, and can therefore win no matter who starts. In fact, since the girl has 14 edges to the boy's 11, Left ends with at least $14 - 11 = 3$ spare moves, if he chops from the top downwards, and Right can hold him down to this in a similar way.

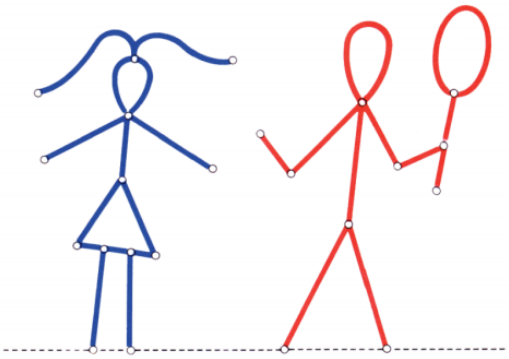

Figure 2. Boy meets Girl.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee in Fig. 3 have the same number of edges each, so that Left is $19 - 19 = 0$ moves ahead. What does this mean? If Left starts, and both players play sensibly from the top downwards, the moves will alternate Left, Right, Left, Right, until each player has made 19 moves, and it will be Left's turn to move when no edge remains. So if Left starts, Left will lose, and similarly if Right starts, Right will lose. So in this **zero position**, whoever starts loses.

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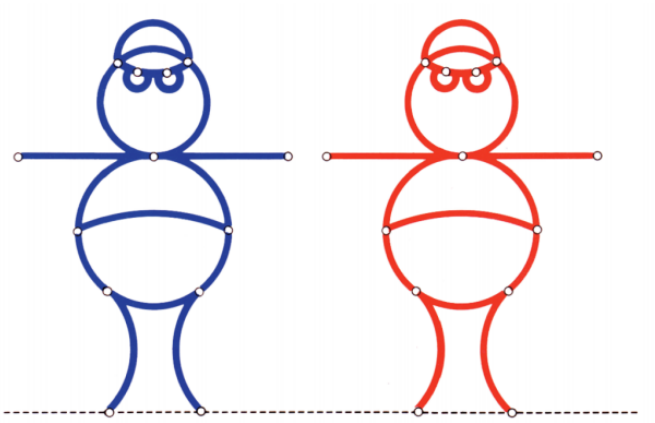

Figure 3. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, about to have a Battle.

The Tweedledum and Tweedledee Argument

In Fig. 4, we have swapped a few edges about so that Tweedledum and Tweedledee both have some edges of each color. But since we turn the new Dum into the new Dee exactly by interchanging blue with red, neither player seems to have any advantage. Is Fig. 4 still a zero position in the same sense that whoever starts loses? Yes, for the player second to move can copy any of his opponent's moves by simply chopping the corresponding edge from the other twin. If he does this throughout the game, he is sure to win, because he can never be without an available move. We shall often find games for which an argument like this gives a good strategy for one of the two players—we shall call it the **Tweedledum and Tweedledee Argument** (or **Strategy**) from now on.

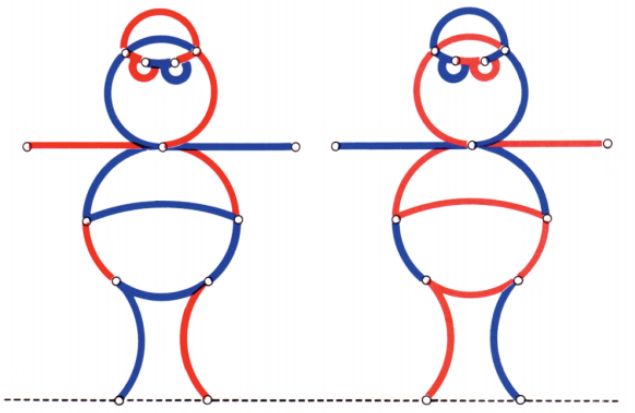

Figure 4. After their first Battle: Ready for the Next?

