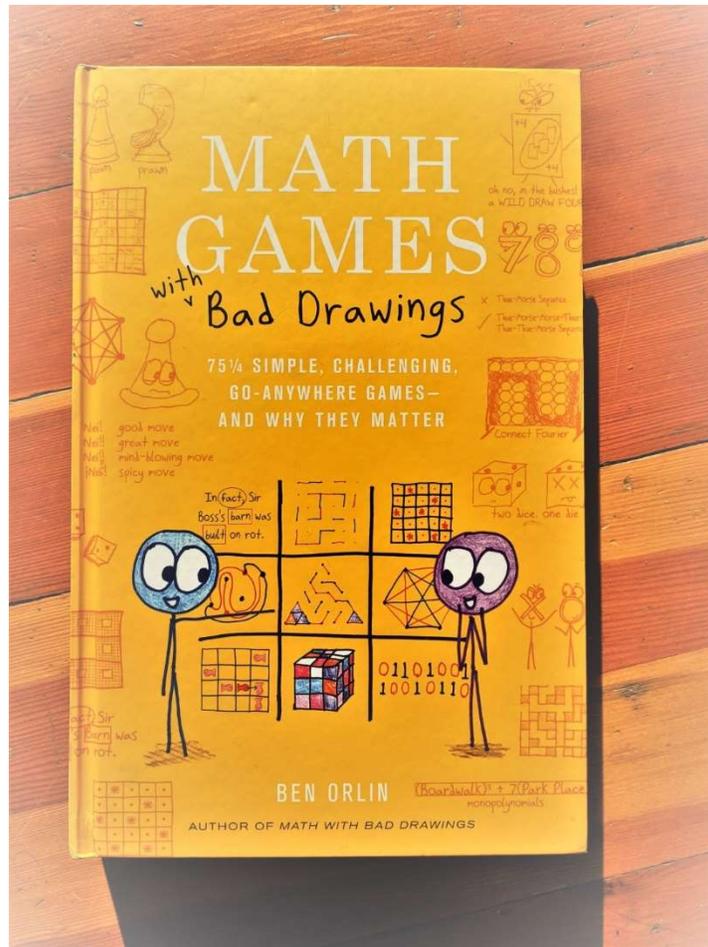


SOLO FLIGHTS

Puzzles, Riddles, Rule Variations, and Other Species of One-Player Math



A FREE COMPANION TEXT TO *MATH GAMES WITH BAD DRAWINGS*

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I am told that, in board gaming today, the rage is “solo play.”

I say “I am told” this, because when it comes to current trends, my finger is not exactly on the pulse. Indeed, it’s about as far from the pulse as you can get, leafing through old collections of Martin Gardner columns. I hope my book *Math Games with Bad Drawings* feels timeless, because it is certainly not timely.

And yet, as purchases began rolling in, players asked me: *What about solo play? Do any of the games work for one player?*

Well, here is the long-delayed answer: yes!

There is a fine line between a puzzle and a solo game. As a rule of thumb, a puzzle is one-and-done. Solve it, and you’ve solved it forever. Sure, you could erase your answers to a sudoku and play it again, but only if you’re sufficiently forgetful (or sufficiently desperate).

By contrast, a game reincarnates. Win or lose, you may always play again, always with a possibility of success, and never with a guarantee.

Then again, the line can blur. For example, what is a Rubik’s cube—puzzle or game? Each arrangement of the cube is a puzzle. But the cube itself generates virtually infinite puzzles. Does that make it a game? A puzzle-game? A game-puzzle? Just a neat toy?

Anyway, this volume collects a mix of puzzles, games, and riddles. I tried not to sweat the philosophical distinctions. The aim is to provide you with fun experiences for the solo gameplayer. A few stand on their own, but most are inspired by the games in the book *Math with Bad Drawings*, and may require a quick perusal of the rules in the original text.

I hope these pages offer some pleasing diversions. Enjoy your solo flights.

Ben Orlin,

July 2023

(approximately one year after I had hoped to have this written, but hey, better late than never, I hope?)

