

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCRABBLE

(November 2010)

Many Scrabble players really don't bother about the history of the game since what they need are tips and strategies on how to win their games. Sure, it's a valid reason for not knowing Scrabble's history. This was actually my thought when I started playing Scrabble. When some of my friends got hooked or curious with Scrabble, however, they started asking me things about Scrabble's history, specifically on why there are blanks, what if we increase the number of tiles, who thought on putting the triple-letter squares, etc. I wasn't able to answer those questions until I researched on the history of Scrabble.

I searched the Web and find very similar articles on the history of Scrabble. However, some dates and facts are incongruent. So below is somewhat a comprehensive compilation of the information I gathered from different sources, which I listed at the end of this chapter. Though my compilation may differ from other sources, the major points are consistent for sure.

The Conception of a Game

Every player should know that Scrabble started in America. It started during the period when the United States of America was in great economic recession, known as the Great Depression^{4, 7}. So, unlike many other sports and games, it has no ancient roots; it's a very young game. During the Great Depression, many Americans lost their jobs and became poor. One of them was the 31-year old²⁰ Alfred Mosher Butts, an architect from Poughkeepsie, New York¹. Since Butts had no work, he got time to do the things he loved¹². Two of these things were words and numbers. He then started the idea of inventing a game in 1931 to help the Americans, like him, pass the rough years^{4, 9}.

The architect Alfred Butts was the inventor of the game that developed into Scrabble that we know and enjoy today.
(<http://www.scrabble-assoc.com/info/history.html>)



Butts first pinpointed the types of games present in the American market. The types were numbers games (e.g., dice games and bingo), move or strategy games (e.g., chess and checkers), and word games (e.g., crosswords and anagrams)^{1, 7}. He also noticed that games can rely on two factors, which are luck or chance and skill or technique⁴. Games that rely on pure luck are bingo and dice games, since a player can't manipulate the arrangement of numbers and there is no concept of *move*. On the other hand, chess and checkers require

skill from the player in anticipating the future turns of the opponent, creating a game plan, etc. Strategy games definitely have a concept of move¹. Since strategy games require skill and game study, they are somehow less appealing to most people¹⁶.

The Birth of Lexiko

Those are the things Butts took into consideration when he conceptualized Scrabble in 1931². He wanted a game that is a mixture of the three types of games and that utilizes luck and skill. So, he invented a prototype of the Scrabble game that we know today. He named it Lexico¹⁵ or Lexiko^{1, 9, 13}. Lexiko, unlike modern Scrabble, was played without a board². The main aim of the game was to form long words to get a high score². A player could discard or draw letters from his/her hand². Aside from word length, score is also credited from the types of letters used in the word. There were bonus points for words that used *minor honors* or tiles that have a higher score than the single-point ones^{3, 5}. These minor honors are the letters B, F, H, M, P, V, W, Y^{15, 16}. The highest scoring letters, the J, K, Q, X and Z¹⁵, are called *major honors*¹⁶. So, having major and minor letters in a long word would score very high in the game of Lexiko. Up to now, it is not very clear to me how that game really works aside from its aim and the possible strategies a player can employ³. I get, however, that is an anagramming word game with twists and strategies. And we all know that anagramming is a part of the modern Scrabble. We also learned that Butts started the categorization of letters with their corresponding points.

The origin of the modern Scrabble is always traced back to Butts' Lexiko, which underwent many transformations.
(<http://scrabble.wonderhowto.com/blog/history-scrabble-boards-glass-vintage-gold-star-trek-0116983/>)



¹ A *move* refers to the act done by a player after analyzing his game plan in relation to the opponent's moves. That means that the player is active in the creation of the outcome of the game. Bingo, for instance, doesn't have a concept of move since the player is passive or doesn't contribute to the game's outcome in favor of him/her. A bingo player just marks the numbers aired by someone who randomly picks up the numbers from a container. On the other hand, a chess player employs moves that would give his/her opponent the lesser advantage and chance of winning the game. He/she, for instance, opens up a piece, eat opponent's pieces, transfer positions, etc.

