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Preface

When most people think of Scrabble, they think family, fun, and words. They think of a wholesome game around the dining room table while going through the photo album and watching football. Scrabble isn't considered a "smart" game like chess or poker: rather, it is thought of as a social game like charades or Monopoly.

Among strategists, Scrabble has a bad rap. Whenever I mention Scrabble to other game players, I'm treated with a dismissive attitude. "Why don't you take up a real game?" I was once told. To them, it is just a word game. But those who ridicule Scrabble are missing out on one of the best strategic games ever devised.

I wrote this book to share my enjoyment of the strategic side of Scrabble. Scrabble combines vocabulary and anagramming (rearranging scrambled letters into words) with mathematical knowledge, spatial skills, bluffing, and a variety of interesting tactics and strategies into one glorious game.

I've always loved the strategic aspect. Ever since I was a small child, I've played games with a strategic element, such as chess, backgammon, gin rummy, and hearts, but found Scrabble to be my favorite game.

I started playing when I was 12. I would play my parents twice a week for ten cents a point. Since this was my allowance, I decided to read the dictionary and learn basic words that I thought were useful for Scrabble play. By the end of the month, I easily beat my parents and made over forty dollars.

Over time, I became fascinated with Scrabble. I played for two hours a day against the computer program, Maven. During high school, I spent my time studying word lists and thinking about new strategies instead of listening to my vapid high school professors.

My obsession with Scrabble carried on to college, where I studied game and decision theory. I wrote papers about Scrabble: analyzing its statistics, psychology, mathematics, computer applications, and theory. Through my studies, I not only learned how to play, but how to *think* about Scrabble.

Breaking the Game is the culmination of my theoretical studies combined with experience from playing tens of thousands of games. While rooted in a deep theoretical understanding, its ideas are presented simply and unambiguously. I hope this book helps you learn about Scrabble in a fun, interesting, and informative way!

A Brief History of Scrabble

In 1931, an architect named Alfred Butts was laid off from his job, one of the many victims of the Great Depression. Like many downtrodden Americans, Alfred worried about how he would survive. He tried to carve out a living by creating art, writing essays, and producing plays, but his efforts failed.

Alfred invented a word game, reasoning that few word games were on the market. He perused the New York Times and the works of Edgar Allen Poe, counting the frequency of each letter used in the English language. From this, he developed a word game called Lexiko.

For the next five years, he tried to sell Lexiko with limited success. People simply did not have the money to spend on word games, and Alfred had no means of marketing his game. Despite numerous tweaks, Lexiko never caught on.

Alfred was then approached by a businessman named James Brunot. Brunot made Butts an offer: Brunot would buy Lexiko and Butts would receive a small royalty. Disheartened by his inability to sell the game, Alfred agreed to the deal and stopped working on his game. Lexiko became the project of James Brunot.

Brunot made some minor adjustments. He added a 50 point bonus for playing all seven of your tiles. He altered the board configuration, and changed the name to Scrabble. For the first four years after the sale, Brunot had little success selling Scrabble.

Then, in 1952, sales suddenly began to soar. It is believed that the president of Macy's discovered the game and decided to sell them in his store. By the end of 1952, two thousand sets were sold every week. In 1953, sales had increased so much that Brunot had to license out production to the company Selchow and Righter. Over a million sets of Scrabble were sold.

Scrabble began to boom. Eventually, Brunot sold the game to Selchow and Righter for millions. Over time, Scrabble has changed hands many times, and is now owned by Hasbro.

To date, over 150 million Scrabble sets have been sold in over 20 languages. Approximately 1 in every 3 homes in the US owns a Scrabble set. Scrabble is now the most popular word game in the world.

About the Author



Kenji Matsumoto is a top Scrabble player originally from Aiea, Hawaii who has finished in the top 5 of the last three Nationals he's played. He is known by many to be one of the best Scrabble strategists in the world.