Triple Fifteen: *A New Game by Walter Joris.*

1. Start with the digits 1 through 9 in a three-by-three square.
2. Each turn, pick two neighboring digits (vertical or horizontal), add them together, and write the sum in one of the two spots, leaving the other blank.
3. *Goal:* After six turns, wind up with three copies of the number 15.
4. *Bonus Goal:* Have your three 15's all in the same row, column, or diagonal.

1 2 3	1+4 ↑ 2 3	2 3	2 3	5		
4 5 6	5 5 6	5 5 15	10 15	10 15	15 15	
7 8 9	7 8 9	7 8	7 8	7 8	15	
1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3			
4 5 6	4 11	15	15			
7 8 9	7 8 9	7 8 9	15 9			
2 7 9	2 7	2 7	9			
3 6 5	3 6 14	3 6 15	3 6 15	3 15 15	3 15 15	15 15 15
8 4 1	8 4 1	8 4	8 4	8 4	12	

Image courtesy of [Walter Joris](#).

Top row is a win. Middle row is a loss. Bottom row is a bonus win.

Duizend: *A Childhood Game from the Netherlands.*

Prof. Ionica Smeets brought this game to my attention. Ionica recalls spending many happy childhood hours playing it as a solo puzzle. I hope it brings you a fraction of the same joy!

1. To begin, draw a blank three-by-three grid.
2. Roll a normal six-sided die, and write the result in a blank square of your choice.
3. Repeat the previous step eight more times, until the grid is full.
4. At the end of the game, add up these three rows as if they were three-digit numbers.
5. *Goal:* Come as close as you can to 1000, without going over.
6. If you have three of the same number on a diagonal, then multiply this digit by ten (e.g., 6 becomes 60); you may now add or subtract this from your total, if you wish.

Change, Change: *A Puzzle Machine by Sid Sackson.*

Think of this game—a kind of perpetual puzzle machine—as a cut-rate Rubik’s cube. But unlike the cube, this game can be purchased for less than a dollar. Heck, you don’t even need to go to the store to buy it. Just take that pocket change, and pour it out on the table.

What do you need? Eleven coins: 4 of one kind, 4 of a second, 2 of a third, and 1 of a fourth. For example: 4 pennies, 4 nickels, 2 dimes, and 1 quarter.



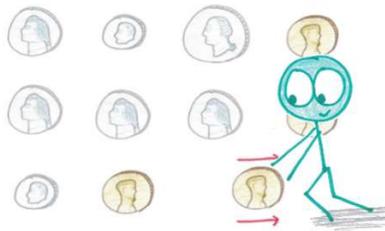
What’s the goal? Using as few moves as possible, rearrange the coins to be symmetric.

What are the rules?

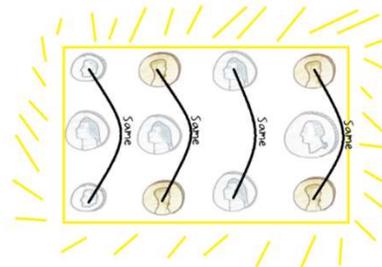
1. Jangle together the coins in your fist, then lay them out in **random order** on the table. Create **two rows of four**, followed by a **row of three** with an empty space at the end:



2. On each move, you can **slide a coin horizontally or vertically into the empty space**.



3. You want to create a symmetric formation—that is, **an arrangement in which the top row and bottom row are identical**—in as few moves as possible.



Dots and Boxes: *Perfect Traps.*

(MGWBD, p. 28)

In this classic two-player game, the most electrifying moments are when you can complete a long chain of boxes, one after another, filling the entire board, while your opponent twiddles their thumbs and writhes in the agony of defeat. So here's a puzzle about those moments.

Definition: We call a situation a **perfect trap** if it meets the following criteria:

1. No box has yet been completed.
2. Whoever goes next cannot complete any boxes.
3. Wherever the next person moves, their opponent will be able to fill the rest of the board in a single turn, claiming every single box on the board.

