No Man's Land

Chapter 2

“The Nightmare”



(Image of the protagonist, Caster)

Written by Whanks/RCN

The world is full of people. People with purpose, important people, special people. They stand in the spotlight, worlds apart from the ordinary. Heroes, soldiers, legends, celebrities... They even become our inspirations, motivating us in life. But can you imagine someone of an impressive caliber who never sought to reveal himself to the world? Not because he is unaware of the masses, or lacks the means to gain recognition, but simply out of sheer indifference. He is a man with few friends, few connections, and scant evidence of his existence. And yet, entire casinos crumble in the wake of his schemes. He wanders the world like a ghost. He acts not for applause, reverence, or wealth, but for his ideology and the sliver of moral motivation found within it

“What is a person’s purpose? I have never had a purpose in life. Must a purpose be fixed, established from the very start or can it be found along the way?”

This man has left ordinary life behind. He has no ultimate goal, no set path to follow. His name is unknown; he could be anyone. He goes where he pleases, doing as he wishes, finding a new reason to keep living. Does he have a family? No—he lives alone, of course. And in this vast solitude, he manages to find a measure of comfort, something that brings him satisfaction

“I am, first and foremost, a machine for observing errors. For every problem, there is a solution. That is my philosophy”

Casinos. The nameless man always found them fascinating. The mechanics of profiting from games designed to favor the house—and the solutions casinos employed—naturally drew him in. It was his calling to devise and refine strategies that could turn the tables. They called him "Nightmare," for he shattered the dreams of casino managers. Eventually, however, reality catches up with everyone, exposing their weaknesses. Unless... you become a master of logic

"It’s time... to finish this game!"

It was February 28, 2026. A group of men arrived at the Allstars Casino in Rio de Janeiro. There were at least eight of them, yet within hours, they would make enough money to drive the casino into bankruptcy. Most were down-and-out gamblers seeking one last shot at a perfect turnaround, led by the master of betting himself. The plan was simple: win as much money as possible, as quickly as possible, before the casino even realized what was happening. The team focused on the games where specific techniques could give them the edge over the house: blackjack and poker

In blackjack, it is possible to overcome the casino's edge by using a number based algorithm (-1, +1, 0) combined with a flawless strategy for every scenario. While difficult to master and potentially detectable by casino staff, the group had managed to remain discreet up to that point. They won over 80 thousand dollars playing the game

Poker also involves a form of optimal strategy, where certain card pairings are statistically superior to others. Reading one's opponents is also crucial for survival in the game. In this instance, since they could not extract money directly from the casino, they devised a strategy to damage the casino's stock value

They invited casino stakeholders who held significant equity in the establishment to play poker. Ultimately, they won a total of 800,000 from these individuals. To cover their losses, the stakeholders liquidated a large portion of their holdings, specifically, their “buy” orders. With the “buy” positions eliminated, the "sell" positions gained strength. The gamblers anticipated that investors would recognize the unfolding situation and realize the casino's stock price was bound to fall as a result. Consequently, they used the money from their short positions to generate an even greater profit

Market sentiment regarding the stock shifted decisively toward selling, causing the share price to plummet. The gamblers used their 800,000 in poker winnings to go all-in on short-selling, amplifying the effect and further draining the value of the casino's stock. Before this tactic, Allstars Casino held 43,750 shares valued at 32 dollars each, immediately afterwards, the price dropped to 18 dollars per share, a loss of 600k dollars, with the total stock value falling from 1.4 million to 780k. And that amount was destined to fall even further after the final game

All these events had unfolded in little more than an hour, and now only one game remained to complete the plan. It was a recent trend that had originated in international casinos, with each venue featuring its own signature game. The final game was…

The Blindfold of Three Dice

"What was your name again?" one of the casino employees asked the team leader

"I go by many names, but among friends and allies, I’m Castro S. Juscelino, though you can call me Caster or Cas." He was a man with a massive vertical scar running down the right side of his face. His hair grew towards the left, leaving the right side of his head sparser

"Well, then, I’ll explain the rules of the game to you." Just then, a crowd gathered around the table, while the staff kept a close watch on every move made by Caster’s companions "There are three standard dice. Each is rolled individually; before the next one is cast, you must guess the number shown on the die that has been rolled. This process repeats for the subsequent two dice until you correctly identify the sequence of numbers."

"And for that, I get 200 thousand dollars as a prize? Is that right?" Cas asked

“Sure. However, no casino would give away that kind of money so easily. The odds of winning this game are 1 in 216, meaning a 0.5% chance of getting the correct sequence. And naturally, we make the player wear this blindfold so they can't cheat. Make no mistake: that blindfold blocks out all light; nothing gets through.”

“That’s the standard casino modus operandi: profiting from chance. This type of game is actually quite appealing; if you really look at it, the odds are better than in any lottery. They charged me 5,000; if the loss-to-win ratio holds steady, they only need to collect 4,600 reais from the 215 losers to cover the 1 million prize for the winner. At 5,000, that yields a profit of 86,000 for every 216 players.”

“Very astute, Mr. Castro, truly astute. In the end, the house always wins, and the decision always rests with the bettor. If they want to change that, they can create their own game where the odds are in their favor. But of course, everyday life itself relies more on luck than any game in this casino; people feel more comfortable here than out there. That is the reality of the world we live in.”

“That’s why today... I’m going to turn this game upside-down and defeat you all without breaking a sweat!” Everyone was astonished, while the bettor’s group flashed a smile

“Very well, enough games... I still wish you luck, Mr. Castro.”

And then the game began, with everyone gathered silently around the table, intrigued by Caster’s challenge. Security personnel clustered around the crowd, ready to spot any sign of cheating from the man. The first die was cast; Caster slowly opened his hands, then closed them in sequence. Then, the first number appeared:

“1”

He had guessed correctly, though the staff didn't yet have much cause for suspicion, it could still be explained by luck. Then, the next die was thrown. Caster’s arm moved first horizontally, then vertically in a very subtle motion. And then, the second number came up:

“5”

Security guards began searching Caster’s allies, who remained completely still, showing no signs of signaling their leader. Guessing the numbers with such confidence was practically impossible; yet, as far as the staff could tell, there was nothing wrong with Caster. His five senses were completely restricted: he couldn't see a thing, the silence offered no sounds for him to hear, he clearly couldn't distinguish the numbers by smell or taste, and he couldn't even touch the die. It was a supernatural feat

The third die was cast. The guards found nothing suspicious. At this rate, a million reais would be lost. Then, at the last moment, Caster tilted his chin down, then up. And just like that, the final number was revealed:

“2”

Everyone was shocked and immediately cheered for Castro as he removed his blindfold. He had just dealt the final blow to the casino, beating its toughest game. As they were leaving with the money, his group had to undergo another search after the casino manager summoned the police. In the end, the authorities had to let him go, as they found no evidence that Cas had cheated. Before leaving, the nameless man glanced back, taking one last look at the casino which would be closing its doors in the coming days because of him

[...]

“Let’s face it, you were intrigued too, weren’t you? As for the trick I used… What was it? All three times, I repeated two specific moves. That was the only suspicious part of my method. The rest... was pure magic.”

“Alright, I’ll reveal it, but only to you. The truth is, my group didn’t consist of just eight people, but nine. Two weeks prior, I paid a homeless man to play at the Allstars casino; I provided him with clothes, temporary housing, and an income. The goal was for him to get comfortable with the casino, and for the casino to get used to seeing him around. Then, on February 28th, I had him enter the casino an hour before I arrived. The fact that my group was with me, combined with the fact that the homeless man was a regular visitor, eliminated any chance of him appearing suspicious.”

