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# Learn to Play 42

A Game of Dominos



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## Preface

This booklet is written for every person who wants to learn how to play 42, a four-player domino game with bidding and trumps.

This document has a playing hand sample that demos common indicating styles. If you prefer a demo hand with no indicating, links are provided in my online instructional pages.

A print version of my instructions is also available that doesn't discuss indicating styles and popular game variations.

Visit my web site at [Texas42.net](http://Texas42.net) for more info on the game, including optional scoring by points and other topics of interest to the 42 student (and experienced players).

Enjoy.

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**Style:** The manner in which one plays the game, e.g., some players incorporate the indicating style into their game, i.e., indicate their doubles when they can't follow the suit led.

**Suit:** A suit is the seven dominos with the same number of pips on one end.

**Take the trick (or lead):** When you "take" a trick, you win the trick by having the highest domino played. You also "take" the lead and lead the next domino when you win a trick (implies a change in lead).

**Talk across the table:** Talking about the dominos in play is a no-no. Chitchat is fine, but hints and comments about your hand (or your partner's) are not permitted in a "serious" game of 42.

**Throw off:** Get rid of (unload) an unwanted domino when you can't follow suit in a trick.

**Tiles:** Dominos.

**Trey:** A domino with three pips on one end, e.g., the 3-2, is the trey-deuce.

**Trick:** A round of play (the domino led and the three subsequent dominos played). There are seven tricks in a hand. Each trick taken is worth one point (plus any count-dominos contained therein).

**Trump:** The designated domino suit that outranks the other suits. If treys are trump, then all seven treys are trumps, regardless of their other ends. (The other end only determines the rank of the domino in the trump suit. The double is highest.)

**Trump set:** Sometimes the trumps you call are too unevenly distributed. When an opposition player has more trumps than you, and you need to take all the tricks to make your bid, you are trump set.

**Unload:** Same as "throw off" (above).

**Variations:** Optional rules agreed on before beginning a game, e.g., Plunge, Sevens, Splash, etc. (Some say "indicating" and the Nel-O option in a forced bid are variations to basic 42.)

**Walker:** A "walker" is the highest domino in its suit currently still in play. For example, if you lead the deuce-blank, and all the other deuces have already been played, then the deuce-blank is a walker and will take the trick (unless trumped).

# 42 – A Game of Dominos

**Opening:** The first lead in the first trick of a hand. The high bidder always leads the first domino and calls trumps or other method of play at this time.

**Overtrump:** When you are unable to follow the suit led, you opt to trump in, and a subsequent player (who also can't follow suit) plays a higher trump than yours.

**Partner:** The person sitting opposite you at the playing table (your biggest asset in helping make your bid unless you have some mighty good standalone dominos).

**Pass:** You pass if you're not going to bid on your hand. Some players might "knock" on the table to indicate they pass.

**Pip:** Pips are the dots on the faces of dominos that define their value ranking and suit.

**Play out:** Finish the hand, e.g., play the remaining dominos in a hand even if one of the players says he has a lay down hand.

**Points:** There are 42 possible points in a hand: seven tricks (each trick is a point) plus the five count dominos (35 points). Each hand is scored as a mark unless multiple marks were bid. (See also score.)

**Pump-bid:** A possibly unachievable bid intended to make an opposition partner bid higher to get the bid.

**Reneg:** When able, but you don't follow suit when a domino is led, e.g., a six is led, you have a six, but you play something else. Reneging is a no-no.

**Rules:** Acceptable play agreed on before the game begins. House rules define acceptable play. In the absence of rules, straight 42 is the norm (subject to interpretation).

**Score:** The team who scores seven marks first wins the game. Marks are annotated on paper by spelling "ALL" (each letter segment is a mark). Scoring by points is optional.

**Set:** When the high bid player team does not make their bid, they are set, and the opposing team gets the mark or marks, depending on what was bid.

**Shake:** Shuffle. "Shake them bones" means "shuffle the dominos."

**Shuffle:** Randomizing all 28 dominos face-down by mixing them around on the playing surface prior to each player's drawing.

**Stack:** When the high bid is one or more marks, the dominos won in each trick are stacked face-up so only the last two tricks are shown.