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The main difficulty in playing Blue-Red Hackenbush is that your opponent might contrive to steal some of your moves by cutting out of the picture a large number of edges of your color. But there are several cases when even though the picture may look very complicated, you can be sure that he will be unable to do this. Figure 5 shows a simple example. In this little dog, each player's edges are connected to the ground via other edges of his own color. So if he chops these in a suitable order, each player can be sure of making one move for each edge of his own color, and plainly he can't hope for more. The value of Fig. 5 is therefore once again determined by counting edges—it is $9 - 7 = 2$ moves for Left. In pictures like this, the correct chopping order is to take first those edges whose path to the ground via your own color has most edges—this makes sure you don't isolate any of your edges by chopping away any of their supporters. Thus in Fig. 5 Left would be extremely foolish to put the blue edges of the neck and head at risk by removing the dog's front leg; for then Right could arrange that after only 2 moves the 5 blue edges here would have vanished.

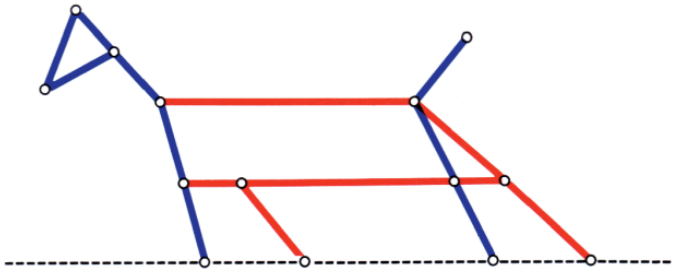

Figure 5. A Dog with Leftward Leanings.

How Can You Have Half a Move?

But these easy arguments won't suffice for all Hackenbush positions. Perhaps the simplest case of failure is the two-edge "picture" of Fig. 6(a). Here if Left starts, he takes the bottom edge and wins instantly, but if Right starts, necessarily taking the top edge, Left can still remove the bottom edge and win. So Left can win no matter who starts, and this certainly sounds like a positive advantage for Left. Is it as much as a 1-move advantage? We can try counterbalancing it by putting an extra red edge (which counts as a 1-move advantage for Right) on the ground, getting Fig. 6(b). Who wins now?

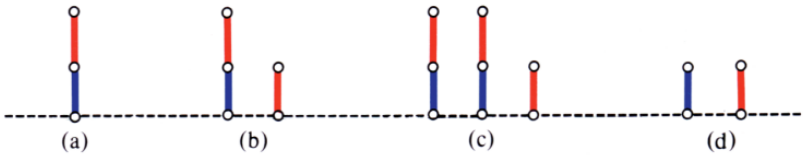

Figure 6. What do we mean by Half a Move?

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If Right starts, he should take the higher of his two red edges, since this is clearly in danger. Then when Left removes his only blue edge, Right can still move and win. If Left starts, his only possible move still leaves Right a free edge, and so Right still wins. So this time, it is Right that wins, whoever starts, and Left's positive advantage of Fig. 6(a) has now been overwhelmed by adding the free move for Right. We can say that Left's advantage in Fig. 6(a), although positive, was strictly less than an advantage of one free move. Will it perhaps be one-half of a move?

We test this in Fig. 6(c), made up of *two* copies of Fig. 6(a) with just *one* free move for Right added, since if we are correct $\frac{1}{2}+\frac{1}{2}$ for Left will exactly balance 1 for Right. Who wins Fig. 6(c)? Left has essentially only one kind of move, leading to a picture like Fig. 6(b), which we know Right wins. On the other hand, if Right starts sensibly by taking either of his two threatened edges, Left will move to a picture like Fig. 6(d) and win after Right's next move. If Right has used up his free move at the outset, Left's reply would take us to Fig. 6(a), which we know he wins.

We've just shown that Right wins if Left starts and Left wins if Right starts, so that Fig. 6(c) is a zero game. This seems to show that *two* copies of Fig. 6(a) behave just like *one* free move for Left, in that together they exactly counterbalance a free move for Right. So it's really quite sensible to regard Fig. 6(a) as being a half-move's advantage for Left.

Putting Right's red edge partly under Left's control made Fig. 6(a) worse for him than Fig. 6(d). So perhaps Fig. 7(a) should be worth less to Right than Fig. 7(b) in which Right's edge is threatened by only one of Left's?

