

In 1952, Jack Straus, the president of Macy's Department store in New York was on vacation with his family in upstate New York. Surrounded by nature, he was able to escape the confines of downtown Manhattan and spend time with his family and practice his passion for fishing. Invited to his neighbour's cottage for dinner one night, Straus and his wife played a game in which players used randomly selected groups of letters to build words for points. He was so impressed with the game that upon returning to Macy's, he was surprised that his store did not carry this game. A large order was placed, and within a year, all of America had to have this game. We know this game as Scrabble¹.

Scrabble had its origin in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Alfred Mosher Butts was from Poughkeepsie New York. An architect by education and a reasonably good amateur artist, like many people of the time, Butts struggled with securing consistent employment in his trade during this historic downturn. As a hobby, Butts had taken to analyzing popular games in a methodical and systematic fashion. He found that these games fell into three distinct categories: number games, such as dice and bingo; move games, such as chess and checkers; and word games, such as anagrams. He also noted, "...there is one thing that keeps word games from being as popular as card games: they have no score."

¹ Clark, Eric. *The real toy story: Inside the ruthless battle for America's youngest consumers*. Simon and Schuster, 2007

In 1938, Butts decided to take his hobby one step further. He created a game which he called "Criss-Crosswords," which included wooden pieces, a gameboard, and crossword-style game play. He constructed a few sets himself, but was not successful in selling the game to any local manufacturers. In 1948, the game attracted the attention of James Brunot who bought the rights to manufacture the game.. Brunot slightly rearranged some of the squares of the board, simplified the rules, and changed the name of the game to "Scrabble", a Dutch word which means "to scratch frantically". In 1949, Brunot's family business made game sets in a converted former schoolhouse. They made 2,400 sets that year, but due to low demand sold very few of them and lost money. Everything changed when Macy's placed a larger order for the game. The rest was history.

The game is often played by up to four players on a square board with a 15×15 grid of cells, each of which accommodates a single letter tile. The board is marked with "premium" squares, which multiply the number of points awarded: eight dark red "triple-word" squares, 17 pink "double-word" squares, of which one, the center square, is marked with a star or other symbol; 12 dark blue "triple-letter" squares, and 24 light blue "double-letter" squares. Each tile is marked with their point value, with a blank tile—the game's equivalent of a wild card—played as the word's first letter. The blank tile is worth zero points. The game has 100 tiles, 98 of which are marked with a letter and a point value ranging from 1 to 10. The number of points of each lettered tile is based on the letter's frequency in standard English; commonly used letters such as

vowels are worth one point, while less common letters score higher, with Q and Z each worth 10 points. The game also has two blank tiles that are unmarked and carry no point value. The blank tiles can be used as substitutes for any letter; once laid on the board, however, the choice is fixed. Other language sets use different letter set distributions with different point values. Tiles are usually made of wood or plastic and are 19 by 19 millimetres square and 4 mm thick, making them slightly smaller than the squares on the board.

Butts based his game design around anagrams and crossword puzzles that were already popular in the 1930s². Players would draw seven lettered tiles from a pool and then attempt to form words from their seven letters. A key to the game was Butts' analysis of the English language. Butts studied the front page of The New York Times to calculate how frequently each letter of the alphabet was used. He then used each letter's frequency to determine how many of each letter he would include in the game. He included only four "S" tiles so that the ability to make words plural would not make the game too easy. Butts initially called the game "Lexiko", but later changed the name to "Criss Cross Words"

Scrabble proved to be an immediate hit with educators and academics as it combined several knowledge retention skills within its framework. In Scrabble, as in language,

² Clark, Eric. *The real toy story: Inside the ruthless battle for America's youngest consumers*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.

concrete words are represented by both verbal and visual codes, whereas abstract words are represented by only verbal codes. As a consequence, concrete words are more quickly recognized³. Scrabble represented a popular gamification of language in a way that had not been realized in previous eras. While games such as anagrams had been known prior to scrabble, they were never marketed in a systematic way that Scrabble was. When Macy's decided to promote Scrabble as the 'game to have', it effectively brought words games into millions of peoples home. Parlor games like Anagrams lacked structure and consistent rules: they could be played in any setting with variation depending on the players. Scrabble introduced a consistent rule set for playing a word game, people across the world would all be playing the same game to the same rules. Butt's analysis of word usage made the game accessible and understandable to the wider public. You didn't have to know the most obscure words, you could win using words from every day life.

Since 1952 the game has steadily gaining popularity. One hundred and fifty million sets have been sold worldwide and between one and two million sets are sold each year in North America alone. Scrabble, the word game, is here to stay.

³ Tuffiash, Michael, Roy W. Roring, and K. Anders Ericsson. "Expert performance in SCRABBLE: implications for the study of the structure and acquisition of complex skills." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 13.3 (2007): 124.

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