“Here’s the interesting part. I gave him a remote-controlled device. It could be placed inside a ventilation duct in the casino restroom. That duct ran directly over the table where I’d be playing, and the device was capable of emitting a focused beam of microwave energy. It generated a low temperature, one you could feel on your skin without causing physical harm. The beam could be toggled on and off and was aimed precisely at me, ensuring it wouldn't affect anyone else.”

“The hand and arm movements… they varied each time, but can be viewed as movement 1 and movement 2. The first is used to determine whether the number is even or odd. If movement 1 (even number) doesn’t trigger the microwave, it means the number is odd. After that, movements 1 and 2 are used to narrow down the three remaining possibilities within the odd or even category. For instance, if it’s odd, the number could only be 1, 3, or 5. If I don’t get a temperature reading from movement 1, I move on to movement 2; if I don’t get a reading there either, then the only viable number is 5.”

“While everyone was focused on my teammates, the homeless man was manipulating the device in his pocket, watching the numbers on the dice on the table. It was quite a performance and one of my best tactics.”

“You were impressed, weren’t you?”

[...]

Two weeks later, on March 14th, the gambler was in his hotel room, his base of operations. The room held various machines and personal items, along with a large sum of money stashed in a safe beneath his bed, accessible via a hatch in the floor. Yet, the nameless man didn't look well. The night before, a friend had knocked on his door, asking for help with a massive financial loss. Such requests were nothing new to the master of deception, but what truly intrigued him was the organization and the game behind it all. He became so obsessed that he stayed up until seven in the morning analyzing the company's website.

"Gameland... yeah, it's time to wake it up." Cas's friend was sitting in an armchair, wrapped in a blanket with a pillow

"Oh! Caster, why are you up at this hour?! Did you stay..."

"It doesn't matter; I've already done a preliminary investigation into the company. I'm going to get your money back, find out more about them, and see if... I can have a little fun."

However, Gameland was no ordinary company; it was extraordinary, even by Castro's standards. It was worth hundreds of millions of dollars and employed 4 thousand people. Stranger still, it had been founded in 2022, meaning it had existed for only four years and three months. Its founder, Mr. Franco Villa, was a 68-year-old man who told an incredible story about the company's origins. He had always loved games but had worked an ordinary job for most of his life. At sixty-two, he suffered a household accident that supposedly granted him advanced cognitive abilities, boosting his intelligence to an overwhelming level, a rare phenomenon sometimes observed following head trauma

"There's something off about this story… I can sense it already…"

"That phenomenon doesn't actually exist, does it? I found it pretty strange, too"

"Actually, it is a proven fact. Jason Padgett once took a blow to the head and woke up with a highly mathematical brain. It wouldn't be impossible for this old man to be telling the truth… though it is highly unlikely"

Gameland wasn't like a casino. In reality, it was more like a tournament where players competed against one another for the money they'd put into the game, or faced off against the organization in a specific challenge. A game where they had a genuine chance of winning if they played well. But the most important thing of all was the fundamental principle behind Gameland that set it apart from every other company in the world

"Upholding the ideals of fairness… that is the number one principle"

"Just think about it: a game is only fair if a person wins through the merit of their intelligence or skill, and if the outcome is determined more by the player's mastery than by luck. Take Mahjong, for instance: 20% of the game is dictated by luck, while the remaining 80% depends on player skill. In other words, in our games, a player's intelligence should give them a better chance of winning, even if a bit of luck is involved. Games like Chess, Go, Blackjack, and Poker can be won by mastering the right techniques. For a game to be accepted by our company, it must involve at least 60% player choice and no more than 40% luck. Consequently, games heavily reliant on luck such as roulette, slots, quizzes, and bingo are excluded from our selection"

"Of course, a higher degree of player choice doesn't mean luck won't play a role from time to time. In Mahjong, an opponent might get better tiles than you and win a specific round. But the key is that, in these games, you can win consistently despite losing certain rounds. Ultimately, your skill will lead to a profit"

"It seems well thought out" Castro states. "They also have principles regarding cheating and other ways of ensuring fairness to the players. I don't see much of a problem with it. After all, it's not an organization trying to prey on players or extort them, which would be truly detestable. I don't mind them profiting from zero-sum games, since players lose on their own

terms. Players can even win money in games against the organization itself! They're actually quite humble about it."

"But… you're still going to help me, right?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Even if it is a rather strange thing to do" Castro leans back in his chair. "Usually, I help people who were cheated at the casino get their money back. There's no paradox there. But imagine if, by winning that money back in a zero-sum game, I created *new* losers who then came to me asking for the same thing you are. I'd be creating an endless cycle of favors that could last until the tournament ends…"

"True, but some of the games have extra money on the line. It doesn't even have to be a game against the organization itself; sometimes there are bonuses within the zero-sum games"

"Then I'll have fewer clients to worry about. Well, I'll get your 600 dollars back, so don't worry. I've already booked a game on their site for the 15th. Come back at 11:40 on the 16th. Our session is over, see you later"

Castro returned to thinking about that website, absorbed by the strange feeling that made him distrust the organization. There were two main points. *"First point: the company listed its past annual costs, with the figures from the first to the fourth year following an exponential curve, a curve that makes the fifth year's cost highly predictable. However, in the company's cost forecast for this year, published in February, the estimated cost falls far below expectations, just slightly above the fourth-year level. That represents very slow growth, even when accounting for the curve's logic. So, why did they choose to keep costs below the expected level? It must be due to debt, or to fund something bigger with their available resources"*

"The first option is highly unlikely, given their strong relationships with both domestic and international companies. Brands like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Spotify provide millions in sponsorship funding. The games themselves draw an average of around a million viewers, generating similar amounts in revenue from viewership. Operating costs are very low, and many of the games take place in rented venues. Aside from the games, the biggest expense is the staff salaries of 400 dollars per month, which is quite manageable considering they likely bring in nearly 4 million dollars a month. So, they are almost certainly funding a larger project"

"The second point: certain wording in the written principles of the organization. With an understanding of linguistic analysis, one can see that older men tend to use shorter sentences in monologues and narrative structures. This text follows a different pattern, featuring fewer pronouns and more refined lexical content. Given that these principles were likely drafted around 2020, the year Villa "hit his head", it is improbable that his cognitive growth would have accelerated quickly enough to produce such a drastic shift in writing style. In other words, it was most likely written by a young person"

"So, is Villa a puppet? Controlled by a young person who made him concoct this fantastic story in order to control the company from the shadows? Hm… interesting. The

organization’s objective has become a potential danger. Where are the resources going? I wonder. I’ll have to go deeper down this rabbit hole, much deeper”

[...]

It was already March 15th. Castro had arrived at the venue, a school reserved for the match, since the day fell on a Sunday. Upon entering the building, he found all the players gathered in the courtyard. He noticed there was an option to request anonymity during the game's recording, with his face blurred and his voice slightly distorted. This was possible because the live broadcast featured a ten-minute delay. He chose this option to avoid drawing attention to himself, given that he was already harassed at his day job due to his notoriety. He also realized that every player had to sign paperwork to formalize the process. Castro had no documentation, after all, he was a man without a name. However, the staff had anticipated this and created an identity specifically for the tournament. He was incredibly excited for his first match.

Before him stood nine other players, none particularly remarkable, save for a pale, thirty-year-old man wearing prescription glasses. He was dressed in a white shirt, shorts, and sandals. He had an analytical gaze, appearing deeply lost in thought; he carried the air of an intellectual. Then, suddenly, the match referee appeared. He was a stout man wearing a monocle. He had little black hair, turning gray at the back and was clearly a man in his fifties nearing his sixties. He introduced himself with a charismatic flair:

“I’m Pierre Alves. A pleasure to meet you all. It’s no coincidence I was chosen; after all, I’m a fine counter. Just look at this beauty!” He pulled a coin from his pocket. “Isn't it amazing? Minted in 1997. And the cherry on top? It’s silver! That would be worth 3 points!”