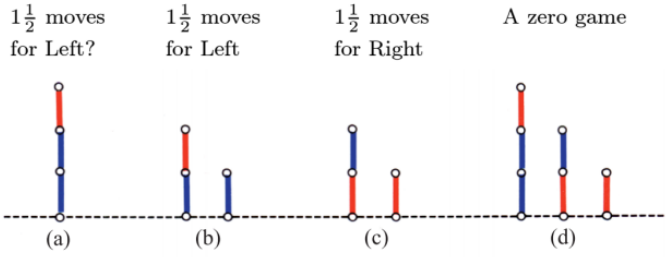

Figure 7. Is Right's Edge even more under Left's Control?

We are asking whether Fig. 7(a) is worth exactly $1\frac{1}{2}$ moves to Left like Fig. 7(b). We can test this by adding $1\frac{1}{2}$ free moves for Right to Fig. 7(a). Since Fig. 7(c) is the opposite of Fig. 7(b), we produce the required allowance by adjoining it to Fig. 7(a), giving Fig. 7(d).

Who wins this complicated little pattern? Here each player has just one risky edge partly in control of his opponent, and if a player starts by taking his risky edge, his opponent can remove the other, leaving two unfettered moves each. If instead he takes the edge just below his opponent's risky edge, the opponent can do likewise, now leaving just one free move each. The only other starting move for Left is stupid since it leaves only red edges touching the ground and indeed Right can win with a move to spare.

What about Right's remaining move? Since this is to remove the isolated red edge, it *must* be stupid, for surely it would be better to take the middle red edge and so demolish a blue

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edge at the same time? And indeed Left's reply of chopping the middle edge of the chain of three proves perfectly adequate. So *every* first move loses, and once again the game is what we called a zero game. This seems to show that contrary to our first guess, Figs. 7(a) and 7(b) confer exactly the same advantage to Left, namely one and a half free moves.

... And Quarter Moves?

In Fig. 8(a), Right's topmost edge is partly under Left's control, but also partly under Right's as well, so it should perhaps be worth more to him than his middle one? Since we found that the middle edge was worth half a move to Right, the pair of red edges collectively would then be worth at least a whole move to him, counteracting Left's single edge. So maybe Right has the advantage here?

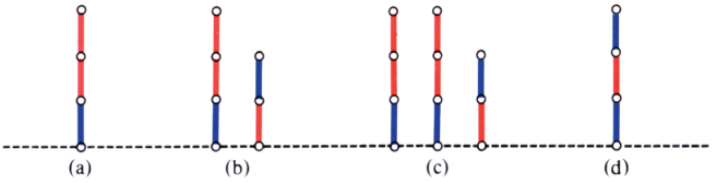

Figure 8. Are Right's Edges worth more than Left's?

This naive opinion is dispelled as soon as play starts, for Left's only move wins the game as soon as he makes it, showing that Fig. 8(a) gives a positive advantage to Left. But when we adjoin half a move for Right as in Fig. 8(b), Right can win by playing first, by removing the topmost edge, or playing second, by removing the highest red edge remaining. So Fig. 8(a), though a positive advantage for Left, is worth even less to him than half a move. Is it perhaps, being three edges high, worth just one-third of a move? No! We leave the reader to show that two copies of Fig. 8(a) exactly balance half a move for Right, by showing that the second player to move wins Fig. 8(c), so that Fig. 8(a) is in fact a quarter move's advantage for Left.

And how much is Fig. 8(d) worth?

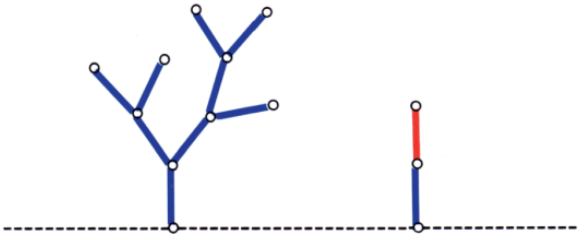

Figure 9. A Hackenbush Position worth $9\frac{1}{2}$.