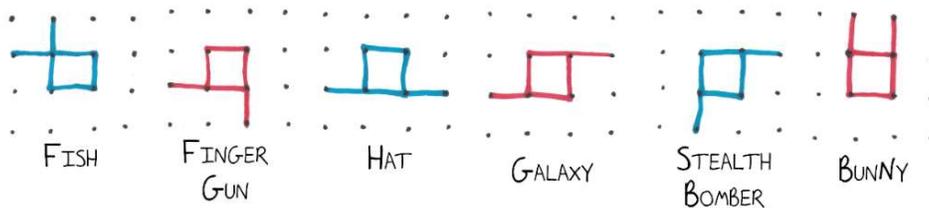
The Puzzle: Pick an array size (I suggest starting with 4 dots by 4 dots and moving up from there). Can you create a perfect trap?

Bonus: To begin, draw a random line somewhere in the interior of the board. *Now* can you create a perfect trap?

Square Polyp: *The Avenging Polyps.*

(MGWBD, p. 37)

In the original game, you take turns attempting to enclose territory by placing square polyps. Each is a square with two line segments coming out; thus, there are six possible shapes.



The Puzzle: Enclose as much territory as you can, by placing each kind of polyp precisely once.

Bonus Puzzle: Enclose as much territory as you can, by placing each kind of polyp precisely *twice* (with the two Fish, the two Finger Guns, and the two Galaxies each being mirror images of one another).

Bunches of Grapes: *Coloring Book Edition.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 73)

Play the game as described, controlling both sides yourself, but with a different goal: try to make sure *each fly winds up with the same number of grapes to eat*. Don't let either fly run out of territory until the very end. Make sure to use nice colored pencils so that your final product is worth hanging on the fridge.

Classic Version: Purple and green on a traditionally drawn bunch of grapes.

Abstract Version: Blue and orange on a bunch of oddly-shaped, differently-sized blobs.

Electoral Version: Red and blue on a map of the continental United States.

Rainbow Version: Three or more colors on a map of your choice. Make sure each color gets an equal number of turns!

Order and Chaos: *The Battle Against Entropy.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 76)

Play the game as described, with yourself in the role of Order, and actual randomness in the role of Chaos. Use the following modifications:

1. As Order, you can choose *where* to play, but not *what* to play. Instead, before placing your mark, flip a coin to determine whether it is an X (heads) or an O (tails).
2. Chaos is controlled by a coin (X if heads, O if tails) and two rolls of a standard die (the first determines the row; the second determines the column).
3. If Chaos rolls a spot that is already filled, go in the next available spot. ("Next" follows the usual rules of reading English text: follow the rows from top to bottom, and within each row, move from left to right.)

Order and Chaos: *The Puzzle of Minimal Chaos.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 76)

On the 6-by-6 board, place as many X's as you want. When you stop, all remaining spots will be filled with O's.

The Puzzle: What is the fewest X's you can place to ensure that Chaos triumphs?

Mediocrity: *Are You Smarter Than the Number 5?*

(*MGWBD*, p. 134)

A game show once asked if you were smarter than a fifth-grader. This variation on mediocrity asks whether you are smarter than the number five itself.

In the standard game, each player picks a number from 1 to 10, and whoever chose the median number wins that many points. For example, if the players choose 7, 8, and 2, then the person who picked 7 scores 7 points. After ten rounds, the player with the median number of points wins the game.

For a solo version, use the following three players:

#1: *You*. This is you. Pick whatever numbers you like.

#2: *Fiver*. This player always picks five.

#3: *Chaos*. This player's number is chosen by a ten-sided die (which is, of course, rolled *after* you make your selection.)

If you win, then you win. (How's that for a tautology?) If Fiver or Chaos wins, then you must devote your days to the worship of chaos and/or the number five, depending on the outcome.

Mediocrity: *A God Who Plays Favorites.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 134)

In this version, a game of Mediocrity will unfold between three random players: A, B, and C. Each is controlled by the roll of a ten-sided die.

But you want player B to win.

So, each round, you may intervene: you pre-select a number from 1 to 10 for precisely one player (A, B, or C). The other two players are generated by rolling a ten-sided die.

Play ten rounds. If Player B wins, then you win. If not, then you lose. (If Player B ties, then this counts as a loss for you.)

