

But Why??

An exploration of **Game Theory** within the context of **Death Note**

Spoiler Warning!
up to:
Chapter 19: Humiliation
Episode 9: Encounter

What even is Death Note?

A Pillar in the Realm of Manga

A Struggle Between Opposing Forces

A Story of Justice

What is it really about though?

1. The Death Note

A supernatural notebook which grants its wielder the power to kill as long as the victim's name and face are known.

2. Light

- A.K.A. Kira, the current wielder of the Death Note.
- A freshly graduated high school student.
- He plans to eradicate injustice by punishing criminals using the Death Note.



3. L

- A globally revered detective of renowned status and stature.
- Notorious for his ingenuity and unorthodox methods.
- Is the lead detective on the Kira case.

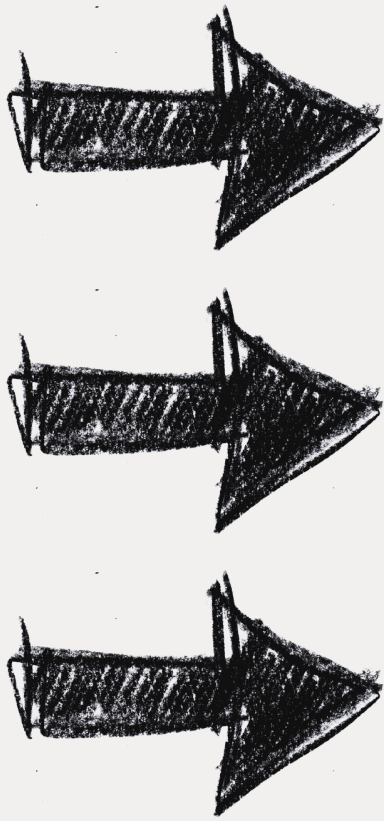


4. The Kira Case

- Kira has been killing people left and right, throwing the world into mass panic.
- L has been able to narrow down the location and profile of Kira in record time.
- He considers Light to be the main suspect.
- Due to the supernatural nature of the weapon, evidence has been scarce.
- L finds himself having to go to extremes to make headway on the case.



What does this have to do with Game Theory?



Why would L go against every conceivable notion of self-preservation?

- In this scene, L informs Light (the main suspect) of his identity AND reveals his face.
- What benefit could he possibly hope to gain from such an interaction?

Why did Light not kill L immediately after?



Well...

Let's take a closer look at the dynamics at play here:

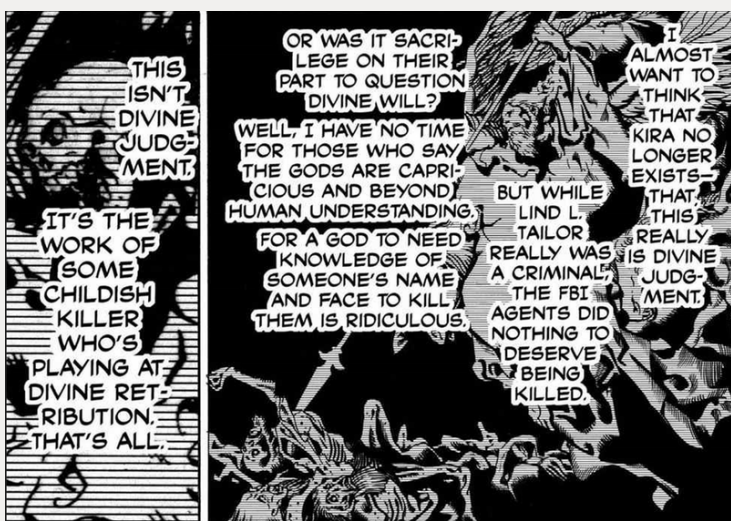
According to Game Theory:
Quantitatively Speaking:

| | | |
|----------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Light \ L | Reveal (Win) | Not Reveal (Lose) |
| Not Kill (Win) | 1, 1 | 2, 0 |
| Kill (Lose) | 0, 2 | 0, 0 |