“3 points?” A scrawny young man asked.

“Oh! I forgot! I haven't told you about the game yet. Not that it matters much! Coins are of immense value to me, and now they will be to you, too!”

“So... we’ll be using coins in this game?” A purple-haired woman asked, smoking a cigarette.

“Exactly! This game is called **"The Two Paths of the Four Coins"** It’s actually quite simple! Do you want me to explain?

“Isn't it your job to explain?” A burly, tattooed man asked, with a rough look on his face

“Ah, yes! My apologies! Here’s the deal... In this game, you have four coins and a board. Both teams receive boards. The board features a 9x9 grid where you’ll place your coins. Don't place a coin outside the boundary lines, or your team will be disqualified. Anything other than our coins placed in those squares won't be considered during the board analysis phase. The coins themselves are: gold, silver, bronze, and counterfeit. They are worth 4, 3, 2, and 1 points, respectively. Once the coins are placed, one board is superimposed over the other. As a result, any counterfeit coin is swapped for a gold one, and any silver coin is swapped for a bronze one”

“That fake coin... what’s it like?”

“Oh! I almost forgot. Look, it’s pastel blue and made of rubber. It doesn’t even have any markings; it’s just a piece of rubber shaped like a coin!”

“Oh... cool” Said a girl with pink hair.

“Moving on... for any coin other than the fake one, you have to fill the adjacent squares with a coin of lower value. In other words, four lower-value coins surrounding the higher-value one. If you want, you can even surround those lower-value coins with more lower-value coins! If you place a coin against the edge or corner of the board, you only need to surround the available sides with the lower-value coins. There will be 7 rounds, the winner is the one who wins 4. If the coins on the boards or the scores end up tied, there will be a coin-toss tiebreaker. And... I think that’s it…”

“You seem a bit confused, you’re even sweating. Didn’t you forget anything?” An elderly man with dark skin asked.

“Oh! Now I remember. The difference between the minimum and maximum possible points across all rounds is... let me see... (81×7) - (284×7) = 567 - 1988 = 1421 points. 1421 points is the maximum a team can gain. Each point is worth 6 dollars, so we have 8 thousand and 526 dollars in bonus money for the team leader. Money coming straight from Gameland itself! However, if the opponent gets disqualified in the final round, the team's score won't be deducted by the opponent's score. So, it’s theoretically possible to get even more bonus points, an extra 486 dollars on top of the maximum score!”

“Is that it?” the man in glasses asked, looking serious while crossing his arms.

“Yes! We can start forming the teams! Everyone, one by one, take a coin from this small bag! If you draw a silver one, you’re on Team 1! Bronze means Team 2!”

“Team 1…” Suddenly, someone tapped Caster on the shoulder; it was the skinny young man from earlier.

“So, we’re on the same team. Watch out for that guy over there, the one with the glasses. He’s no ordinary person…”

“Who is he?”

“Oh, he’s my math teacher. He teaches differentiation and integration. You don’t want to mess with him in a game like this,” the young man warned.

“Hm… we’ll see” Caster replied.

And so, they were all taken to the school gymnasium, a rectangular space with high walls and an arched ceiling. It was divided by a massive wall built specifically for this game, though it was surprisingly thin for its size. They went to their respective corners and found a

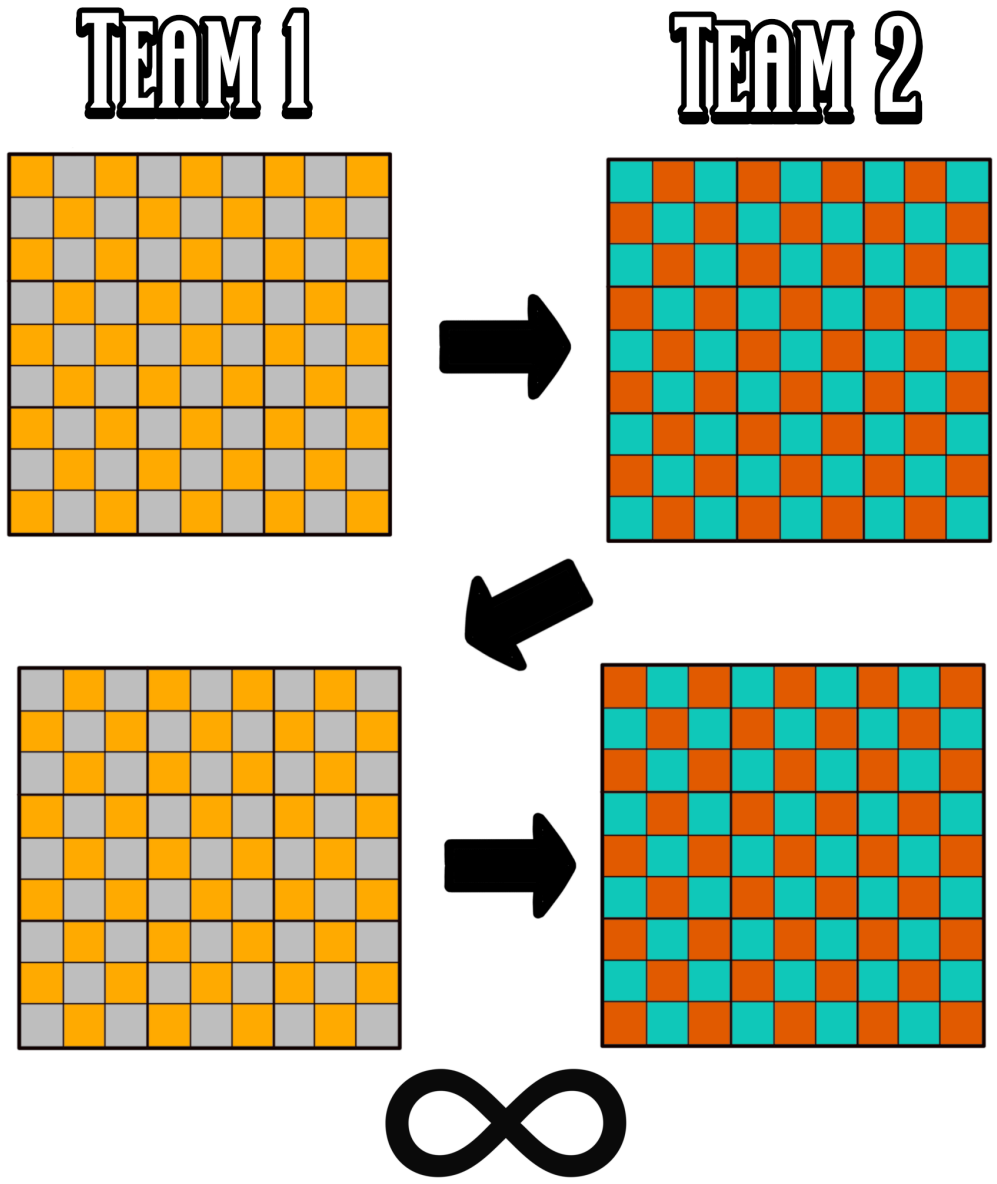
table waiting for them. It was on this table, marked with the faint lines of a 9×9 grid, that the board was placed. Then, the five members of each team sat down side by side

“For each round, you will have twenty minutes to analyze the boards. Good luck!”