**Straight off:** A straight off is an off domino whose pips on either end match none of the other suits in your hand, e.g., the trey-duece domino is the only trey and the only duece in your hand. (See also Offs.)

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## *Foreword*

Legends indicate that 42 (also called Texas 42) was conceived by a lad in east Texas because his parents would not let him play cards.

Other stories say 42 was born in Hallettsville or was created by ministerial students at a seminary in Georgetown in central Texas.

A Dallas newspaper reportedly interviewed a man in 1927 who said he co-invented the game forty years earlier in 1887 in Garner, Texas (west of Fort Worth).

In all the stories, 42 was created so dominos could be used to play card-like games. This was an innovative way to circumvent the then moral ban on playing cards in Texas in its earlier years.

Reportedly, it was also illegal to play card games on trains and in public places in Texas following the Civil War in the 1860s. Maybe railroad men and train passengers were similarly creative and helped spread the game via the pre-1900 Texas rail system.

Regardless of how 42 started, the rules discussed in this document reflect the game as played by and taught to me by friends who resided in the south Texas town of Devine in the mid-1980s.

**Drop:** In the bidding process, when the last bidder (the shuffler) has to take the bid because the other three players passed, he has the bid "dropped" on him. When this happens, he has the option of going low.

**False indicator:** When your partner indicated he had a helping hand, and he can't follow the suit led, and he plays a domino that doesn't indicate he's holding the high domino in the suit he plays, his domino is a "false indicator."

**Follow me:** When a player gets the bid and doesn't want to call a trump suit (no trumps), he can say "follow me." This means the highest domino played takes each trick.

**Forced bid:** When the players agree beforehand, the shuffler (last bidder) has to take the bid for at least 30 if the other players passed. See also "Low" (going low).

**Hand:** (1) A hand is the seven tricks played following each shuffle in a game; also, (2) the seven dominos held by a player.

**Helping hand:** A helping hand has doubles and/or count-dominos that can help a partner make his bid (sometimes indicated by a 30-bid when the other partner hasn't bid yet).

**House rules:** These are the established playing rules defined by the hosting individual(s) or game director. Acceptable variations, if any, and penalties for indiscretions are spelled out.

**Indicate:** When a player cannot follow suit, he plays a domino whose high end indicates he has the high domino in that suit. His partner can then "come" to him in that suit (helpful in making a bid).

**Lay down:** This is a hand that can't be set. The high bidder says he has a "lay down" hand and reveals his dominos to show that he would take all the tricks if play continued.

**Lead:** The first domino played in a trick. It establishes the suit to be followed, be it trump or otherwise.

**Low (Nel-O):** A game variation (called nello or nillo in some parts of Texas). When the bid is dropped on the shuffler, he has the option of going "low." If he goes "low," his partner doesn't play, and he must take no tricks to make his bid.

**Mark:** The scorepad annotation when a bid is made (or set). Each hand won or lost is a mark unless multiple marks were bid. Seven marks by either team wins a game.

**Nel-O:** Same as going low.

**Nickel:** A 5-count domino, e.g., the four-ace.

**Offs:** These are dominos in your hand that have little or no value in helping you or your partner make your bid. An off domino, especially count, can jeopardize making your bid since it is vulnerable to capture.

## *Introduction*

Forty-two (42) may be played with variations not discussed in this document, e.g., Plunge, Splash, and Sevens. Three-handed 42 (Moon) can also be played.

Visit [Texas42.net](http://Texas42.net) for links to other sites with more info on variations.

## *Glossary*

**Ace:** A domino with a single pip (dot) on one end.

**Basic 42:** Plain ("pure," "straight," or "bare bones") 42 with traditional rules and no game variations (subject to individual and regional interpretation). Formal competition rules vary, but they normally specify exclusions.

**Bid:** The declaration of the number of points (tricks plus count) that a player thinks he and his partner can win in a hand. Bids vary from 30 to 41, one mark (42), to multiple marks.

**Blank:** A domino with no pips on one end (or both ends).

**Bones:** Domino tiles.

**Call in:** Lead a suit, especially trumps, to bring a particular domino out into play that could later jeopardize making your bid or your ability to set the opponents.

