

Student's First and Last Name

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### A Game for Hardscrabble Times

*The Guardian* article "Spell Bound" notes that the exact beginning of Scrabble is "debatable," adding that "Scrabble experts are the kind of people who like to debate it at length." In a piece of writing such as this--one that begins at the beginning of the game--the starting point could be Lexico, which is the game that Alfred Mosher Butts developed before he invented Scrabble--which, by the way, wasn't named Scrabble until Butts sold the game to Jacob Brunot. That's when the game that Butts had christened Criss-Cross Words became the game that would multiply to more than 150 million sets worldwide, a game that can now be found in a third of homes in America (Bukspan 16).

If that description of Scrabble's beginnings doesn't capture your interest, perhaps because you don't think of yourself as a word person, consider this: Scrabble's inventor wasn't a word person either. Butts was fascinated by games of all sorts and saw word games as the category that offered the most opportunities for innovation. For him, that innovation meant creating a game in which the frequency of letters corresponded with their frequency in the English language. As part of his research, he documented how often each letter appeared on the front page of the newspaper. *E* is most common, so there are twelve *E*'s in Scrabble but only one tile for each of the rarest of letters: *J*, *K*, *Q*, *X*, and *Z*. For many players, including me, part of Scrabble's appeal is the combination of skill and luck. Word power alone won't win the game. You don't know which letters you will draw or which seven letter tiles are on your opponent's

rack. And for many players, another source of the game's appeal is its synthesis of crosswords and anagrams.

Since creating words from anagrams is a process of letter scrambling, James Brunot may have chosen the name Scrabble in part for its similarity to *scramble*, but the word *scrabble* itself is apt for a game that often requires players to struggle (or scrabble) to make a word from a seemingly impossible combination of tiles. It's notable, too, that Scrabble's beginnings date to the 1930s, when its inventor was an out-of-work architect. He wanted to create a diversion from the dark days of the Depression. Now it's a game that many of us have returned to, pantomiming the ghosts of those first-generation players. Once again, it's a game for hardscrabble times.

#### Works Cited

Bukszpan, David. *Is That a Word?: From AA to ZZZ, the Weird and Wonderful Language of Scrabble*. Chronicle, 2012.

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