Sir Boss's Barn: *The Language Puzzle.*

(*MGWBD*, pp. 137-138)

In the standard game, two players take turns picking words from the following sentence: *In fact, Sir Boss's Barn is built on rot.* You win by selecting three words that share a letter in common (for example, “rot,” “barn,” and “sir,” which all share an **r**). This game, it turns out, is isomorphic to tic-tac-toe, and (once you realize this secret) not terribly interesting.

But here is a better game: *Try coming up with other versions of this game, consisting of a different nine-word sentence, that are also isomorphic to tic-tac-toe.*

My own best is the “Sir Boss's barn” sentence. Another is the classic from John Conway: “Spit not so, fat fop, as if in pan.” A third: “Gasp at his pun, tip us gin, and tug.”

But I bet that you can do better! Email me at mathwithbaddrawings@gmail.com when you've got a good one.

rot	fact	built	fat	as	pan	tug	us	pun
on	barn	In	if	spit	in	at	gasp	an
Boss	was	Sir	fop	so	not	tip	his	gin

Neighbors: *Solo Play.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 171)

You can play the game (as described) by yourself. Use these scores to benchmark your growth:

0 – 100:	<i>Baby.</i> Keep learning, kid!
101 – 120:	<i>Child.</i> Ah, you begin to understand this game!
121 – 140:	<i>Tween.</i> You are on a magical journey of growth. It gets better.
141 – 160:	<i>Undergrad.</i> You are almost ready to receive the keys to the shop
161 – 180:	<i>Grad student.</i> Not bad!
181 – 200:	<i>Postdoc.</i> Quite good!
201 – 220:	<i>Professor.</i> You're a star!
220+:	<i>Nobel Laureate.</i> Well done, my friend.

Neighbors: *Digit Party.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 171)

This fabulous online implementation of Neighbors for solo play can be found at <https://digit.party>. It has several clever rule changes, all for the better.

Breaking Rank: Questions for Your Consternation.

(MGWBD, p. 268)

In the illuminating (and frustrating) game of Breaking Rank, you are given a list of items to rank in order from largest to smallest. List as many (or as few) as you like, scoring one point per item. But if any of your ordering is mistaken—if a smaller item ever appears before a larger item—then you score zero.

To play against yourself, here are some questions; the answers are all easily Googled or Wikipedia'd. Score yourself in comparison to par; above par is better.

List These Items...	In Order Of...	Par
<i>U.K. countries:</i> England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales	Land Area	2
<i>Continents:</i> Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania, South America	Population	4
<i>U.S. States that Start with M:</i> Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana	Order of joining the union	3
<i>Kardashian Sisters:</i> Khloe, Kim, Kourtney	Instagram followers	2
<i>Star Wars Episodes:</i> I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, and IX	U.S. box office gross	3
<i>Jane Austen Novels:</i> Pride and Prejudice, Persuasion, Emma, Sense and Sensibility, Mansfield Park, Northanger Abbey	Number of Goodreads reviews	3
<i>21st-century Vice Presidents:</i> Dick Cheney, Joe Biden, Mike Pence, Kamala Harris	Age when elected	2
<i>Planets:</i> Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune	Diameter	4
<i>TV Comedies:</i> Friends, Seinfeld, The Office, Cheers, Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	Number of episodes	3
<i>Birds:</i> bald eagle, flamingo, grey heron, pelican	Wingspan	2

Tax Collector: A Question.

(MGWBD, p. 28)

Here is an extra mathematical challenge regarding this one-player game: *Give a simple proof that the player can never score more than three times what the tax collector scores.*

Dandelions: Terraforming.

(MGWBD, p. 55)

This puzzle asks, “How large a field can you fill with dandelions and their seeds?”

Play the game as described in the book, with yourself controlling both the dandelions *and* the wind, and the goal of trying to fill the entire meadow.

Question #1: What is the largest square meadow that you can fill?

Question #2: What is the largest *non-square* meadow that you can fill?

Now, a rule change: the left and right edges of the board are connected, so that instead of “vanishing” off the left or right edge, the wind “wraps around” to the other side. *Now* what is the largest meadow that you can fill?