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Disclaimer

This book is written for people who have some experience playing Scrabble. Although the puzzles in this book will not use obscure words, many of the diagrams contain obscure words, and knowledge of obscure words may influence many of the strategic decisions.

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Who plays Scrabble?

Somewhere, people are playing Scrabble at a neighborhood game night, competing in a spirited game while gossiping about office politics and trying to impress each other with their word savvy. Players battle for the respect and admiration of spectators, hoping to obtain the status of being the best Scrabble player around. Money is exchanged as players bet on who will win. A vibrant feeling of competition emanates throughout the room, both in the Scrabble game and in the repartee of wits.

At a university, a game between two English professors begins. Professors enjoy a scholarly conversation while expressing their appreciation for words through a game of Scrabble as though it were an artful dance between two lovers. For them, Scrabble is not just a game, but a subtle way of conveying their appreciation of words, and glorifying the poetic beauty of eloquent words such as ‘ethereal’ and ‘visage’.

In their rundown apartment, a young couple plays Scrabble every week. They spend the evening playfully flirting, finding different ways to spend time together. For them, each game is new: it brings upon new possibilities and new opportunities for them to learn about words and about each other. For them, searching for a word is like panning for gold: each rack has newfound riches waiting to be found.

The reasons that people play Scrabble are as diverse as the people who play. Whether you are old or young, a lawyer, a housewife, or a construction worker, you can find a way to enjoy America’s favorite word game. Ultimately, you play Scrabble for the same reason you should play any game: It’s fun! The mysterious nature of words lures people to Scrabble.

On one hand, words are logical and symmetric: each word has a definition, a pronunciation, and an origin, and people have an innate sense of which letter combinations comprise a word. Each word has a history and a meaning: a unique character that is meant to be loved and appreciated.

On the other hand, words are chaotic and bizarre. Over time, the definition and even the pronunciation of words evolve. Many words are not spelled how they sound, and other words look completely bizarre to the human eye.

Scrabble gives word lovers the ability to celebrate, learn, and share words with other people in a way few other activities can. It gives beautiful yet forgotten words a chance to take center stage, and allows word aficionados to share their profound love of words with others. For word lovers, language is like music: while its impact is profound, its true nature remains mysterious and intangible.

A Change in Perspective

Many players ask what the difference is between a Scrabble expert and an amateur Scrabble player. While there are major skill differences such as vocabulary, anagramming, and strategy, I've always found the biggest difference is in *attitude*. To break the game, you need to forget any preconceived notions or skills that you've acquired, and change the way you approach Scrabble. Here are four important concepts that everyone should realize about Scrabble:

Concept #1: Scrabble is more than just a word game.

Scrabble's allure stems from the way it celebrates language. The word lover in each of us is fascinated by what is possible over the Scrabble board. Scrabble allows us to use language creatively while sharing our knowledge of words with other people.

Thus, you may be alarmed to learn that not all Scrabble players possess the same "feelings" towards words. In fact, many Scrabble players memorize words without definitions; they study words solely to improve their Scrabble play. Most great Scrabble players are not wordsmiths. One top Scrabble player has claimed not to have read a serious book in ten years. Few players know the definition of all the words that they play. Many top Scrabble players reside in Thailand, and speak little to no English.

For Scrabble players, it is easier to anagram a rack like AEINORS (ERASION) than to anagram a more common word like ACILMSU (MUSICAL). Many players don't mentally unscramble words. Instead, they say to themselves: "Oh, AEINORS! I've seen that before: that anagrams to ERASION!" For most tournament players, finding most bingo is accomplished using memory rather than anagramming skill.

Successful Scrabble players spend time looking at word lists. They memorize words such as FOY, ZAMIA, and QADI because they know those words are likely to show up in future games of Scrabble, but may be unfamiliar with common English words since they are "less useful". A Scrabble player's vocabulary is not developed based on eloquence or interest, but on word utility.

While most kitchen table players are elated to find a cool word, tournament players are more concerned with strategic components. They look for ways to use high scoring tiles to score well and keep tiles so they can play a bingo (a word that uses all 7 tiles from your rack) next turn.