² The site www.ideafinder.com³ adds: "During 1995, historian Jeffrey Saunders of Jackson Heights, Queens, New York, uncovered some materials that prompted the SCRABBLE® world to rethink the original "invention" date of the game. While Alfred Butts was clearly tinkering with word game ideas as early as 1931, it's now believed he may not have focused on the board game idea which led to SCRABBLE® until a few years later. In the summer of 1996, the Butts family, the National SCRABBLE® Association and the Milton Bradley Company agreed to conduct a formal study to determine the correct chronology. Many believe 1938 may emerge as a more accurate date."

³ I somehow grasped Lexiko as similar to Squabble, a word game where a player forms words out of the letters picked from a container. The player's aim also is to form long words and as many as possible to win.

Now, how did Butts decide on the categorization of letters and their values? He found the answers in reading, studying and tabulating the words used in the frontpages of periodicals, such as *The New York Times*¹, *Saturday Evening Post* and *The New York Herald Tribune*⁹. He also consulted various dictionaries. He laboriously listed down the frequency or the number of appearance each letter of the English alphabet in all of the frontpages⁵. He found out that the letter E is the most used letter in English⁷ while Q and Z are the least used. So, in a set of 100 tiles, he designated twelve letter E's, nine A's and I's, eight O's, one Z, Q, X, J and K, and so on and so forth. The letters' value also depended on their frequency: the mostly used tiles have lower points while the rarely used ones have higher points. For instance, among letters with one tile each, Z and Q have 10 points each, while J and X have 8 points each, because J and X can be found slightly more than Z and Q in English words. But how come there are only four tiles of the letter S, when in fact it is one of the commonly used letters? Butts thought about this and decided to have only four S's because the game would be easy if there are too many S's⁷. Players just create word inflections by adding S to gain high scores; Butts wanted the game to be challenging.

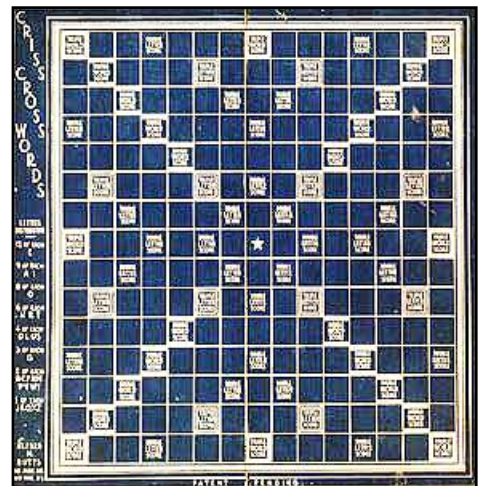
Up to now, Scrabble utilizes the above features of Lexiko. As a recap, these features are the use of anagramming, and tile frequency and valuation. We also saw that Scrabble is a product of a systematic evaluation of the lexicon of the English language.

The Transformations of Lexiko

Butts had big dreams for Lexiko. The dreams, however, needed to wait more years to be realized. He applied several times for patent but all of them were turned down⁹. Game manufacturers, such as Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley, refused his proposals for launching Lexiko⁵. Despite these failures, Butts never lost hope. He instead continued to make two hundred sets for the next five years⁵. The sets were either given or sold to his friends. Unfortunately, Lexiko never went far more than that. It never reached the American market.

After series of revisions, Butts changed Lexiko's name into New Anagrams, Alph, Criss-Cross and Criss-Cross Words. (<http://scrabble.wonderhowto.com/blog/history-scrabble-boards-glass-vintage-gold-star-trek-0116983/>)

But Butts was really determined to develop his game. He made innovations on Lexiko by adding blank tiles that can stand for any letter, having seven tiles in a rack and, most importantly, a board². Yes, a board! He thought that words could be played like a crossword, where words can be formed by connecting to a played word or letter in horizontal and vertical manners¹⁴. Along with the creation of a board, premium squares or squares that have special effect on a word or letter's score had also been added². The board had a fifteen by fifteen square dimension or 145 squares¹⁴. Back then, the



first word was place near the upper left-hand corner of the board¹⁶. We can now see the basic features of the modern Scrabble.