Figure 9 shows a Hackenbush position of value $9\frac{1}{2}$, since the tree has value 9, and the rest value $\frac{1}{2}$. What are the moves here? Right has a unique red edge, and so a unique move, to a position of value $9+1=10$, but Left can move either at the top of the tree, leaving $8\frac{1}{2}$, *or* by removing the $\frac{1}{2}$ completely, which is a better move, since it leaves value 9. Since Left's best

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move is to value 9, and Right's to 10, we express this by writing

$$\{9|10\} = 9\tfrac{1}{2} \qquad (\text{“9 slash 10 equals } 9\tfrac{1}{2}\text{”})$$

In a similar way, we have the more general equation

$$\{n|n+1\} = n + \tfrac{1}{2},$$

of which the simplest case is

$$\{0|1\} = \tfrac{1}{2},$$

with which we began. We also have the simpler equation

$$\{n|\ \} = n + 1$$

for each $n = 0, 1, 2, \ldots$, for if Left has just $n + 1$ free moves, he can move so as to leave just n free moves, while Right cannot move at all. The very simplest equation of this type is

$$\{\ |\ \} = 0$$

which expresses the fact that if neither player has a legal move the game has zero value.

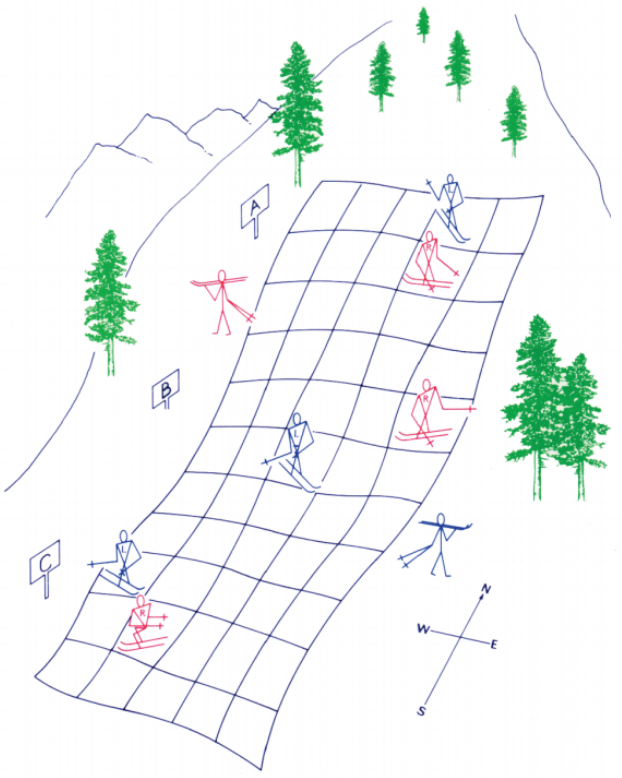

Figure 10. A Game of Ski-Jumps.

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Ski-Jumps for Beginners

Figure 10 shows a ski-slope with some skiers in the pay of Left and Right, about to participate in our next game. In a single move, Left may move any skier a square or more Eastwards, or Right any one of his, Westwards, provided there is no other active skier in the way. Such a move may take the skier off the slope; in this case he takes no further part in the game. No two skiers may occupy the same square of the slope. Alternatively a skier on the square immediately *above* one containing a skier of the opposing team, may jump over him onto the square immediately below, provided this is empty. A man jumped over is so humiliated that he will never jump over anyone else—in fact he is demoted from being a *jumper* to an ordinary skier, or *slipper*!

No other kind of move is permitted in this game, so that when all the skiers belonging to one of the players have left the ski-slope, that player cannot move, and a player who cannot move when it is his turn to do so, loses the game. Let's examine some simple positions. Figure 11(a) shows a case when Left's only jumper is already east of Right's, so that no jump is possible. Since Left's man can move 5 times and Right's only 3, the value is $5 - 3 = 2$ spare moves for left.

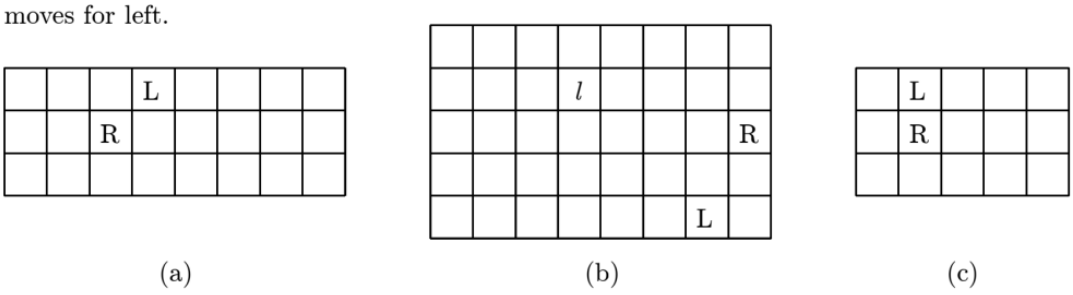

Figure 11. Some Ski-Jumps Positions.