Many Scrabble aficionados frequently play words without any *interest* of definitions. They learn words not because they love them, but because they want to become better at Scrabble. As one world class player said in a recent interview, "All the words are just *letter strings* that I use to score points."

Here are some essential ways that a word lover may differ from a Scrabble player:

Scenario 1: Opponent opens the game with the word KHEDA, a word that you have never seen before. You challenge, and the play is ruled acceptable.

Word lover's thoughts: "Cool! What does that mean?"

Scrabble Master's thoughts: Can I add an S to form KHEDAS?

Scenario 2: Player has opening rack ABCILPU and are trying to decide between ABULIC and PUBLIC.

Word lover's thoughts: "Ooh, ABULIC. That's a nice word! PUBLIC is an everyday word, but ABULIC (relating to abulia, a neurological disorder) is a lovely word! I'm going to play that!"

Scrabble Master's thoughts: PUBLIC is 4 more points than ABULIC and the P is about as good as an A. Also PUBLIC seems better positionally. I'm going to play PUBLIC.

Scenario 3: A player wants to learn some bingos.

Word lover's thoughts: MRIDANGA: ooh, that's an Indian musical instrument!

Scrabble Master's thoughts: AADGIMNR = MRIDANGA. That's a tough word to find. Oh, what does it mean? Probably some African thing. I don't know. Next word!

Concept #2: Scrabble proficiency takes practice and work.

You must spend time away from the board to work on your Scrabble game. If you want to improve your golfing, you go to the driving range and practice your swing until you consistently hit good golf shots. After your round is over, you think about the positives and negatives, and then you go back to the range and work on your weaknesses so that you can do better the next time.

The same type of scrupulous attention is necessary in Scrabble. You must critique your thought process and learn from your mistakes. You need to practice anagramming, board vision, rack vision, and decision making. Without practice, you will never win consistently, even if you have all the basic tools to succeed.

When a casual player makes a mistake, they treat the error as an isolated incident. When a serious player makes a mistake, they think of the error as a deficiency that needs to be corrected. Whether it's learning a new word list or fixing a strategic flaw, serious Scrabble players become proficient because they are honest with themselves and willing to do the work necessary to correct errant Scrabble behaviors.

Concept #3: You don't know all the words (yet).

“What does that mean?” they ask.

“I don't know.”

“Let's look it up.... (pause, looks it up) it's a shrub.”

“Okay... if you say so.”

(Five minutes later...) “How can _____ be a word? That's not a word!”

This is a common reaction newcomers have to tournament Scrabble. Indeed, the dictionary contains words that may strike you as objectionable. OE is a whirlwind off the Faeroe Islands. QOPH is a Hebrew letter. PHPHT is an interjection that describes every player's reaction upon hearing that it is a word. Admittedly, a lot of these “words” don't intuitively seem to belong in a dictionary.

To make matters worse, some “everyday” words are NOT in the dictionary. Seemingly common words such as SEEDINGS*, CHIHUAHUA*, and GOUDA* are not acceptable. (Throughout the book, unacceptable Scrabble words are denoted by an asterisk.) In addition, offensive words like the F-word may be unacceptable at home, but ARE acceptable in tournament play. These plays can be *challenged*: your opponent can question the validity of a word at any time. The player who is unsuccessful during a challenge will lose their turn.

However, despite the dictionary's shortcomings, the vast majority of words played are everyday words, even if you have not encountered them before. While words like SARIN, ROUILLE, and DICOTYL aren't common to everyone, they are extremely common words in the fields of chemistry, food, and botany respectively.

Knowing these words doesn't require that you become an expert in all of these fields: it merely requires changing the way you think about learning words. Words are like heirlooms, passed down from player to player. While some learn words by thumbing through encyclopedias or dictionaries, words can also be learned by playing the game.