Lexiko, since then, became a more sophisticated yet entertaining game. Lexiko also changed its name to New Anagrams, Alph, Criss-Cross and Criss-Cross Words^{1, 2, 4, 7, 16}. The boards were manually manufactured by Butts using his architectural skills¹². The drawing on the board was reproduced using blue printing, which was pasted on folding chessboards and checkerboards⁷. The tiles, on the other hand, were also hand lettered on a one-fourth inch of plywood or balsa wood, enough to fit the squares of the board⁷. Butts sold each set for \$2². Unfortunately, the application for patent of Criss-Cross Words was also turned down. Game manufacturers also refused the game.

After years of producing and distributing Criss-Cross Words on his own, Butts recognized that he was neither lucky nor skillful in business. So he returned to being an architect. When the World War II broke out, Butts made no more developments with his game¹⁶.

The Transition to Scrabble

In 1947, Butts' invention was revived when he met James Brunot of Newtown, Connecticut^{1, 11}. Brunot was an entrepreneur who liked games. Brunot and his family liked the concept of Criss-Cross Words and decided to commercialize it⁵. The following year, Brunot started producing sets, while ordering boards from the company Selchow and Righter. Brunot manufactured and sold the game through his company named Production and Marketing Corporation. Butts, on the other hand, received a royalty or portion of the profit for every set sold².

Butts and the Brunots made some changes with the rules and the architecture of the board, such as simplifying the rules¹¹, since Butts' rules were really long. The premium squares were also rearranged and had color codes (i.e., pastel pink, baby blue, indigo and bright red⁹)¹⁰. They also added the 50-point bonus for using all seven tiles in the rack in a single turn or move⁹. Finally, they applied a copyright application which was granted on December 1, 1948, while it had a registered trademark fifteen days later¹⁶. They also changed the name from Criss-Cross Words to Scrabble^{1, 4}, which is a real word that means "to grope frantically"^{1, 7} or to feel using one's fingers or hands in search of something. This was the start of the modern game of Scrabble.

The Brunots made their living room the factory for manufacturing Scrabble sets. With the help of his wife, he assembled the parts which he bought from manufacturers. They also manually stamped the letters onto the wooden square tiles¹⁶. They averaged eighteen a day in producing sets. However, their new business was struggling – on their first year, they sold 2,400 sets but lost \$450¹. Until 1952, the Brunots were still losing money, so it crossed in

⁴ One source said that "Brunot registered the board game name as "Scrabble" for no apparent reason except that he liked the sound of it."²⁰

their minds to abandon the venture. Eventually, the Brunots stopped the production of Scrabble sets to think things over¹⁶.

The Peak Years of Scrabble

After taking a break in Kentucky, James Brunot was welcomed with a great demand for Scrabble¹⁶. He found out that the game was recommended through word-of-mouth. This forced him to move to a bigger manufacturing place. The Brunots rented an abandoned schoolhouse in Dodginton, Connecticut^{1, 9}, which was near their house. With the help of friends, they made twelve sets per hour, still manually stamping wooden square tiles with letters^{1, 7}. Soon, boards, boxes and tiles were made elsewhere by other manufacturers and sent to the Brunots' factory for assembly and distribution¹. In the last quarter of the year 1952, their sales reached 37, 000 sets¹⁶.

It was also in 1952 that Scrabble had a major breakthrough. It happened that Jack Strauss, the chairman of the world's biggest department store named Macy's in New York, played Scrabble while on a holiday. He enjoyed the game so much that when he returned to New York, he requested the Games Department of the mall to send him some few pieces of Scrabble. Surprisingly, the mall didn't have any stock of Scrabble. Of course, it eventually had upon the order of Strauss. Macy also supported a promotional campaign for Scrabble that resulted successfully^{1, 4, 8, 16}.