We can similarly evaluate any other position in which no further jumps are possible. Thus in Fig. 11(b) Left has one man on the row above Right's, and another lower down, but still no jump will be possible, for Left's upper man has been demoted to a mere slipper (hence his lower case name, l), while his lower man, being two rows below Right's, is not threatened. Left's two men have collectively $2 + 5$ moves to Right's 8, so the value is

$$2 + 5 - 8 = -1$$

moves to Left, that is, 1 move in favor of Right.

Now let's look at Fig. 11(c), in which Left's man may jump over Right's, if he wishes. If he does so, the value will be $4 - 2 = 2$, which is better than the value $3 - 2 = 1$ he reaches by sliding one place East. If, on the other hand, Right has the move, it will be to a position of value $4 - 1 = 3$. So the position has value

$$\{2|3\} = 2\tfrac{1}{2}$$

moves to Left. More generally, if Left has a single man on the board, with a spaces (and hence $a + 1$ moves) before him, and Right a single man with b spaces before *him*, and one of the two

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men is now in a position to jump over the other, the value will be

$$a - b + \tfrac{1}{2} \quad \text{or} \quad a - b - \tfrac{1}{2}$$

according as it is Left's or Right's man who has the jump. We can think of an imminent jump as being worth half a move to the player who can make it.

Figure 12 shows all the positions on a 3×5 board in which there are just two men, of which Left's might possibly jump Right's either at his first move or later.