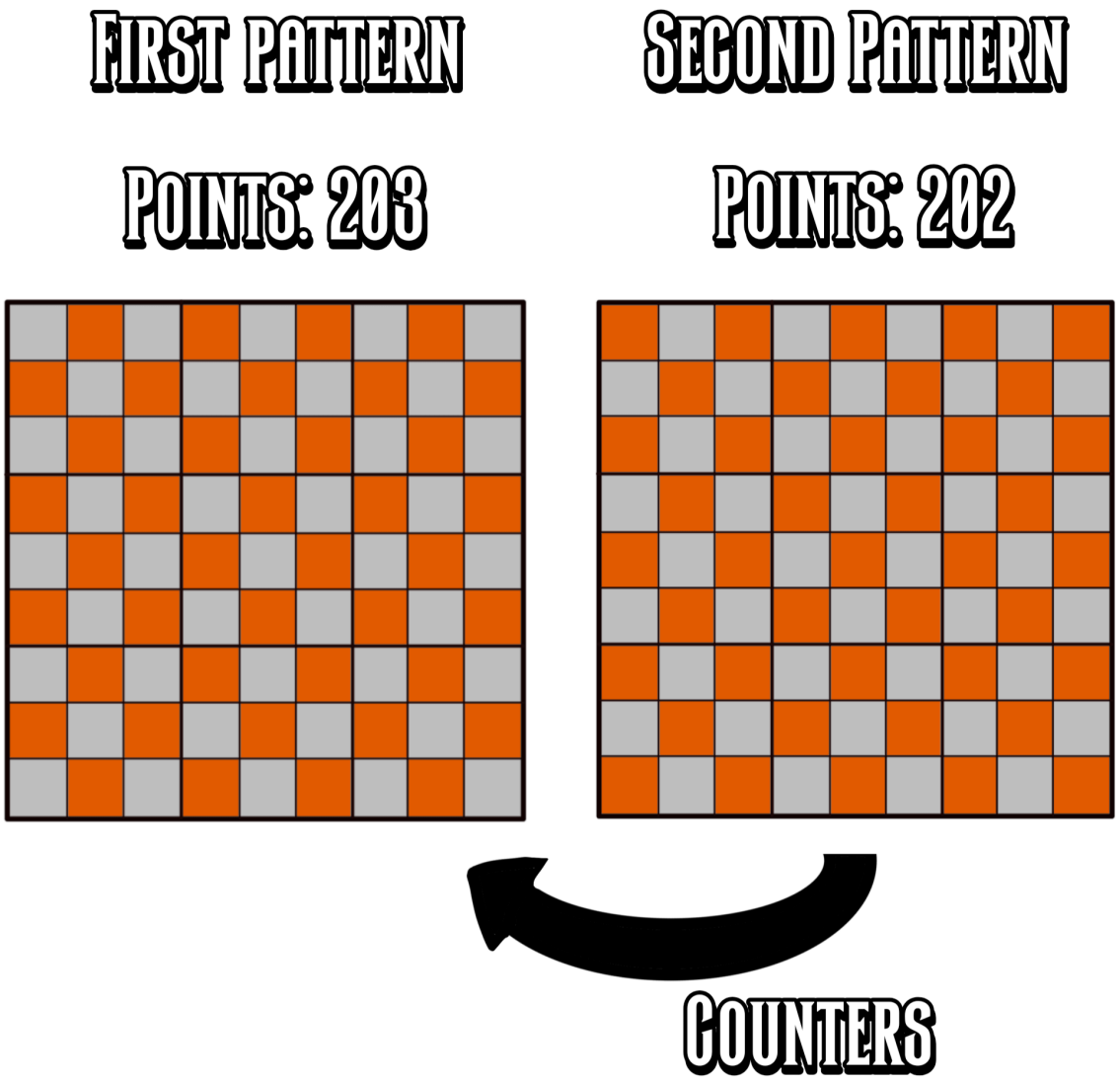
Round One

Within the first five minutes of the game, the leaders of both teams had already emerged. On Team 2, the professor had won over his teammates with his rapid calculations, which were capable of integrating every aspect of the complex structure. Meanwhile, on Team 1, Cas displayed supreme confidence, claiming he could predict Team 2's exact position for the first round.

“Well, this can also be explained using game theory... especially since we have limited information about our opponent. But... I think an informal explanation will suffice... pay attention!”



“In this game, the structure with the most points is the first one. Note that each subsequent board either steals points or diverts a point-stealing attempt from the previous board. These four structures can be cycled through indefinitely, and there is no single fixed answer to the problem. In other words, there are no guarantees when using these patterns. However, we can reach a logical conclusion that narrows down the available choices, creating a limited set of patterns. For instance, the gold coin is powerful, but it carries the risk of being stolen by a counterfeit coin. The 4-point coin turns into a 1-point coin, effectively making it a non-viable option. If neither side uses the gold coin, the counterfeit coin loses its purpose. That leaves only the silver and bronze coins. So, both sides are left with just two possible patterns to use. These ones here:”



“Note that there are four options: both teams choose the 203-point pattern, one team chooses the 203-point pattern while the other chooses the 202-point pattern (and vice versa); or both teams choose the 202-point pattern. If one team picks the 203-point pattern, the other will pick the 202-point pattern, stealing the points and flipping the 203-point board. In other words, it is better for both teams to choose the 202-point board, thereby nullifying the extra points and relying on a 50% chance of winning. These two patterns resemble the Prisoner's Dilemma, which shares the same solution. If this professor knows so much about mathematics, he must be familiar with the basics of game theory—meaning he would choose the 202-point pattern!”

And so, Team 1 used the pattern chosen by Castro. When the 20 minutes were up, both boards were revealed. It was the same pattern! Consequently, the dice were rolled, and victory went to Team 2—purely by chance. Yet, that would be the only time such a coincidence occurred

Round Two

“Did you notice that?”

“Notice what?”

“They showed the boards only briefly, but I saw the positioning of the opponent's coins. They were on the squares, of course. But look at the difference in their orientation. The weaker coins, the bronze ones, are shifted towards the top-left corner. Meanwhile, the stronger coins, the silver ones, are all shifted towards the center. The silver coins in the center are perfectly centered. What do you make of that?

“Hmm... does that mean he’s going to place the fake and bronze coins in the corners?” The pink-haired girl replied.

“Certainly. The coin's shifting reveals his future intentions. He thinks I’ll place the gold and silver coins in the corners, since they take up less space and it’s safer than clustering a bunch of them in the middle. In other words, my opponent will place two gold coins where the two bronze coins are, and the silver coin where the fake coins are. Since the focus seems to be on the top-left corner, I suspect he’ll use weak coins only in that corner and the two adjacent ones.

“Well... what about the 3 point coins in the center?” The wise old man asked

“I think I know the pattern he’s going to use. Notice that this 9×9 board can be divided into nine squares, each containing nine smaller squares. Look at the giant square in the center. Now think: if he wanted to maximize the outcome, he’d place five gold coins in an ‘X’ shape, eventually creating a diamond-like pattern made of gold and silver coins. That’s where I’ll place the weaker coins”