**Come:** When you're in the lead, and you need your partner to take the lead so you can unload your "off" domino(s), you "come" to your partner, i.e., lead a domino that you think he can take and win the trick.

**Count:** Count are the five dominos with face values divisible by 5. Each count domino is worth its face value in points.

**Deuce:** A domino with a two pips on one end, e.g., the 3-2, is the trey-deuce.

**Dime:** A 10-count domino, e.g., the six-four.

**Dominos (dominoes):** The rectangular tiles ("bones") used to play 42. A set of double-six dominos has 28 tiles.

**Double:** A double has the same number of pips on each end. There are seven doubles in a set of double-six dominos. The double is the highest rank in its suit.

**Draw:** After the dominos are shuffled to begin a new hand, each player picks (draws) seven dominos before beginning play. (The shuffler draws last.)

The domino game 42 is similar in strategy to the card game Bridge; however, it is easier to learn. If you enjoy card games like Bridge or Spades, you'll probably enjoy 42. All three games employ bidding and trumps.

In 42, there are eight optional trump suits: blanks, aces, deuces, treys, fours, fives, sixes, and doubles. When declared, the trump suit outranks all the other suits.

The concept of trumps in dominos is sometimes difficult for a novice to comprehend. For this reason, I have included illustrations to help the 42 student understand suits and ranking of the seven dominos in each suit.

Bidding in 42 is sometimes challenging for the novice, too. The lowest bid is 30, and the highest bid is one mark (42), or multiple thereof. A graphic shows how many points can be lost in a hand to make allowable bids. A sample hand is also included which discusses bidding considerations.

## OVERVIEW:

Four players sit at the table. Players sitting opposite each other are partners. The dominos are shuffled. Each player draws seven dominos. Bidding begins with the player to the left of the shuffler. Thirty (30) is the lowest that can be bid. Maximum bid is 42 (one mark), or multiples thereof.

High bidder calls trumps and leads the first domino. Each player plays a domino, in turn (clockwise), and must follow the suit of the domino led (if possible). Trumps outrank the other domino suits and can be played only when they are led, or when a player cannot follow the suit led in a trick (round of play).

The highest domino played takes each trick, and its player leads the next domino. This process continues until all 28 dominoes in the hand are played (seven tricks), or the high bidder makes his bid or is set by the opponents. Dominos divisible by five (5) are worth their face values, and each trick won is one point.

The shuffle and opening bid rotate clockwise after each hand is played. The object is to make your bid or set the opponents (stop them from making their bid). Each hand won is scored as a mark. The game ends when a team scores seven marks (the letter segments annotated in "ALL").

**Nancy/Steve** get a mark on the score pad, and **Ella** shuffles ("shakes") the dominos for the next hand.

(Visit [Texas42.net](http://Texas42.net) for non-indicating alternate sample hands)

## GAME VARIATIONS:

Non-tournament 42 may be played with variations not sanctioned by the National 42 Players Association (N42PA). For example, my house rules allow a bid to be twice as many marks as a previous high bid in marks. The forced bid Nel-O option is also popular among social players who enjoy a little twist in the game and don't like to reshuffle every time everybody passes:

**GOING LOW (Nel-O):** When the last player in the bidding process (the domino shuffler) has the bid "dropped" on him (everyone before him passed), he has to bid at least 30. He also has the option of bidding one or two marks "low." If he goes low, there are no trumps, his partner does not play (turns his dominos face-down), and he tries to take no tricks. He begins play by leading a low domino and hoping one of the opposing players takes the trick (and the lead). Doubles are a suit of their own. If a double is led, then doubles have to be played by the opposition if they have any. If he can stay out of the lead (take no tricks) for the remainder of the hand, he makes his bid. If, however, he takes one trick, the hand is ended, and the opposition partners get what he bid. Count-dominos have no special significance in Nel-O.

so he indicates he has the double-five (55) by playing the five-four (54). Will cannot follow suit, so he "throws off" the trey-blank. *Nancy* takes the trick.

**Trick #3:** *Nancy* does not have a five, so she cannot "come" to her partner by leading a five. Since Nancy has the 10 (a ten-count), it is relatively "safe" for her to lead the 6 (it won't draw the 10 out). Her partner (Steve) cannot follow suit, so he indicates his double-four (44) by playing the 4. *Ella* takes the trick with the 6. Her partner (Will) could have taken the trick with his 10, but decided to save it in hopes of "catching" the 10 later.