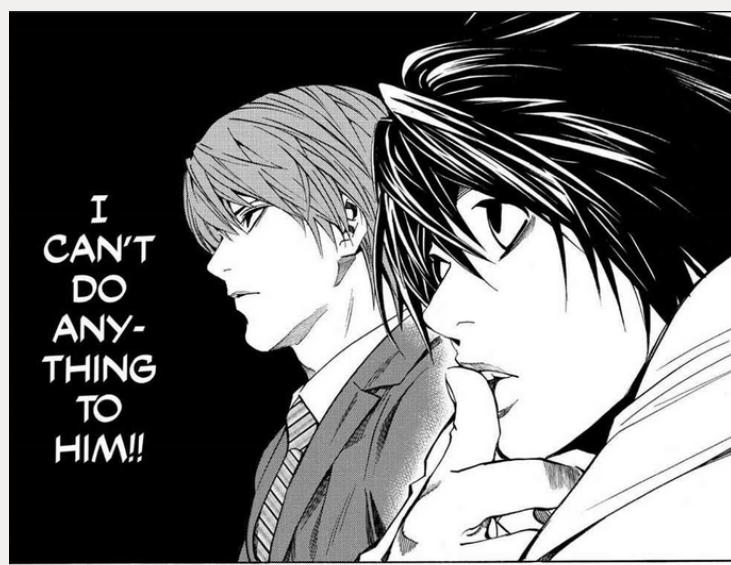
But that's confusing!

What if we consider...

L's Perspective

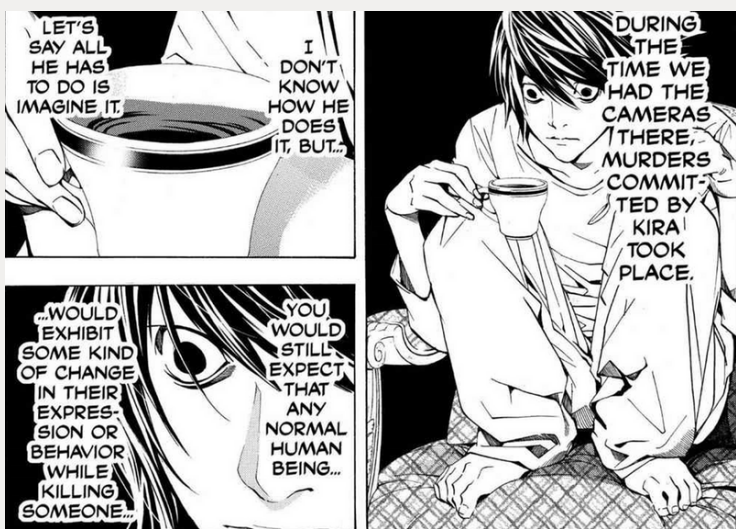


Light's Perspective



- L is in a conundrum: he is sure of the existence of Kira, but has no means of confirming the culprit.
- He has already identified Light as a main suspect, due to his similarity to the criminal's profile.
- L's hand has been forced, and he must take a drastic step or the case will become stagnant.
- L must reveal himself to prompt a response from who he believes to be Kira (reveal - win).
- Not revealing his identity would maintain the current stalemate (not reveal - lose).

- On the surface level, Light has the perfect opportunity to kill L.
- However, doing so would lead to his immediate arrest; Light must play along (kill - lose).
- Internally, Light is panicking. He must act impromptu, with no time to plan ahead.
- L has trapped Light; forced him into submission (inaction) while keeping him under watch.