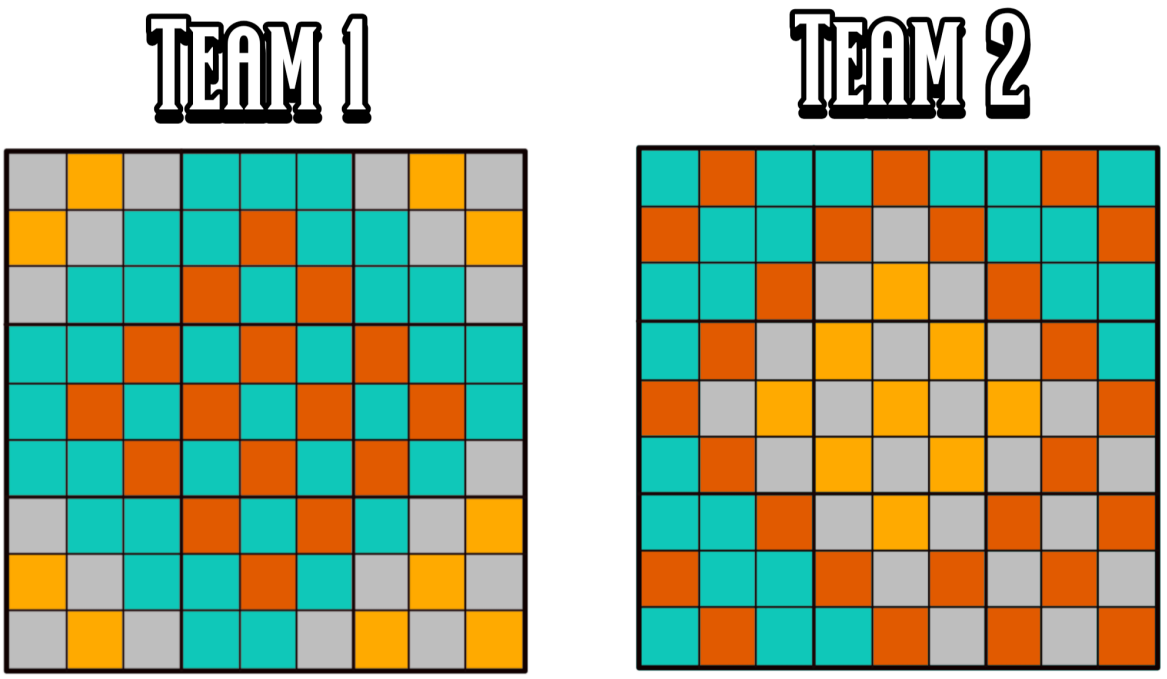
“Hey, what about the bottom-right corner? You didn’t mention that one, did you?” The student asked, with his pupils dilating.

“Ah, right. Notice how the coins in three of the corners all shift somewhere? Except for the coins in this corner. Could it be because they won’t be moved? That makes sense, after all, his strategy is weak coins in three corners and strong coins in the center. So, this corner might be a mix of both, the ones closest to each other. Silver and bronze coins, that would be the mix.”

“You’ve already proven yourself to be a clairvoyant...” said the purple-clad smoker. “We trust in your ability to work miracles.” Almost everyone shared that sentiment, except for the student.

“We’re almost at the end. But I’m certain I won’t fail” the gambler thought.

Round 2 Results



Team 1: 206 points
Team 2: 135 points
Team 1 extra points 1: 71 points

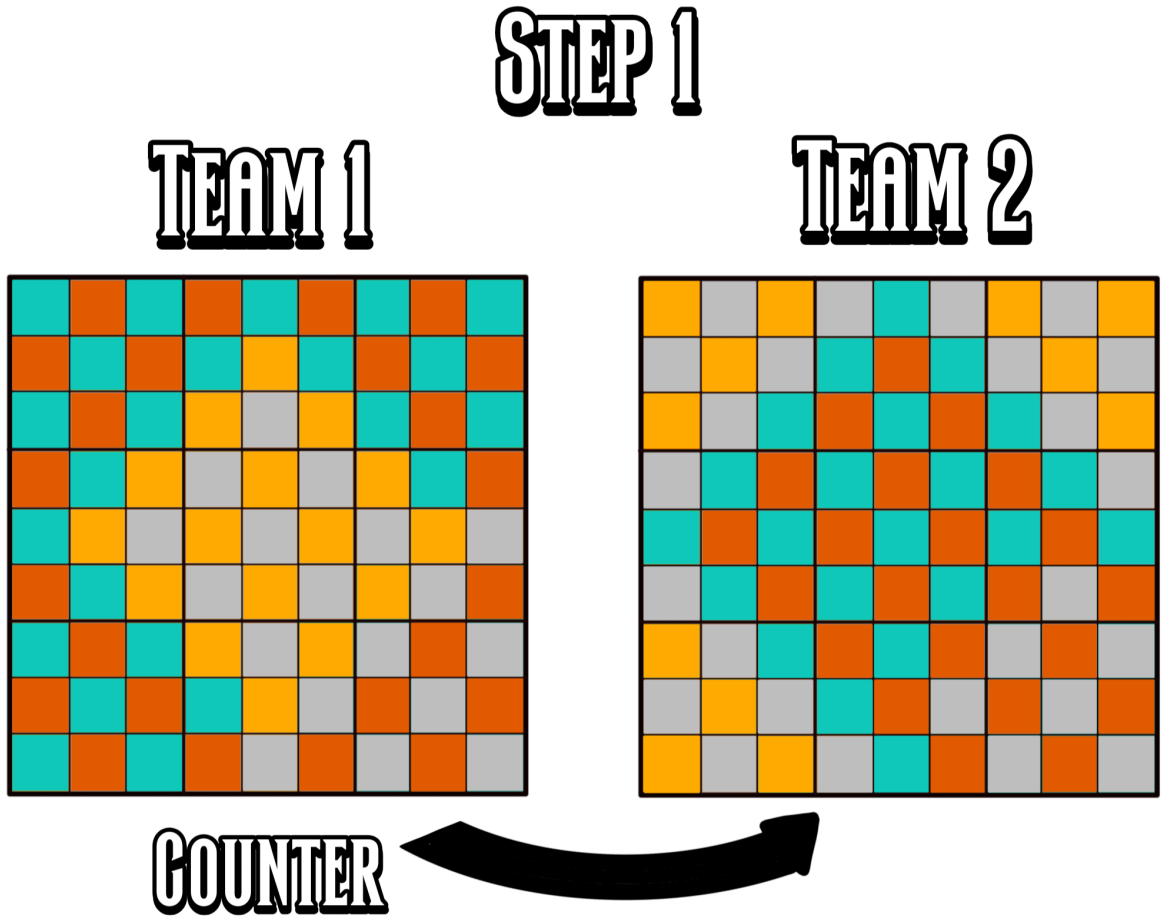
Everyone on Team 1 celebrated, but Castro remained on alert. His prediction hadn't accounted for the bronze coins surrounding the diamond, an unexpected move by the professor. Perhaps he had placed those coins there as a safeguard in case the higher-value ones were stolen, ensuring the score wouldn't drop too drastically. Even so, the betting expert felt a sense of unease, the mathematician still had a trick up his sleeve

