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A BRIEF HISTORY OF Scrabble

By M.J. Stephey | Sunday, Dec. 07, 2008

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It's a "mockable emblem of Eisenhower-era family values, a stand-in for geekiness, a pastime so decidedly unhip that it's hip," former Wall Street *Journal* reporter Stefan Fatsis once wrote about the best-selling board game Scrabble, which turned 60 on Tuesday. Fatsis would know: while researching *Word Freak*, his bestselling 2001 book about the game's most fanatical players, he became a self-proclaimed word freak himself, and he's not alone. More than 150 million Scrabble sets have been sold in 121 countries since its creation in 1931.



Leon Neal / AFP / Getty

Madonna and Martha Stewart love it, as do Barack Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Keanu Reeves and "Junk Bond King" Michael Milken, who organized a Scrabble tournament in the early 1990s at the white-collar prison where he was serving time for securities fraud. Even Queen Elizabeth II is a fan, perhaps in part because her first son was born the very same year that "Scrabble" became a trademark. (That coincidence did not go unnoticed in Britain. An artist commemorated the 60th birthday of Prince Charles *and* the board game by creating a portrait of the Prince entirely composed of Scrabble tiles.) In countries like Senegal, Scrabble is an official sport. In fact, when Senegal hosted the French Scrabble World championship this summer, its government commissioned a special Scrabble song to mark the occasion. (See the 50 best inventions of 2008.)

Scrabble.

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Scrabble was conceived during the Great Depression by an unemployed New York architect named Alfred Mosher Butts, who figured Americans could use a bit of distraction during the bleak economic times. After determining what he believed were the most enduring games in history — board games, numbers games like dice or cards and letter games like crossword puzzles — he combined all three. He then chose the frequency and the distribution of the tiles by counting letters on the pages of the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. For more than a decade he tweaked and tinkered with the rules while trying — and continually failing — to attract a corporate sponsor. The Patent Office rejected his application not once, but twice, and on top of that, he couldn't settle on a name. At first he simply called his creation "it" before switching to "Lexiko," then "Criss-Cross Words."

When a New Yorker named James Brunot contacted Butts about mass-producing the game, he readily handed the operation over. Brunot's contributions were significant: he came up with the iconic color scheme (pastel pink, baby-blue, indigo and bright red), devised the 50-point bonus for using all seven tiles to make a word, and conceived the name "Scrabble." The first Scrabble factory was an abandoned schoolhouse in rural Connecticut, where Brunot and several gracious friends manufactured 12 games an hour. When the chairman of Macy's discovered the game on vacation and decided to stock his shelves with it, the game exploded. By 1952, Brunot's homegrown assembly line was churning out more than 2,000 sets a week. Nearly 4 million Scrabble sets were sold in 1954 alone.

In 1971, Brunot and Butts sold the game's rights to a company called Selchow & Righter. Butts received a total of \$265,000 in royalties; Brunot got nearly \$1.5 million. Coleco Industries Inc. took over after Selchow collapsed in the 1980s and when Coleco went bankrupt, Hasbro Inc. swooped in. In 1994, scandal rocked the Scrabblesphere when Hasbro announced plans to remove nearly 200 words deemed too offensive for the official Scrabble dictionary. The list of words ranged from ethnic slurs to playground phrases like "turd," "fart" and "fatso." Hasbro eventually compromised and published two officially sanctioned dictionaries — one for "recreational and school play" and the other for official tournaments and clubs; the latter contains a total of 120,302 words, dirty ones included.

Scrabble has been translated into 22 languages, from Arabic to Afrikaans. Oddly, the game is sold outside the U.S. by Hasbro's rival, Mattel Inc. By the early 1990s, thanks to its acquisitions of Milton Bradley (maker of Life, Yahtzee and Candy Land) and Parker Brothers (Monopoly, Risk and Trivial Pursuit), Hasbro owned more than half of the \$1.1 billion U.S. games market. But in 1993, Mattel outbid Hasbro, paying \$90 million for the international rights to the game. Hence the game's weirdly bifurcated homepage at [Scrabble.com](#).

The Scrabble soap opera went viral earlier this year when both Hasbro and Mattel filed lawsuits against two brothers from Calcutta for launching "Scrabulous," their own online version of the popular word game. Created in



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and Rajat Agarwalla, had a quick and clever response to the accusations of copyright infringement. Their newly dubbed "WordScraprer" now features a malleable board that, if one feels so inclined, can be rearranged to form the original Scrabble board.

Even so, Facebook users were distraught, as evidenced by community groups like "Please God, I Have So Little: Don't Take Scrabulous Too." But last week, perhaps as an early birthday gift, Hasbro Inc. announced it had dropped its half of the lawsuits against the Agarwalla brothers. For players in the U.S. and Canada, at least, things are looking ... well, Scrabulous.

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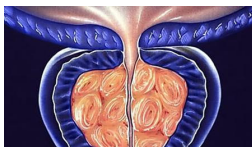
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