*Scrabble was officially released in 1948. Since then, it had many changes.
(<http://www.donaldsauter.com/scrabble-dating.htm>)*

By 1953, the Brunots were producing 6, 000 sets a week¹⁶. However, they acknowledged that they could not catch up with the increasing demand for Scrabble^{1, 14}. So James Brunot licensed Long Island-based, well known and leading American game manufacturing company Selchow and Righter, on March 1953, to market and to distribute Scrabble in America and Canada^{1, 4, 8, 19}. Remember that Selchow and Righter previously rejected Scrabble. Selchow and Righter was also pressured to step up their production as Scrabble demand increased. In addition to that, Scrabble became popular as stories about it appeared in newspapers, television and magazines. It seemed that everybody wanted to have a set of Scrabble immediately; it had been an American craze! In January 1, 1971, Selchow and Righter purchased the trademark from James Brunot and Alfred Butts, giving them all the rights to Scrabble in the US and Canada^{1, 5, 7}. Butts received the royalties that totaled \$265,000 while Brunot got an estimate of \$1.5 million⁹.

The Maturity of Scrabble

The popularity of Scrabble reached Australia by 1953⁵. In the same year, it was launched by J. W. Spear and Sons in the United Kingdom, where the game was an instant success. In 1968, Spear and Sons acquired the rights to the world¹⁸, outside US, Canada and Australia. They, however, eventually got the rights to Australia. We now see that Scrabble was spreading its virus across the major Anglophone countries in the world! In 1984, Scrabble was turned into a daytime game show on the television network National Broadcasting Company (NBC)¹¹. The Scrabble show ran from July 1984 to March 1990¹¹, with a second run from January to June 1993¹⁴. Chuck Woolery was the host of the show, which has a tagline, "Every man dies, not every man truly Scrabbles."¹¹

In 1986, Selchow and Righter was sold to Coleco Industries, a toy manufacturer in North America^{1, 2}. In 1987 (or three years after), Coleco was bankrupt^{1, 8}. Its assets, including Scrabble, were purchased by Hasbro, Inc, owner of Milton Bradley company^{1, 2, 9}, which was the leading toy company in the US. Remember that Milton Bradley previously rejected Lexico. Outside of North America, J. W. Spear and Sons was acquired in 1984 by Mattel Inc., the largest toy and game company in the world⁵.

Scrabble evolved from being an entertaining household game into a competitive game. It became competitive because players wanted to excel in the game which they could through developing techniques and strategies⁵. Since then, word lists, game rules, among others were universalized. The first Scrabble championship was held in London on 1991¹⁵. It was then held in New York City in 1993¹⁵. James Brunot died in October 1984 and did not witness the first Scrabble championship¹⁶. But Alfred Butts did, since he died at the age of 93 in April 1993². Butts continuously played Scrabble until the end of his life with family and friends¹⁶.

⁵ Not all games can be competitive. Remember that I pointed out the idea of *move*. If a player can enhance his/her move, through developing or practicing techniques, studying his and other players' games, etc., then the game can become competitive. Almost, if not all, games that have moves can be competitive.

Today, Scrabble is still a worldwide phenomenon, and has developed several variations and forms. Scrabble clubs proliferated across many Anglophone countries. There are states that even require Scrabble as part of their education curriculum. Non-English countries, on the other hand, developed their own variations. It is unquestionably the best-selling word game all over the world. In 1970, a British mountaineer Chris Bonington and his team even spent their evenings playing Scrabble²⁰ while on the mountain Annapurna in Himalaya. Clearly, Scrabble conquered the world!

*Butts witnessed the first World Scrabble Championship.
He enjoyed playing Scrabble until his death.
([http://clevergames.wordpress.com/2009/10/29/
famous-board-games-history-the-invention-of-scrabble/](http://clevergames.wordpress.com/2009/10/29/famous-board-games-history-the-invention-of-scrabble/))*



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