Round Three

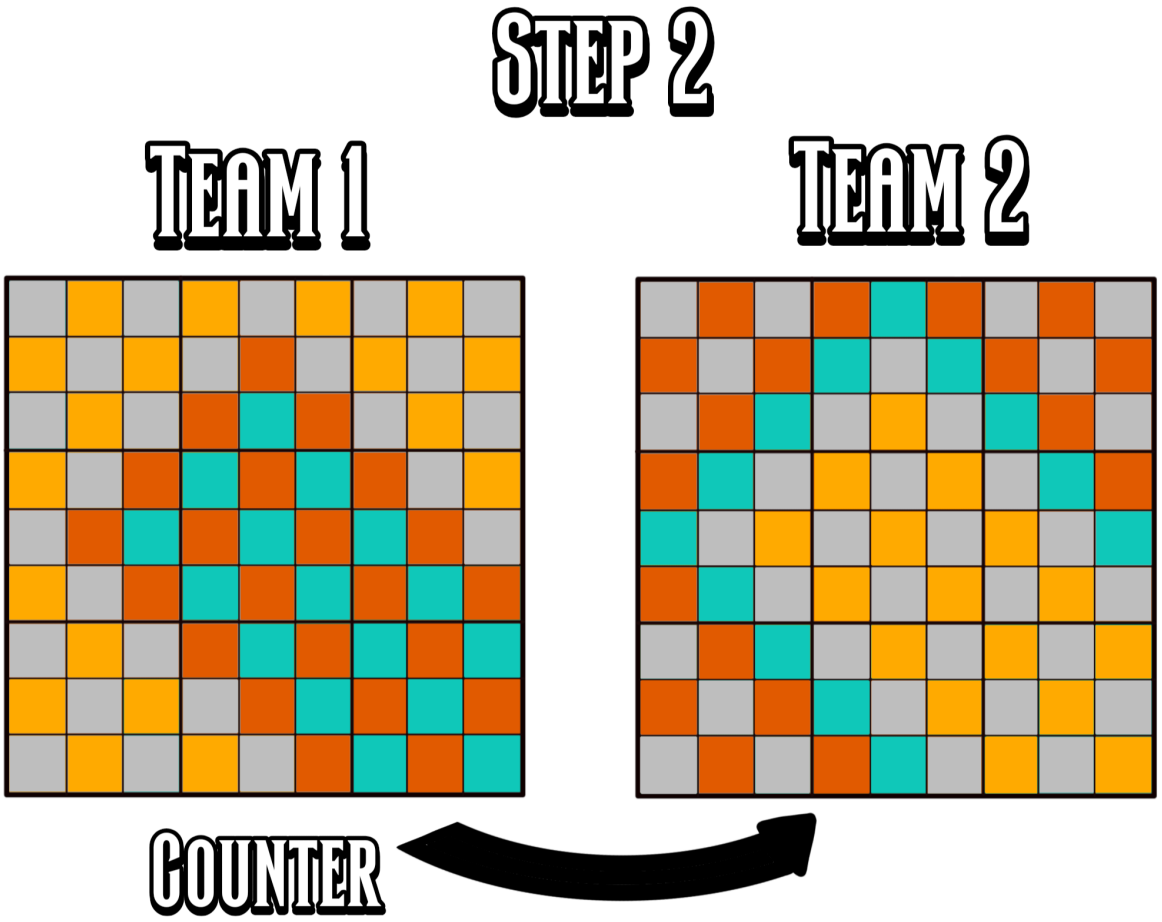
“There’s something off about the professor’s student. When we lost the first round, he was calm. His entire demeanor was relaxed, and his pupils weren't dilated. However, in the second round, he became more agitated. Even then, his pupils didn't dilate as much as they should have. That must mean… if we lose, he still has a chance to win. That’s the opening he’s looking for. It’s because of this commitment that he gets a bit nervous, even if our team wins. He wants his professor to win, they must have made a deal. I didn't see any signs of this agreement during the game's explanation phase, so it must have happened beforehand. An alliance formed in case the game involved two teams, with each of them ending up on opposing sides”

“So, what do we do now?”

“They’ve noticed we’re relying on the exchange system, meaning for every board they set up, our response is to swap as many coins as possible. We can map out the most likely board configurations in steps”

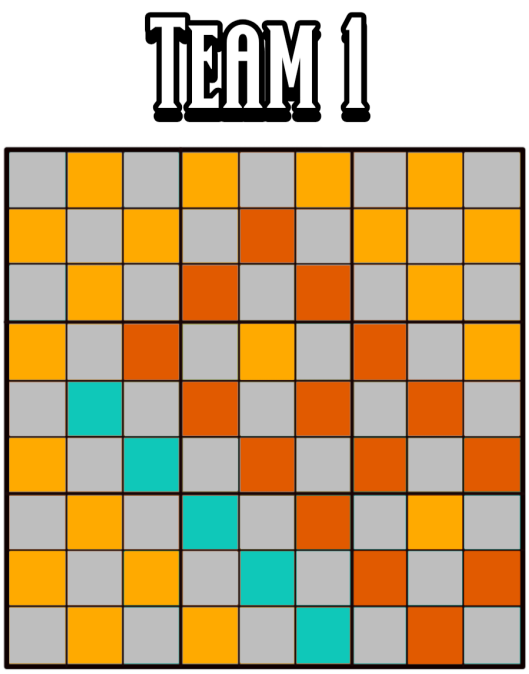


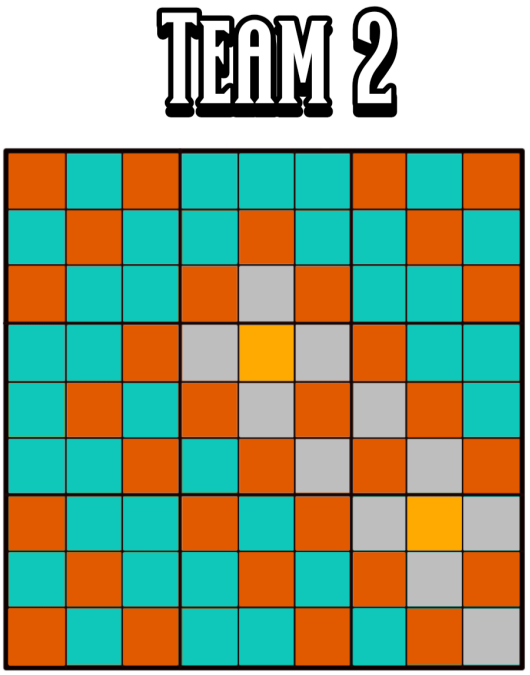
“Team 2’s first move would likely be to reverse the coin setup from the previous round, attempting a radical strategy shift due to the heavy losses they suffered. With this new board, we’d use a layout designed to steal coins from Team 2. But of course, the professor is likely quite intelligent, so I’m betting he’ll notice this chain of events. In other words, he’ll probably counter the board we used in step 1”



“So, our best strategy is to counter Team 2’s board in step 2. However, Team 2’s board for the second round, just like the one in the first round, has certain coins shifted to specific directions. This time, there are two spots that seem to echo the pattern of the diamond-shaped bronze coins. In other words, two three-layer formations. So, it would be best to fill those spots the same way on our board to avoid the risk of losing points”

Round 3 Results





Team 1: 172 points
Team 2: 207 points
Team 2 extra points: 35 points

Why was Team 2's pattern so different from the one in step 2? It was because the professor had anticipated the second stage, predicting that Caster would choose that board. He had foreseen step 3 specifically to beat Caster's board. The Nameless Man had little information, leading him to underestimate his opponent. Even so, he had used the diamond pattern as a safeguard; without it, the point loss would have been drastically higher

"Alright… it's time to dominate this game. If only I had some way to get more information…" He thought, tapping one of the coins against the board. Suddenly, he looked closely at that coin. "Ah… I see… could this work?"

Round Four

Cutting to Team 2, the professor, Luís Alvarez, was analyzing the game with his team

"Nice one, Boss! That's how it's done!"

"Hehehe... I'm calculating every pattern mathematically now. The math for the trade-offs, the subtractions and additions happens in under a minute. I can visualize multiple patterns at once. I compare them against each other, selecting the best one based on average points and how well it counters the enemy." He adjusted his glasses in a flash.

"I was wrong about you. You're a genius, a machine, really..."

"Don't mention it. I'm good at adapting to difficult situations, the more information I have, the more refined my mathematical algorithm becomes... There's no way I can lose now!"

Round 4 Results

Team 1: 210 points
Team 2: 145 points
Team 1 extra points: 65 points

The members of Team 2 were confused. But by now, Luís had realized his opponent was far more skilled than he had anticipated

"My adaptation is still working. Their extra points were 71 points the last time; now it's down to 65. I can still turn this game around!" Suddenly, he heard a sound coming from the wall separating the two teams. "What was that? It sounded like a coin hitting the wall and dropping... Huh... Could it be...? It must be possible!"

Round Five

"If I press my ear against the wall, maybe I can hear where they're placing the coins…" The professor tested his hypothesis, proving it valid. "The gold and silver coins can be deduced. First, a gold coin is placed, followed by four sounds around it (or at least two if it's in a corner) indicating silver coins. The same applies to the silver coin, except this time, there are four bronze coins surrounding it. However, a bronze coin… isn't accompanied by four distinct sounds! That's because the fake coins around it are made of rubber!"