- We mustn't forget that L is running purely on rationale rather than hard evidence.
- His hypothesis on the murder method is tentative at best. When he reveals himself, he will be either:

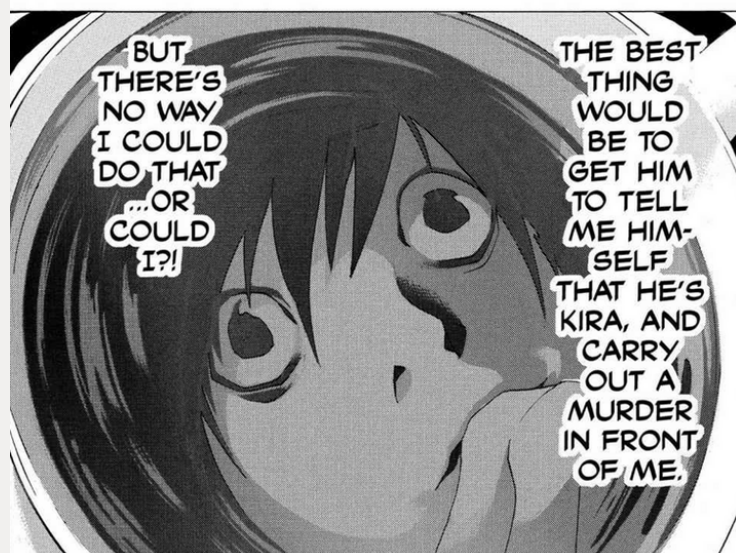
RIGHT

- Light kills Hideki Ryuuga (a pop star who's name L borrowed).
Kira is caught.

WRONG

- Light kills L.
- Light is the only person who knew L's identity, thus;
Kira is caught.

- "If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you" - Friedrich Nietzsche
- Light realises the benefit of playing along: he too is able to get closer to L; to throw off the investigation and kill him later on (not kill - win).



How Can they Resolve the Issue??

And that's the real question, is it not?

To begin to even attempt to answer, we must narrow down the problem

What automatically repels two individuals from working together?

Trust!

or lack thereof

1. Trusting the other party is difficult

2. Incentives to "cheat" will always exist

3. People are naturally self-interested

4. The dominant strategy is to defect

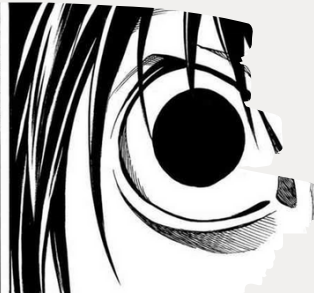
How does this translate within the context of Death Note?

I want to create a fairer world, free of injustice and crime*

*Or so we think, at this point



Mass Murderer



International Detective

I need a constant stream of puzzles to ease my boredom

Though their methods are vastly different, L and Light's intentions do not truly contradict each other (short-term, at least).

The root of the issue here is definitely trust; Light and L are unable to trust each other's actions, since it is their behaviour which conflicts.

Although the pair become amicable later, their friendship cannot be trusted through the layers of deceit covering it (cheap talk).

There are other approaches to building trust as long as both parties are willing (both L and Light do not trust the other, but want to gain the other's trust).

Credible Commitments

"A commitment is a pledge advantageous to the other party" (Sun & Sun, 2018).

"A credible 'signal,' something that would not be desirable if the circumstances were otherwise" (Daxit & Nalebuff, 2018).

Costly Signals

"Expensive and seemingly arbitrary or 'wasteful' behavioural or morphological traits are designed to convey honest information benefitting both signalers and observers".

"These signals reveal informational about underlying qualities (characteristics of the signaler that are of importance to observers) of the signaling individuals".

(Smith & Bliege Bird, 2004)

- In order for L and Light to establish trust, they must agree on a basic premise to start from, to serve as a launching pad for a (hopefully) mutually beneficial relationship.
- This is costly, requires compromise.
- Going against one's own direct interest is a sign of trustworthiness, as long as they follow up.

What if the costly signal is merely a strategic decision of multiple layers for long-term benefit?

"The general principle is that it can be in a player's interest to reduce his own freedom of future action. By so doing, he removes his own temptation to renege on a promise or to forgive others' transgressions." (Daxit & Nalebuff, 2018)

L could tell Light his real name.

Light could hand the Death Note in or render it inaccessible to himself.

Soichiro Yagami (Light's father, L's coworker) could act as a neutral 3rd party.

L would have a friendly rival to compete against and stimulate his mind.

Light would be able to work on eradicating injustice.

L & Light could work together on cases.

References

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