**Trick #4:** *Ella* leads her double-deuce (22), and everybody follows suit. *Ella* takes the trick which includes the five-count (5) that Nancy had to play.

**Trick #5:** *Ella* leads the 1 (a "walker" since the other six deuces have already been played). *Nancy* "trumps in" with the four-ace (4A), a five-count, and takes the trick.

**Trick #6:** *Nancy* leads the 5 so her partner can take the lead (assuming the 4 he played in Trick #3 was not a false indicator). Her partner (*Steve*) takes the trick with the double-four (44).

**Trick #7:** *Steve* leads the double-five (55) to take the last trick and make the bid. Nancy was able (fortunate) to play the 10 on this trick, and Ella had to play the last five-count (5).

## THE PLAYERS:

Who will be partners is determined by mutual agreement or by drawing dominos.

When drawing, the dominos are shuffled and each player draws a domino. The player who draws the highest domino will be the scorekeeper, and the next highest domino holder will be his partner.

The two lowest domino holders will be the opposition partners. In case of tie(s), those players each draw another domino to break the tie.

Partners sit opposite each other at the table.

## THE SHUFFLE:

All 28 dominos are shuffled face-down.

The scorekeeper shuffles ("shakes") the dominos to start the game. Thereafter, the shuffle rotates to the left (clockwise) after each "hand" has been played. The shuffler always draws his/her dominos last.

If multiple games are played at one sitting, and the same partners are retained, then either of the previous winning player partners shuffle to begin a new game.

## BIDDING:

The player to the left of the shuffler begins the bidding. He may bid or pass (not bid).

The bid rotates left (clockwise) to the next player until all have had an opportunity to bid.

Each bid must be higher than any preceding bid(s).

If all players pass, then the dominos are reshuffled by the next player and the bidding process repeated. (My house rules require the shuffler to take the bid for at least 30 points when everybody passes. The minimum bid allowed is 30. Bids higher than 41 must be one or more marks.

The first bid in marks can be one or two marks. Subsequent players may bid one mark more than the number previously bid.

When one or more marks are bid, the high bid partners must take (win) all seven tricks. If they lose one trick, they are set, and the opposing team partners get the mark(s) they bid. Trick values have no special significance when the bid is one mark (42) or multiples thereof.

**OPENING PLAY:** Following the bidding process, the high bidder declares a trump suit (or no trumps) and starts the hand by leading a domino.

Each player, in turn (clockwise), must follow the suit led if possible. For example, if a  is led, sixes (high end of the domino) is the suit led unless the high bidder had declared treys (threes) the trump suit. (See TRUMPS below for clarification.)

The player who wins the trick leads the next domino.

**SAMPLE PLAY** (with indicating):

Here's how the players could play the above hand after *Nancy/Steve* got the bid (aces trump):

D O M I N O S P L A Y E D					P O I N T S	
Trick	<i>Nancy</i> (Bid 32)	<i>Ella</i> (Passed)	<i>Steve</i> (Bid 30)	<i>Will</i> (Bid 31)	N/S	E/W
#1	 (Takes trick)				1	0
#2	 (Takes trick)				1	0
#3		 (Takes trick)			0	1
#4		 (Takes trick)			0	6
#5	 (Takes trick)				6	0
#6			 (Takes trick)		1	0
#7			 (Takes trick)		26	0
 Led				 Totals:	<b>35</b>	<b>7</b>

**Trick #1:** *Nancy* leads her highest trump () , and each player, in turn, follows suit by playing a trump. *Nancy* takes the trick.

**Trick #2:** *Nancy* leads the second highest trump () to call in the other trump and, hopefully, get an indication from her partner. Steve cannot follow suit

this case, unbeknownst to Steve, his partner [Nancy] has the other three trumps if he called fours as trump. If Nancy/Steve played their dominos wisely, they wouldn't have any problem making 30.)

**Will** is strong in treys and sixes, so he bids 31. If he gets the bid, he could call either treys or sixes as trumps. In this case, he wants to try sixes, hoping his partner has the six/four (6:4) trump, and/or it falls on the first trick when he leads the double-six (6:6).