"Now, given this, only certain patterns can occur based on the logic of those sounds. Knowing my enemy's mindset, that pattern becomes highly predictable!"

Round 5 Results

Team 1: 171 points
Team 2: 194 points
Team 2 extra points: 23 points

"But how… is Team 1… managing to cut into my bonus points? Was it just luck this time? No, it's adaptability. There's an intelligent man on that team… could it be… that guy from earlier? It doesn't matter, I'm still winning."

Round Six

Suddenly, Alvarez heard a voice shouting from the other side of the wall. It was his student, who had thrown something over to his side

"Professor, I'm sorry, Professor! I'm sacrificing myself for you!"

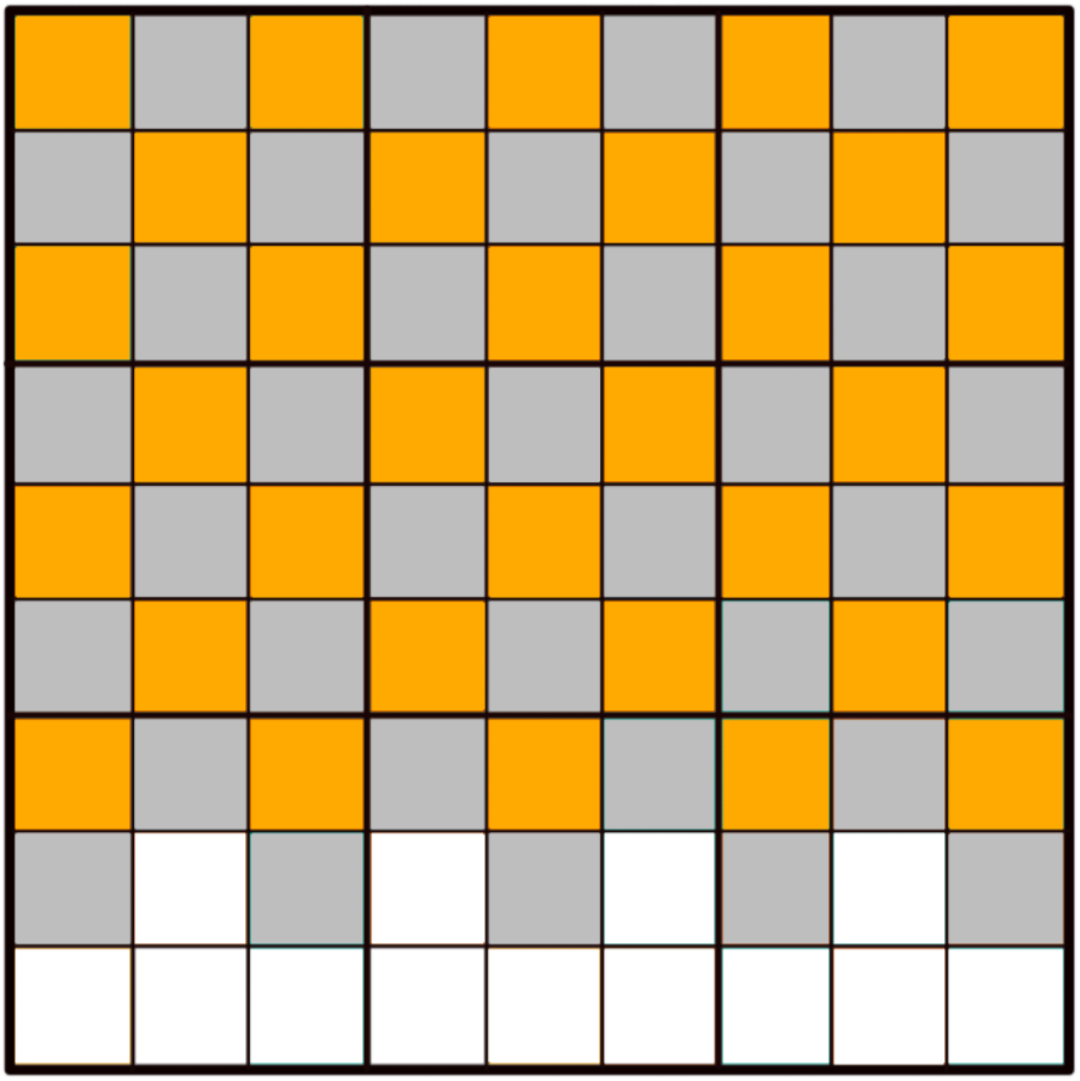
"Player Felipe has been disqualified for attempting to aid an enemy team," a voice announced

“Felipe…” The professor noticed the objects that had been tossed over the wall. “They’re… coins… Team 1’s coins, from their containers! We have most of them now. All the counterfeit coins are in our hands. Each team starts with at least 50 of each type… we received 18 gold, 8 silver, and 35 bronze. That means they have 32 gold, 42 silver, and 15 bronze. They’re bound to use high-value coins, I have to counterattack with low-value ones!”

He pressed his ear against the wall again, now anticipating a specific pattern

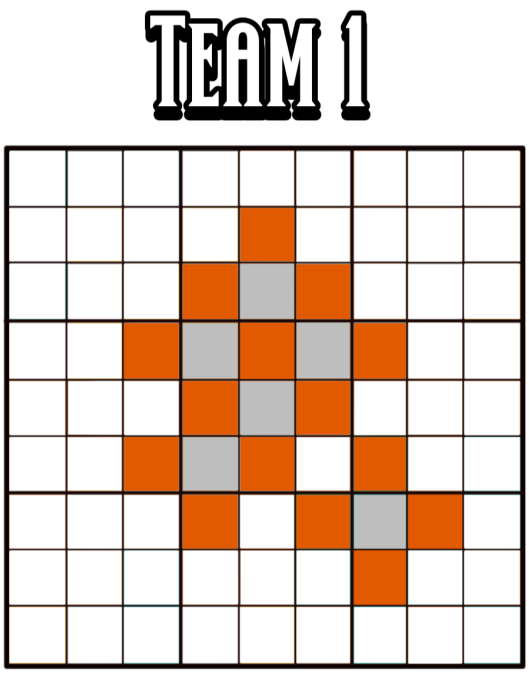
“I see… there was a pause between the sounds of the last few coins. There was no hesitation in placing them, which means it’s a simple pattern. What confirms this is that the coins were placed one after another in a line, unlike the first coin which was followed by four coins arranged around it. And with so many coins placed, it has to be this pattern…”

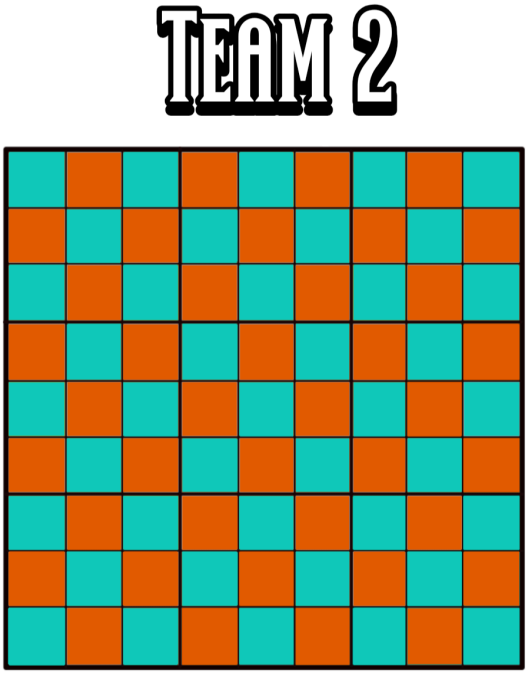
TEAM 1



So… I'll create a pattern using 41 counterfeit coins and 40 bronze coins. I'll rack up over 200 points with that!