Players can also learn words by studying them from a word list. While this may cause some players to groan, studying words from lists is no different than studying chess openings or practicing on the golf course. As long as there is a competitive aspect to Scrabble, word lists will be a necessary (and fun!) part of Scrabble.

Concept #4: The goal is to try to make the BEST play.

Many players sitting at home are content to make the first “nice” word they see. They value winning less than the aesthetic and cultural impact of words. They view making Scrabble plays not as instruments to winning games, but as self-expression.

While there's nothing wrong with playing Scrabble “for fun”, tournament players will turn down eloquent, beautiful words for simple commonplace words that score more points. Competitive players focus on making the best decision that will help them win the game. They develop a methodical way to approach every decision, and treat each decision as a mathematical problem instead of an artistic display.

Introduction

Breaking the Game is a strategic insight into the top levels of Scrabble strategy. It shows you techniques used by the best players in the world, and provides a blueprint that anyone can follow if they want to play championship level Scrabble. After reading this book, you'll never think about the game the same way again!

To get the most out of this book, you will need some experience playing Scrabble. This book assumes that you have a basic familiarity with Scrabble: you should know the rules as well as basic terms such as bingos (plays using all of your tiles) and bonus squares (multi-colored multipliers you can use to help you score). If you are unfamiliar with these terms, I would suggest familiarizing yourself with Scrabble before reading.

This book takes you into the mind of tournament Scrabble players and teaches you how Scrabble is played at the very highest level. Because it teaches top-level play, it will necessarily contain weird words. Although I have made a concerted effort to keep the obscure words to a minimum, you should get used to seeing new words on the road to becoming a Scrabble master.

This book introduces many concepts useful for top Scrabble play. Some of these skills can be applied to all word games, such as anagramming, and word knowledge. Other skills can be applied to other strategy games, such as board vision, decision making, and entropy. Yet other skills are Scrabble specific, such as board vision, fishing, setups, and endgame.

This book shows you how to play Scrabble in a way that it was never meant to be played. It introduces strategic concepts largely used by only the best players in the world. This book is *breaking the game*.

S-C-R-A-B-B-L-E

As a preview, I've outlined eight important concepts that will be covered throughout the book. Mastering these concepts will help you in your quest to become a Scrabble Master.

is for Studying

Ultimately, Scrabble is a word game. Word knowledge is a significant part of becoming a great Scrabble player. To improve your game, you need to study new words.

One benefit of studying is that it allows you to enhance your appreciation of language. By learning new words, you learn about new concepts, foods, cultures, and ways to express yourself that enhance your life. Learning new words can teach you about different cultures and experiences that you never knew existed.

The other benefit of study is that it can develop your anagramming skill. There are plenty of everyday words that are very difficult to anagram, and you won't be able to find them in a game without great effort. As a test, see if you can find these common 8 letter words: (Answers at bottom of the page)

ADINORSU

ADEELMNO

AAIMPRST

ABDEKORY

ACELORSU

CEELSTTU

ABLLSSUY

AIMNNOTU

Not so easy, is it? After studying, you will be able to find these words consistently.

is for Choices

Human thought is mysterious. At times, people are amazingly brilliant: the ability to speak a language, solve a physics problem, or build a car requires an amazing amount of sophistication and ingenuity. At other times, human thought can be confusing, illogical, contradictory, or erratic, even in situations that seem simple. While often brilliant, human thought is inconsistent.

Success depends on your ability to harness the power of your mind. This requires using your cognitive ability to make good *choices*. Scrabble choices are easy when one play significantly outscores another. However, there are other cases when several moves initially seem equivalent, or when different plays accomplish different goals. Your ability to evaluate different candidates will determine your Scrabble success.

Solutions: DINOSAUR, LEMONADE, PASTRAMI, KEYBOARD, CAROUSEL, LETTUCES, SYLLABUS, MOUNTAIN

is for Rack Vision

Imagine you are playing a game of Scrabble. You have a rack that looks good, but don't see anything worth playing. However, an inner voice tells you to keep searching. All of a sudden, Eureka! A word pops out of your rack! Wouldn't it be nice to find those plays consistently?