(Treys might be a safer trump since the five/deuce (5:2) "off" domino makes Will more vulnerable to being set, especially if he didn't take in the six/four (6:4) trump in the first trick. In this case, Nancy would surely play her six/blank (6:0) on the first trick and then she would be holding the high trump [a ten-count] and the double-ace (2:2) for taking subsequent leads and setting Will.)

**Nancy** (last bidder) is strong in aces. Since her partner (Steve) indicated he had a helping hand, she bids 32 and calls aces trump. (Bidding more than 32 was not necessary since Nancy had last bid, and the previous high bid was 31. If Nancy would have had to bid higher than 32 to get the bid, she could have bid as much as 35 without being set [as demonstrated below].)

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Scoring for each hand is recorded after all seven tricks are played or the high bidder is set (doesn't make his bid).

### SCORING:

Each trick is worth one point.

Dominos divisible by five (5) are worth their face values, e.g., 6:5 or 5:6 is 10 points and 4:1 or 1:4 is five points. (The other three count-dominos are 6:6, 5:5 and 4:4.)

There are seven (7) tricks in a hand and five dominos with a total "count" value of 35 points, hence the name 42 (7+35).

Each hand won is scored as a mark (or marks bid).

If the bidding partner(s) do not make their bid (or higher), the opposition partners get the mark(s).

The partner team who scores seven marks first wins the game.

Marks are recorded on paper by spelling "ALL."  
(Each letter segment is a mark.) Scoring by points is optional.

**TRUMPS:** Trumps are like a suit in cards. When declared, the trump suit outranks the other domino suits. If a player gets the bid and calls "treys" (threes) trump, then the seven dominos with three dots (pips)

on one end are trumps. Doubles may also be declared a trump suit.

Trump Suit Options (ranked highest to lowest in suit)	
Sixes	
Fives	
Fours	
Treys	
Deuces	
Aces	
Blanks	
Doubles	

When a trump is led, each player must play a trump if he has one. High trump wins any trick. If a non-trump domino is led, and a player cannot follow suit, he may (does not have to) play a trump if he has one.

A player who gets the bid may elect no trump ("follow me"). When "follow me" is called, each player, in turn, plays the "suit" corresponding to the high end of the domino led in each trick. The double in each suit is high.

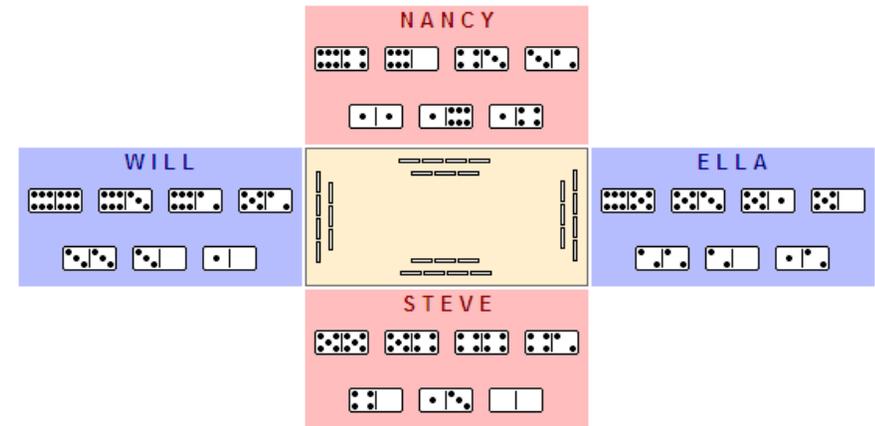
A player may play any domino if he cannot follow suit.

### STRATEGY:

If your bid is the highest, you have the advantage of calling trumps and leading the first domino. The

### SAMPLE HAND (with indicating):

*Nancy*, *Steve*, *Will* and *Ella* are from Austin. They play 42 every Friday night. **Nancy** shuffles, and each draws seven dominos (Nancy last). **Ella** bids first.



*Ella* (sits left of shuffler Nancy) begins the bid. She has four fives she could call trump, but she doesn't have the double-five (a ten-count) so she passes. (I would have bid 31 since I could afford to lose the trick with the double-five; however, trying to get back in the lead to "walk" my deuces would be risky. In this hand, Steve has the double-five, would win the trick when it was played, and could come back with his double-blank [] lead and set me.)