Round 6 Results





Team 1: 284 points
Team 2: 121 points
Team 1 extra points: 163 points

“What? How is that possible? There aren’t enough coins on Team 1’s board to yield that many points, yet they were counted anyway. How can this be?” He stared intently at the board and the table, trying to find some logic behind it all. “Ah… so that’s it…”

“Boss… do we still have a chance to win this game?”

“Yes, yes. Trust me! Look! The table has recessed areas that form a 9×9 grid, just like the pattern on the board. It’s possible that… coins can be placed below the board level, that part of the table might count as part of the board, even if the coins aren’t visible from above! And it looks like coins can be placed in the same grid square, either on top or underneath.”

“This is my last chance to win!”

Round Seven

“Disqualified!”

“Team 2 broke the rules by making an illegal move, so the entire team has been disqualified. Team 1 established a pattern worth 284 points. In total, after deducting Team 2’s points, Team 1 gains an extra 525 points. That comes to 3 thousand and 150 dollars!”

“The winners are…”

“Team 1”

“Huh? Wait... but... hey, what mistake did I make? Did I mess something up? What does this mean!? Explain yourselves!”

“Actually, there is no mistake, my good sir!” Pierre appeared suddenly. “You would have realized that if you had paid closer attention to the rules…”

“What do you mean by that!?”

“What he means is…” Castro’s presence felt like a dark mist behind Luís. “You made a huge mistake. You created a problem, but there is always a perfect solution, a man's worst nightmare”

“You... who are you, anyway?”

“Just a guy who likes to wander around, making curious facts my specialty”

“What did you do!? Answer me!” Alvarez tried to lunge at him, but Cas remained motionless.

“I think I could have beaten you without it, but I wanted to dominate this match to teach you a lesson. Let me tell you... about my perfect strategy”

“During the third round, I discovered that your student was your lackey. I also figured out the trick of listening through the walls. At the start of the fourth round, I realized it was possible to use the coins on the other side of the board. I discovered this when I touched the board and noticed a 0.3 cm difference between certain sections of the grid lines. I realized then that the ‘lines’ were actually made of wood connecting the top and bottom surfaces of the board. That made sense, given that the referee had instructed us not to place coins outside the boundary lines. Since there were lines on the underside as well, the same rule had to apply, proving that coins could be placed underneath too”

“So, it wasn’t just the 9x9 pattern on the table that reinforced that idea…”

“Of course not.”

“So, my plan went like this: I deceived your disciple by telling him I suspected others of being the traitor. I spoke to each person individually, creating the impression that I was investigating alongside them. In reality, I assigned the others the task of listening at the wall on the opposite side. To pull this off, I planted the idea that the traitor would take the coins and pass them to the other side. I did all this to get my team to sit opposite me, with their backs to the wall. The traitor, so fixated on the board and the investigation, failed to notice that a different team member was taking turns listening at the wall. For the plan to work, I had to keep you and your student from realizing I had uncovered the trick”

“And so, in the fourth round, I tossed a coin against the wall so you would discover the trick. That way, you’d become reliant on it, abandoning your unpredictable adaptability and I could manipulate your board using the sounds I produced.”

“In rounds 4 and 5, I had to minimize both my bonus points and yours, to foster the impression that your adaptation was working. I knew that if I scored too many points using that tactic in round 4, you’d figure out I was using the ‘wall’ strategy. My score would have dropped after that. By keeping it under wraps, I managed to manipulate your board to create a wider point gap in round 6. That was the key... waiting to pull off a major turnaround in rounds 6 and 7 was the best move. Keeping that secret from you in round 5 was tricky, given the significant lead I’d already built. But there were several reasons why you wouldn’t suspect me.”

“Could... could you tell me what they were?”

“Oh, sure!”

“1) You never imagined I’d lose on purpose just to hide the ‘wall’ tactic. 2) Even though your score was lower than in round 3, it was still quite close. 3) Even with all the information you had, there was still a chance you could misinterpret parts of the pattern. All these factors combined to keep that possibility off your radar. First, I created my pattern. You listened to it and used a counter-strategy. Then, I simply tweaked it in a plausible way so the scoring would end up the way it did”

“At the start of the sixth round, I left the containers in my original spot. When I revealed the true traitor, he recalled the explanation I’d given earlier regarding the traitor’s objective. To make it even more convincing, I even acted worried when I glanced at the containers behind Felipe. He then took that objective on himself, moving the coins to his side... or so you thought...”

“But I had your coins!”

“Then... how did my final board end up with 41 gold coins? And why was that specific number of coins given to you?”

“Tell me what you did!”

“Alright... remember what the referee said about placing other items on the board squares?”

“‘Anything other than our coins won’t be considered during the analysis.” So what? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Look here, in my hand...” He held up some bronze and silver coins. “These are the coins I used on the upper part of the board during the sixth round; let’s call them “ordinary coins”. They aren’t Gameland coins, they’re pocket change the players had on them when they arrived. They’re indistinguishable from the game coins, yet they aren’t counted during the analysis phase”

“Our coins have an internal chip for identification. Aside from that, they’re absolutely identical” Pierre added.

“No… that’s it. I get it… that’s why the silver coins at the top of the board weren’t overlapping my bronze ones. Logically, there would have been a swap; you had to avoid that swap to keep the illusion up”

“Exactly. In reality, I had nine gold coins to complete a 41-coin pattern. Of the eighteen gold coins you received, nine were ordinary ones. But to you, it only looked like I could form a limited pattern of gold and silver coins. In the sixth round, I used a pattern of 41 gold and 40 silver coins. I chose those specific coins for the top of the board because the pattern you thought I had, combined with those ordinary coins, would yield the same score as the 41 and 40 pattern. I did it that way so you’d think the top coins were placed in the same squares as the bottom ones. But you can’t have two coins in the same square”

“Which rule forbids that? That is unfair!”

“It isn’t. The referee calculated the maximum and minimum possible scores. Curiously, he noted that the maximum score is 284 points. In other words, if a single square could hold two coins at once, the value would be much higher”

“It was a trap… all this time, it was a trap!”

“Wait, does that mean you also foresaw that Luís would discover the bottom section of the board before the game ended?” Pierre asked.

“Yes. I had enough information about him to be certain of that.” Caster looked directly at the professor. “I managed to trick you into a fatal error in your reasoning. And so, no matter which pattern you chose, you were doomed to fail!”

“Fine! I admit defeat! You played really well. I didn't know people like that existed…”

“Well... don't feel too bad. You're more entertaining than some of the institutions I've taken down. That’s enough for me. Maybe these games are better than I’d imagined”

“Oh! There are games out there harder than this one, with even more formidable opponents!” Pierre replied.

“That is good. I want to satisfy my appetite for challenges, to push the boundaries of my consciousness.”

And so, the game came to an end, with each player on Team 1 walking away with 1600 dollars, including the 800 dollars Team 2 players used to enter the game. Caster used the extra money to repay the 600 dollars he owed his client. He also kept 550 dollars for himself. The remaining 2 thousand dollars was distributed among the players on Team 2, allowing them to recover 50% of the money they had lost. Did Caster feel the team had proven their worth against him? Perhaps he attributed the gesture to a twinge of pity for the players. But in the end, either way, life goes on just the same.

[...]

The Nameless Man

The power of an unknown man
Cannot be outmatched
For within him lie all men
The center of the soul reveals every path
The answer lies entirely within
A wager against all that is lesser
There is no change or transformation
Only agreement and acceptance
The search for the conceptual becomes
A struggle against reality
Perfect or not, choose what to make of it
A crack in the mask becomes a nightmare