Dandelions: Random Plantings.

(MGWBD, p. 55)

Here, you play as the Wind, attempting to prevent the Dandelions from filling the board.

Use a 6-by-6 grid; the Dandelions will be planted at random. You roll two six-sided dice: the first to determine the row, and the second to determine the column.

(If this square has already been chosen for a dandelion, then you should reroll; but if it merely has a seed, then plant a dandelion on top of the seed.)

Also, one more change: the Dandelions will plant *eight* times, rather than seven. Thus, as the Wind, you must blow in all eight directions.

Paper Boxing: Three Unusual Boxers.

(MGWBD, p. 246)

Imagine head-to-head matchups between these boards. Assuming perfect play, which board will win in each pair? And can you design a board that is able to beat them all?

	15	0	15
15	0	15	0
0	15	0	15
15	0	15	0

	16	1	16
16	1	16	1
1	16	1	1
16	1	16	1

	8	8	8
8	8	8	8
8	8	8	8
8	8	8	8

Bullseyes and Close Calls: *The Impossible Feedback.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 277)

In Bullseyes and Close Calls, all feedback takes this form: “X bullseyes, Y close calls,” where the sum of X and Y is at most four. Some examples:

Secret Number	Your Guess	Feedback
1234	1348	“1 bullseye, 2 close calls”
1234	2341	“0 bullseyes, 4 close calls”
1234	1243	“2 bullseyes, 2 close calls”
1234	5678	“0 bullseyes, 0 close calls”

However, there is one form of feedback that fits the description above, yet is logically impossible. What feedback is this?

Hold That Line: *Why Not This Line?*

(*MGWBD*, p. 203)

In Sid Sackson’s game “Hold That Line,” the person who makes the final move is the loser.

But it seems more natural (at least to me) that the final move should be the winner.

Why would this be a bad rule?

(*Hint*: Figure out who would have the advantage under this rule.)

Hold That Line: *The Tiniest Snake*

(*MGWBD*, p. 203)

Sid Sackson’s “Hold That Line” lends itself to a few pleasing puzzles.

For ease of communication, I’ll call the line created in a game of “Hold That Line” a *snake*. A snake is necessarily complete; it cannot be extended from either end.

Playing with yourself, it is easy to make a snake that uses every dot on the board. But what is the *smallest* snake you can create?

Hold That Line: *Lots of Tiny Snakes*

(*MGWBD*, p. 203)

This is a follow-up to the previous puzzle. Let's say that, once you've finished your tiniest snake, you are allowed to begin another one.

What's the largest number of snakes that you can pack onto a board 3 dots by 3 dots?

What about 4 by 4 dots?

What about 5 by 5 dots?

What about 2 by N dots?

Prophecies: *The Emptiest Board*

(*MGWBD*, p. 123)

Andy Juell's game "Prophecies" can be played on a square grid—say, a 6-by-6 grid. Each number (in this case, from 1 to 6) can appear only once per row and once per column.

As you play, some squares may become impossible to fill. For example, if the first row reads "1 2 3 _ _ _" and the righthand column reads "_ _ _ 4 5 6," then the top-right square is impossible to fill. It shares a row with 1, 2, and 3, and a column with 4, 5, and 6. Thus, no number is valid.

Puzzle: On a 6-by-6, what's the maximum number of squares that can become impossible to fill?

Extension: What about on an n -by- n grid?