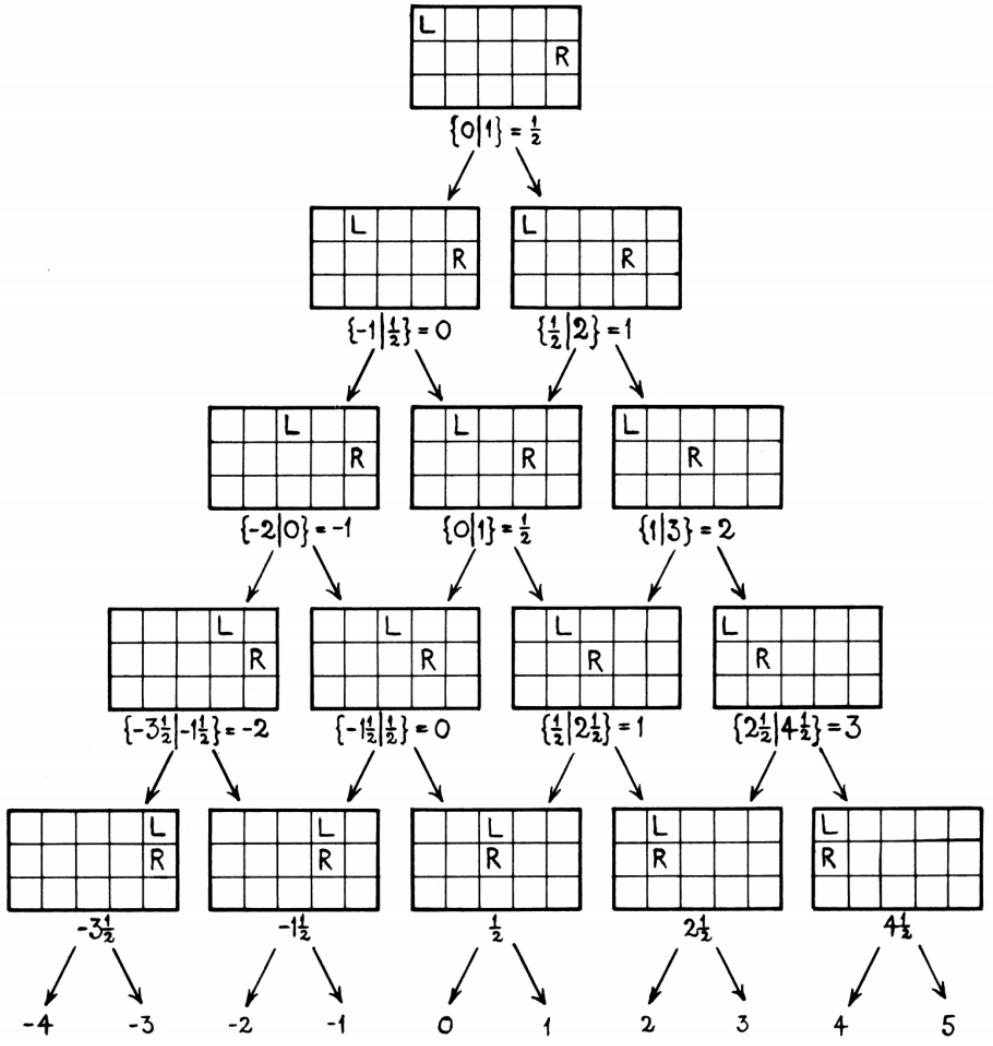

Figure 12. Ski-Jumps Positions on a 3×5 Board.

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Don't Just Take the Average!

The positions in the bottom two lines are those we have just analyzed, in which the jump is imminent or past. From any of the other positions, Left has just one move, to the position diagonally down and left from the given one, and Right similarly has a unique move, to the position diagonally rightwards. We have appended the values of all these positions, measured as usual in terms of free moves for Left, and there are some surprises. We have evaluated the rightmost position on the fourth row as

$$\{2\tfrac{1}{2}|4\tfrac{1}{2}\} = 3.$$

Surely this is wrong? Anyone can see that the average of $2\frac{1}{2}$ and $4\frac{1}{2}$ is $3\frac{1}{2}$, can't they?

Well yes, of course $3\frac{1}{2}$ is the *average*, but it turns out that the *value* is 3, nevertheless. You *don't* simply evaluate positions in games by averaging Left's and Right's best moves! Exactly how you *do* evaluate them is the main topic of this book, so we can't reveal it all at once. But we *will* explain why the second position on the fourth row has value 0, rather than $-\frac{1}{2}$, as might have been expected.

If the value were $-\frac{1}{2}$ or any other negative number, Right ought to win, no matter who starts. But in this position, if Right starts, Left can jump him immediately, after which they will have just three moves, and Right will exhaust his before Left. In fact neither player can win this position if he starts, for if Left moves first, Right can slip leftwards past him to avoid the threatened jump, leaving Left with but two moves to Right's three. A position in which the first player to move loses *always* has value zero.

We could have seen the same thing from the symbolic expression $\{-1\frac{1}{2}|\frac{1}{2}\}$ for the position, for since Left's best option has negative value he cannot move to it and win (if Right plays well), and since Right's best move is positive, he cannot move to win either. It does not matter

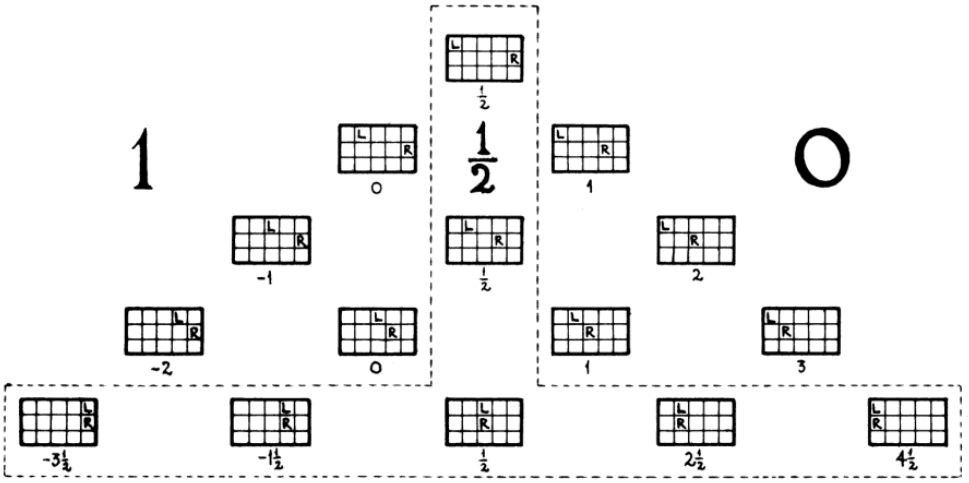

Figure 13. The value of a Potential Jump is 1, $\frac{1}{2}$ or 0.

