Game for 2 Players
NIM

Origin

In the French New Wave film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), a suave and rather menacing character challenges various socialites to a game that they never win. The game, like the character, is unnamed; but, since ancient times, people have played games involving the selective removing of stones or other small items from structured rows, piles, or cups. Today, these games are best known as Nim. The meaning of that name is just as mysterious as the meaning of New Wave films, but it could be based on the peculiarity that when NIM is rotated 180° it becomes WIN.

Set Up

The version described here is the one played in *Marienbad*. All it requires is 16 pieces of whatever is handy — perhaps coins, matchsticks, sugar packets, checkers, poker chips, or (as used by the enigmatic stranger) playing cards. Arrange them between the players in a four-rowed pyramid with the rows containing 1, 3, 5, and 7 items.

The Play

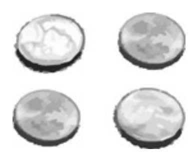
Each player, in turn, removes at least one item from any one row. The goal is to force your opponent to remove the last item.

Players may remove any number of items from a given row, even the entire row, but may not remove items from two or more rows during a turn.

Winning Ways

Some folks knowledgeable in mathematics and game theory claim that Nim can always be won if the player can readily calculate binary digital sums in her head. The rest of us are left to work things out with plain logic. It would spoil all the fun to give too much information, but here are more than a few hints for achieving victory at Nim. If you enjoy figuring things out for yourself, you might want to skip the rest of this section.

You will win if you can end your turn leaving your opponent with two rows of two items. If your opponent removes one item from one row, you remove the other row entirely. If your opponent chooses the only other option and removes an entire row, you remove one of the two remaining items.



This same principle applies to any two rows containing an equal number of items. No matter what your opponent takes, you can work the remainder down to 2-2.

Likewise, the principle applies to any *two* sets of two rows with equal numbers (1-1-3-3, 1-1-4-4, and 1-1-5-5).

Another winning combination is 1-2-3. Because no matter what your opponent does, you can always give back either a 1-1-1 or a 2-2.

Now consider that it is impossible to create a 1-2-3 from a 1-4-5 in a single move, but easy to do in two moves (if you cannot create two equal rows).

I'll leave to you the fun of figuring out how to get from the starting arrangement to a 1-4-5. ■