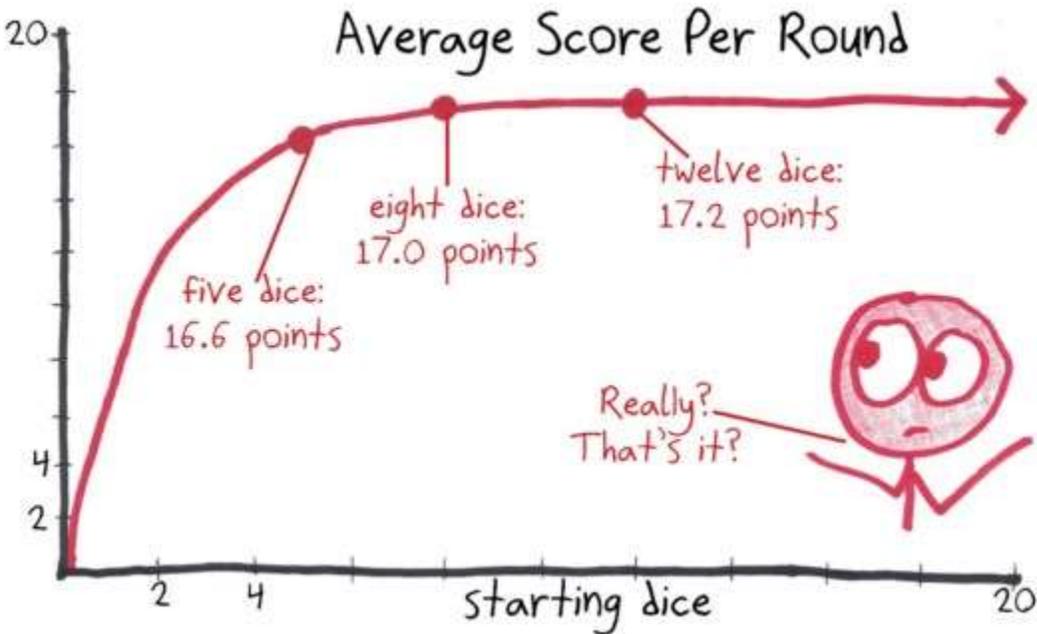
Drop Dead: *A Deterministic Dice Game.*

This one missed the cut for the book because it is a game of pure luck, with no strategy involved. Still, it has some interesting mathematical properties.

On your turn, **you roll five dice, and score their sum**, with two exceptions: **2's** and **5's** are fatal. They immediately **drop dead** and are removed from play. Not only that, but **whenever any 2's or 5's appear, the other dice are worthless**; you score no points for the roll.

Then, whether you scored points or not, you **roll all remaining dice again**, and continue repeating this process until all five dice have dropped dead. Play for a set number of turns per player (say four), after which the highest total score wins.

Here's a sample turn that lasted for six rolls, scoring a total of 15 points.



It seems weird. An extra die can't hurt, can it? Best-case scenario, it adds to your score, and worst-case scenario, it comes up 2 or 5, at which point you discard it, and wind up right back where you started.

Well, sure, it can't hurt. But past a certain point, it doesn't much help, either. Each die has a 1-in-3 risk of dropping dead. Compounded many times, that becomes a virtual guarantee: *somebody* is going to spoil the party. With just twenty dice, the probability of entirely avoiding 2's and 5's is just 0.03%, roughly your lifetime chance of being struck by lightning.

Let's say you begin with 5 quadrillion dice, enough to blanket the state of West Virginia. Seems like you should score tons of points, right? Nope. Roll after roll, about 1/3 of your dice will spoil the party. This will repeat a hundred times in succession, your score stuck on zero, until finally, with just a few dice remaining, you begin to score points. (About 17 points, on average.)

5,000,000,000,000,000 dice. 17 points.

The moral: **Don't design systems where everything needs to go right.** If your machine is doomed by one broken part; if your party is spoiled by one late guest; if your game plan crumbles when one player strays out of position; then you've got yourself a problem. A lot of problems, actually: one per component. Crowds are good for some things, but achieving unanimity is not one of them.

Anyway, if you want to turn this into an actual game, Joe Kisenwether has a good idea: **You may start with as many dice as you want, but your turn ends immediately after your 5th roll.** Thus, you want to pick enough dice that you don't run out (1 or 2 is probably too few) but not so many that you waste early rolls on scoring zero (so 20 is too many). In this version, **what's the optimal number of dice?**

Starlitaire: *Rules to Try.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 123)

This “game”—really more of a freeform art project—is already designed for one player. The fun comes in making up your own patterns to explore, but in case you need inspiration, here’s a rough itinerary of rules to try:

- Try different numbers of dots in your circle.
- Try skipping different numbers of dots.
- Try switching colors any time you complete a cycle.
- Try an alternating pattern of skipping: e.g., skip 1, skip 2, skip 1, skip 2...
- Try arranging your dots in a shape other than a circle, such as a square.
- Try varying the game in your own unique way, and let me know what you find!