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Index

accounts-payable, 127
action, in hottest game, 167
active position, 149, 150
acute triangles, 254
Adams, E. W., 117
addition of games, 31, 32
addition of switches, 122
addition, nim-, 58, 59, 73, 74, 90, 109, 110, 116, 199, 246
addition, ordinal, 220
addition, two kinds, 191
additives of no atomic weight, 225
adjacency matrix, 222
Air on a $\mathcal{G}$-string, 96
Alice in Wonderland, 1, 56, 57, 229
all small games, 229, 230
alternating moves, 46, 47
Althöfer, I., 86, 117
amazing jungle, 208
Amazons, 15, 16
ambient temperature, 164, 165, 188
anatomy of Toads-and-Frogs, 63
Andersson, Göran, 119
animals, dead, 135
animals, tracking, 202
annihilation games, 224
Argument, Poker-Nim, 55, 56
Argument, Snakes-in-the-Grass, 191
Argument, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, 2, 3, 35, 72
arithmetic periodicity, 99, 113–117, 144
arithmetically periodic, 187
asymmetrical heating, 173
atom, 229
atomic weight = uppitiness, 200–202, 204, 206, 208, 209, 211, 220–222, 225, 230–232, 234, 236–240, 242–244, 246, 248, 251, 253, 256, 258, 259, 261
atomic weight calculus, 231, 232, 234, 237, 239, 242, 247, 249, 256, 259
atomic weight of lollipops, 238
atomic weight of nimbers and of up, 232
atomic weight properties, 236
atomic weight rules, 242
atomic weight, eccentric, 231, 232, 237, 251
atomic weight, fractional, 234, 236
Austin, Richard Bruce, 52, 96, 109, 117
average versus value, 10
averages, playing the, 167, 173

Bültermann, J., 86, 117
Backgammon, 14
bad move, 16
bad moves, 16
ball, officers', 96
Ball, W. W. Rouse, 117
Baron, J. G., 52
Baseball, 15
Basketball, 15
battle, 3

Copyrighted material

battle, hot, 145
battle, Nim-like, 230
Battleships, 15
Beasley, John D., 18
bed, redwood, 211, 213–217, 222
Benson, E. C., 117
Berge, Claude, 78
Berlekamp's Rule, 77, 78
Berlekamp, Elwyn Ralph, 16, 18, 77, 78, 123, 144, 187, 188, 224, 225
Bicknell-Johnson, Marjorie, 79
big game, 65, 75, 202, 206, 222
binary (base 2), 73
bipartite graph, 217, 224
Black, Farmer, 145, 146
Blass, U., 78
Blockbusting, 187
blossom, 198, 199, 240
bLue edge, 2, 198, 230, 237
bLue edges, 2
Blue Flower Ploy, 199, 201, 240, 242
Blue Jungle Ploy, 201, 210
bLue tinted nodes, 48
blue tinted nodes, 204
Blue-Red Hackenbush, 1–6, 15–17, 20, 22, 27, 29–33, 35, 36, 42, 77, 179, 198, 200, 211–217, 224
Bodlaender, H.L., 225
Bodlaender, H. L., 117
bogus Nim-heap, 56
Bond, James = ·**007**, 95
bottle, 218, 225
boundary, 158
boundary, Left, 154–156, 164, 169
boundary, left, 165
boundary, Right, 154–156, 164, 169, 170
Bouton, Charles L., 42, 52, 78
breakthrough, 188
Breuker, D. M., 144
Bridge, 15
bridge, 190, 194–196
bulls, 145, 146
Bushaw, Donald W., 52
Bynum's Game = Eatcake, 136, 234
Bynum, James, 136, 234
bypassing reversible options, 60, 62–64, 66, 70, 71, 75, 77
Byrom, John, 53
Byron, Henry James, 81