The bid rotates clockwise to *Steve* who has a good helping hand (three doubles). He bids 30 since he can indicate two of his doubles to his partner. (If his partner passes and he ends up having to take the bid for 30, he would probably call fours trump or call no-trumps ["follow-me"] in hopes of making his bid. In

## INDISCRETIONS:

When a player plays out of turn or reneges (doesn't follow suit led when able), the hand is ended and the opposition partners get the mark(s).

Once a domino has been played, it cannot be retrieved (taken back).

Talking across the table about the hand in play is strictly prohibited.

If a domino is inadvertently knocked over (exposed), it must remain face up and played at the first valid opportunity.

If a player bids out of turn, the bidding process resumes normally, but he cannot change his bid. If his bid is not higher than previous bids when it is his turn, then he must pass.

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object is to bid wisely, make your bid, or help your partner make his bid.

If the opposing team partners get the bid, then you and your partner try to set them. This is done by preventing them from making their bid, if possible, by "catching" (winning) tricks with "count." (If the bid is in marks, you can set the opponents by taking any trick.)

For example, if an opposing player leads the double-five (fours are trump), and you do not have a five, you can play a four (trump) on your turn and win the trick (if nobody else "over-trumps" you). By winning the trick, you and your partner get 11 points (the trick plus the ten-count), or 16 points if the five/blank (5.0) is also played in the same trick (or you trumped-in with the four/ace [4.1]). This is sufficient to set a bid greater than 31 (42-11=31 or 42-16=26).

<u>Bid</u>	<u>Can't lose more than</u>
30	Two tricks, one 10-count*
31	One trick, one 10-count*
32	Five tricks, one 5-count
33	Four tricks, one 5-count
34	Three tricks, one 5-count
35	Two tricks, one 5-count
36	One trick, one 5-count
37	Five tricks, no count
38	Four tricks, no count
39	Three tricks, no count
40	Two tricks, no count
41	One trick, no count
42**	(Must take all tricks)
** one mark    * or two 5-counts	

When trying to make your bid, normally, you should call in the trumps (or try to find out where they are) by leading them early in the hand.

You want to put count on tricks you and your partner take. (Count dominos have no special significance when the bid is in marks.)

When possible, you may want to take the lead to allow your partner to get rid of (unload) "off" dominos which would otherwise jeopardize making the bid. Knowing what to do comes with experience and playing the odds on domino distribution. It helps to keep track of which dominos have been played and which ones are still held.

### **INDICATING:**

Many 42 players interpret a 30-bid to mean that the bidder has doubles and/or count dominos that could help his partner make a higher bid. In other cases, however, a 30-bid simply means that the bidder thinks 30 is the highest bid he can make.

Some players also try to indicate to their partners which doubles they're holding by what they play when they are unable to follow the suit led. The two most common practices are [1] playing the double itself to indicate they're holding the next highest domino in that suit, or [2] playing a domino whose high end indicates they're holding the double in that suit. (When more than one double is held, players usually indicate their highest doubles first if they can.)

Whereas the latter style for indicating doubles is frowned on by many "pure 42" advocates as being unwise, it is nonetheless commonly practiced and completely legal. Realistically, these common

indicating styles cannot be legislated out of the game. Prearranged secret indicating and bidding signals between partners, however, are considered cheating.

False indications can occur, sometimes with undesirable results. Playing count or some other domino is often more prudent than indicating. Even without indicating, a bidder normally expects some kind of help from his partner, whether it's donating count or having an important double. In any 42 game, experience and observation skills are helpful to correctly interpret bidding practices and play action on the board.

### **PROTOCOL:**

Players agree on the rules **before** beginning a game.

The shuffler draws his dominos last.

The partner of the high bidder normally gathers in the dominos at the end of each trick they take. The opposing partner team gathers their own tricks taken and keeps them separate from the other team's.

The tricks are stored face up, off to the side of the playing surface.

When one or more marks are bid, the dominos are stacked so only the last two tricks can be viewed (dot sides). (This makes domino tracking more dependent on players' memories.)