

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Peter Schwartzman

Scrabble®: Game or microcosm of life?

As you're reading this I should have just competed in my third National SCRABBLE® Championship (I also competed in 2000 and 2004). This game became an obsession of mine back in 1996 when, after playing in my first tournament, I found out that one could play on the newly formed Internet; my mom had played in two tournaments and she suggested I give it a shot. Over the past 13-plus years of playing competitive SCRABBLE®, I have often wondered what its attraction is for me and thousands of others who spend several hundreds of hours a year studying words, strategies, or playing this deceptively simple game of tiles, racks, boards and timers. Ultimately, I think it comes down to the fact that the game of SCRABBLE® allows players to enter into a world of fantasy where anything is possible but life goes on. In other words, playing SCRABBLE® can provide so many emotional swings that it often seem like a lifetime has passed over the course of just one game.

In order to appreciate this conclusion, it is necessary to say a little about how the game is played on the competitive scene. Every weekend, there are anywhere from one to six tournaments played on this continent. Many of these tournaments have a regional flare but most attract players from far off places. Some addicts cross continents routinely in order to get their fix. (I, on the other hand, rarely play in tournaments; this will be my 23rd one in 13 years—believe it or not well below the average frequency). These one to three day tournaments (the nationals is actually five!) consist of pitting players head-to-head in roughly 50-minute games—each player gets 25 minutes per game before they are penalized points for extra time. Typically, there are several divisions set up based on player rating (the higher the rating, the more skilled the games). Players play a distribution of players within their division, possibly playing opponents multiple games. There are usually seven to eight games per day and everyone gets to play all of their games (unlike Texas hold'em, where you could be ousted from a competition on one hand). At the end of all the rounds the player with the most wins or, in the case of a tie in wins, the one with the greatest spread—the cumulative points won or lost by—is declared the victor and to him/her go the biggest prize (anywhere from \$50 to \$50,000).

So how can a game seem like life and draw people in? It all starts on the draw to see who goes first. Both players draw one tile from a bag of one-hundred tiles, the one closest to "A" alphabetically gets to go first (a blank is considered even better than an A). Going first has a distinct benefit, so winning this draw seems like a minor victory. (As it turns out, many tournaments now decide who goes first randomly, so



The author (right) and one of his opponents at the National Scrabble® championships in Dayton, Ohio