By developing your *rack vision*, you can find words faster and more frequently. Finding words in your rack is like playing a musical instrument: while someone can tell you how to look for words, improvement only occurs through practice and repetitive play. Rack vision is a combination of the Daily Jumble that you might find in the newspaper and flashcard memorization that people use to learn foreign languages.

is for Anagrams

Anagramming is the essential element of Scrabble. Without an ability to find words in your rack, you cannot be successful at Scrabble. Players need to find words using all the letters in their rack (finding the 7 letter word in CEEHILV) as well as find shorter words in their rack that can score points. (for example, CHIVE, VICE, or EVIL)

Newcomers are often impressed at how quickly expert players can find words in their rack. Experienced players can find words such as SENARII and GEOIDAL almost instantly. Non-Scrabble players have trouble finding everyday words such as DOOR and APPLE in their rack: never mind finding obscure 7 letter words they can't define.

Anagramming skill can only be improved through practice. For most players, anagramming is not an innate talent, but rather something built over time: you are training your mind to see both long and short words in your rack and on the board. If you gave Scrabble players words that were longer than 8 letters (ACDEELNOST = ADOLESCENT), names of countries (ACDEORU = ECUADOR) or proper names (AEILORSTT = ARISTOTLE), they would largely be unable to do so. However, experienced players can anagram 7 and 8 letter words with one-point tiles fairly easily since they have practiced finding those Scrabble-valid words several times.

is for Board Vision

When players are first introduced to Scrabble, there is often a look of both anticipation and terror. On one hand, there are so many neat and creative possibilities; the Scrabble board is like a canvas waiting for an artist. There are always many new, exciting plays waiting on the horizon.

On the other hand... there are so many possibilities. A new player can become overwhelmed; terrified by the thunderstorm that surrounds them. New players initially need guidance to find the various plays available to them over the Scrabble board.

There are many different types of plays that you can make over the Scrabble board. For example, if the word FATHER is on the board, you can make a play that overlaps FATHER, forming several two letter words. You can extend FATHER into a longer word, such as GODFATHER. Or you can add an S, forming FATHERS, and make a perpendicular play. Illustrations of these possibilities are shown below:



is for Bingo

There is little more thrilling for most amateur players than playing a bingo, scoring an extra 50 points for using all your tiles. Playing a bingo is fun and rewarding, and often impresses your friends.

Bingos are the core of Scrabble. Much of Scrabble strategy involves trying to play bingos while also prohibiting your opponent from playing a bingo. The player who plays more bingos is much more likely to win the game.

While bingos are unusual when you first start out, they will become commonplace once you gain experience. Finding 7 and especially 8-letter bingos will become easier after a healthy diet of practice and study.

is for Leave

When I first started playing Scrabble on the internet, computer opponents were a popular way to practice playing. Observers marveled at the words that computers played, and wondered how anyone could ever beat the computer.

However, beating these computers became possible once you observed their strategy. If the computer has an S, it would often use the S to score one additional point. If the computer had AAIIOU, it would play AIR for 9 points. These computers could score, but they had no idea how to keep a good *leave*. A leave consists of the tiles remaining in your rack after a move. By keeping a good leave, you can ensure that you score well on subsequent plays.

Good players will either keep tiles that will often score 30-40 points or more next turn (*scoring leaves*), or tiles that will often become a *bingo* after you draw your other tiles (*bingo leaves*).

is for Exchange

Sometimes in Scrabble, you will have a very bad rack. In these situations, you don't have to make a play: instead, you can trade any or all of your tiles, scoring zero points. Exchanging can be a quick and effective way of dealing with hopeless racks.

Many players don't like exchanging, and would rather take their chances with trying to play through their garbage racks. However, playing with bad tiles is a detriment not only to your next rack, but often for many racks to come. Exchanging gives you a fresh start so that you can play a bingo sooner in the game.