Caines, Ian, 117
cake, 26, 51, 196, 220, 221
Calculus, Atomic Weight, 231, 232, 234, 237, 239, 242, 247, 249, 256, 259
Calistrate, Dan, 188
canonical forms for numbers, 22
card sharp, 16
cards, shuffling, 14
Carroll, Lewis, 229
cash flow, 126
Cashing Cheques, 122–124, 145, 158, 159, 240
ceiling, 51
Celoni, James R., 226
centralizing switches, 123
chain, green, 40
chain, Snort, 147, 149–151, 153, 156–158, 161, 167, 168, 177, 180–183
chair, redwood, 211
chalk-and-blackboard game, 1
chance moves, 14
Chandra, Ashok K., 224, 227
change, phase, 167, 168
charge, electric, 253, 254
Checkers, 18
Checkers = Draughts, 224, 226, 227
cheque-market exchange, 158, 159
Chess, 14, 18, 224, 226
Chess, Dawson's, 89–92, 101, 109
Childish Hackenbush, 43, 52, 157
Childish Hackenbush Hotchpotch, 236–238
childish lollipops, 237–240
childish picture, 43
children's party, 132, 179
chilling, 187
China, 16
Chytie, M.P., 227
class, outcome, 28, 84
cloud, 31, 36, 121, 149, 150
coalitions, 15
code digits, 92, 93, 99, 101, 103–105, 107, 108, 113, 117
Coinage, Sylver, 15
coins, 123, 124
Col, 38, 39, 47–51, 67, 68, 75, 145, 224

Copyrighted material

colon notation, 243, 244
Colon Principle, 191, 193, 194, 220
coloring, 38, 145, 147, 187
common coset, 110
common values, 110
comparing games, 35, 36, 122
compendium, 109
complete in exponential time, 225
complete in Pspace, 224
complete information, 14
component, 20, 22, 31, 32, 35
compound game, 31
compound thermograph, 164
computing power, 163
confused, 31, 68, 69, 71
confusion interval, 121, 149–151, 158, 163
conjecture, 112
Connell, Ian G., 78
contract, 126
convention, normal play, 14
Conway, John Horton, 18, 22, 52, 78, 117, 123, 144, 188, 225, 262
Cook, Stephen A., 224, 225
cooling, 151, 152, 154, 167, 179, 231
cooling formula, 151
Corinthians I, 13.12, 69
coset, common, 110
cost, 161
counters, heaps of, 41
Couples, Seating, 44, 45, 132, 133
cousin, 101, 103–105, 107, 109, 114, 116
Cowley, Abraham, 119
cows, 145–147
Coxeter, Harold Scott Macdonald, 78, 117
Cram, 142
Cram = Impartial Domineering, 142, 144
Cricket, 15
criminal, minimal, 194, 214
critical temperature, 167, 168, 171
Crosscram = Domineering, 119
cucle, 213
Cutcake, 25, 26, 31, 32
Cutcake, Hickerson's, 51
cycles, 192–194, 214

Damß, J. E., 225
Dawson's Chess = ·**137**, 89–92, 101, 109
Dawson's Kayles, 261
Dawson's Kayles = ·**07**, 15, 90, 93, 95, 101, 109
Dawson, Thomas Rayner, 89, 117
dead animals, 135
Death Leap Principle, 127–130, 135
deleting dominated options, 62, 63, 75, 77
delphinium, 47, 199, 242
Demaine, Eric, 225
Demaine, Martin, 225
Descartes, Blanche, 96, 117
devil's label, 195
dice, rolling, 14
Difference Rule, 74
digits, code, 92, 93, 99, 101, 103–105, 107, 108, 113, 117
dilemma, 132
Dim, 98
disarray, 95
discount, 161
disguise, 95
disincentive, 147, 148
dissection, 128, 129, 134
dissociation, thermal, 168
Dodgson, Charles Lutwidge, 1, 229
dog with leftward leanings, 4
dominated option, 62, 63, 75, 77, 126, 149
Domineering, 178, 187
Domineering = Crosscram, 119–122, 139, 142, 144, 153, 177
Domineering, Impartial = Cram, 142, 144
Dominoes, 119
Dominoes = Domineering, 119
Don't-Break-It-Up Theorem, 213, 214, 216
Dots-and-Boxes, 15, 95, 225
Double Duplicate Nim, 114
Double Kayles, 99
double-down, ⇓, 68, 69, 71
double-up, ⇑, 68, 69, 71
double-up, ⇑, 230
doubling of nim-values, 94
down, ↓, 68, 151
down, ↓, 63–65
down-second, 236
down-third, 236
downstar, 66, 242
drawn, 14

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