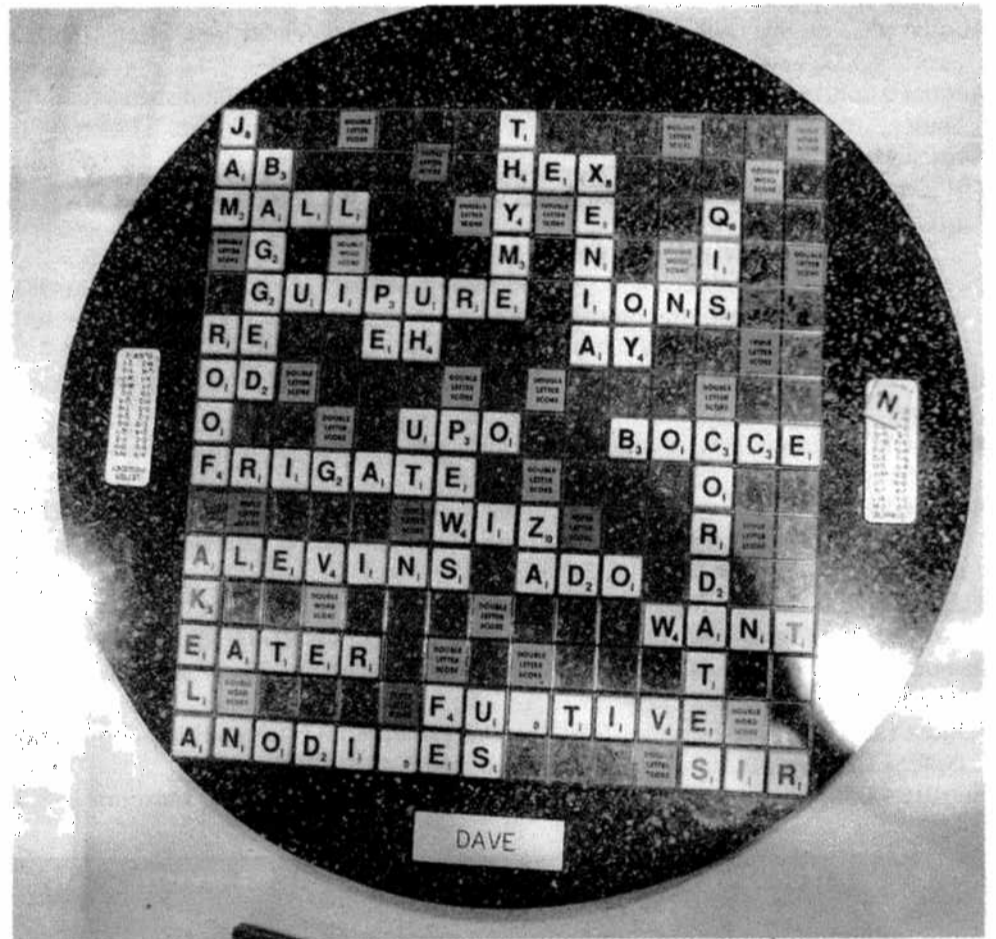
no person gets a lop-sided "going first" advantage anymore.) Is this like being born to well-to-do parents? Then players draw their tiles to play. In drawing tiles, players put their hand into a bag (above their head to avoid any appearance of peeking) and draw seven tiles. This may seem like a mundane activity until you realize that these tiles will decide one's fate. Consider this equivalent to the prenatal care and pre-schooling that one gets. If one draws "OOOUUAE," the game isn't over but one gets the feeling that it is going to be tough going. That is, a bad opening rack causes a player to get pessimistic about the future, just as having a traumatic event early in one's life can affect a person's outlook as well. Similarly, drawing an opening of "FLOATE?," (a "?" is a blank), can build confidence and optimism—playing all of one's tiles on a turn results in a 50-point bonus and is called a "bingo".

Yet, the game involves two players. So one has to respond to one's opponent as well. It isn't just what you draw but what your opponent draws and what they play—this is you interacting with your environment. The things that happen to you are partly your doing (i.e., the plays you make) and the world in which you interact (i.e., the plays your opponent makes). This adds an important variable. You don't control what they do and, furthermore, what they do depends on what they know and what type of upbringing they have had. In SCRABBLE®, you do have a little control over the opponent's options—you can trade

"bad" letters back or block a bonus square (some squares give extras, like "double word score," if they are covered on one's play). Also, if you think you can get away with it,

you can try a phony word. If your opponent doesn't challenge it, then it, and its points, stand. How many of us have cut corners in life (e.g., jumping ahead in line, getting a friend to pull strings to get us a job, etc.)? There are risks in "stepping outside of the grain," but one decides when they are worth it.

In the end, you are trying to win by getting the most points. You might be way behind or you might be well ahead at some point. Believe me, this is no guarantee of anything. Most SCRABBLE® games played at the highest levels consist of 12-14 plays. That is all you have to try and come out on top. Ultimately, SCRABBLE® is a game with a very interesting balance of luck and skill, but one has to play the tiles that one draws—i.e., you live with the "cards that you are dealt." Tournament-going Scrabblers probably see each tournament as an opportunity to "live again," starting from scratch. The one thing you can count on, however, is that even if you lose all your games, and miss all your "bingos," you will wake up the next morning and your non-SCRABBLE® life will probably not have changed. Reality sets in but the thrill was worth the stress and ample preparation. May all your tiles be blanks—i.e., you get to decide whatever letter you want! (Next week, I'll prepare a summary of this year's National Championship, so till next time ...)



A finished game that was a losing board for the author



The players in Dayton

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