Gridlock: *Perfect Player’s Woe.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 141)

Here’s a mathematical question. Imagine you’re playing a solo version of Gridlock. No opponent; you just fill your own board. As it so happens, you are a perfect player, always making the best possible move.

Under these circumstances, what is the worst score you could possibly achieve?

Gridlock: *When Fate Attacks.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 141)

In two-player Gridlock, the most fun moves are when you’re able to wreck your opponent’s arrangement with a deviously misplaced little rectangle. The one-player game works fine, but lacking that spicy attack move, it’s a bit bland.

So here’s some extra flavor: *let fate attack you*. After each of your turns, roll two ten-sided dice. For example, you might get 4 and 7. Then, you must blacken either the 4th row, 7th column, or else the 7th row, 4th column. If you’ve already filled this square, then you gain a bonus point. But if you haven’t filled this square, then it is off-limits, and you can no longer fill it.

Banker: *You vs. Perfection.*

(*MGWBD*, p. 114)

This game, as described, can be played solo. Then, once all the numbers have been rolled, you can determine (as a little puzzle) what is the highest possible score you might have achieved.

Play 10 rounds. If you achieve the maximum score in 3 of them, you win!

Racetrack: *Joyrides*.

(*MGWBD*, p. 254)

This game requires a bit of overhead—you need to grab some graph paper and draw the track—but I speak from experience in saying that it’s actually a pretty fun solo pastime.

You can race two cars against one another (controlling both yourself, and alternating turns), or just control one car, trying to go as fast as possible without crashing into walls. (If you go the latter route, then a crash counts as an instant defeat).

Ascender: *Never-Descender*.

(*MGWBD*, 232).

This game is already designed for one player, but it has (I must admit) a bit of a flaw: only 37% of games will be possible to win. Perhaps you like that challenge. Or perhaps you want something a bit more manageable—in which case, you can allow your list of numbers to stay the same (e.g., 33 followed by 33) as long as it never *descends*.

Mathematicians have a name for this—well, a pair of names, really. The sequence 11, 12, 15 is *increasing*, whereas the sequence 11, 11, 15 is *nondecreasing*.

Pig: *That’ll Do, Pig*.

(*MGWBD*, 262).

As discussed in the endnotes, there is a specific strategy for maximizing your score in this game: each round, keep rolling until you reach at least 27 points, and then stop.

For a one-player version of the game, just simulate an opponent who follows this strategy.

(Note: you should be able to beat this opponent more than 50% of the time. That’s because your opponent will not make adjustments depending on the game situation. When trailing, for example, it may pay to be a bit more aggressive, and keep rolling past 27; and when leading, it may pay to be a bit more conservative, and stop rolling before 27. Use this knowledge to defeat your unthinking foe!)

101 and You're Done: *The Sheep and the Wolf.*
(*MGWBD*, 265).

Here are two imaginary players to use as your opponents. Roll dice to simulate for them.

The Sheep plays conservatively, multiplying by ten unless there is *any danger* of going over 100.

The Wolf plays aggressively, multiplying by ten as long as there is a *reasonable chance* of not going over 100.

	The Sheep	The Wolf
Roll #1	Always multiply by 10	Always multiply by 10
Roll #2	Don't go above 76	Don't go above 90
Roll #3	Don't go above 82	Try not to go above 92
Roll #4	Don't go above 88	Try not to go above 95
Roll #5	Don't go above 94	Try not to go above 98
Roll #6	Don't go above 100	Try not to go above 100

Wordsworth: *With Random Letters.*
(*MGWBD*, 175).

You can play this game against yourself by generating random letters.

Method #1: Use a bag of letter tiles, such as from Scrabble or Bananagrams.

Method #2: Pick a random book, and open to a random page. Use the 1st letter from the 1st line, the 2nd letter from the 2nd line, and so on.

Keep track of your best score as you go, and try to beat your previous best.