ANNALS OF GAMES

SPREADING THE WORD

The new Scrabble mania.

BY JUDITH THURMAN

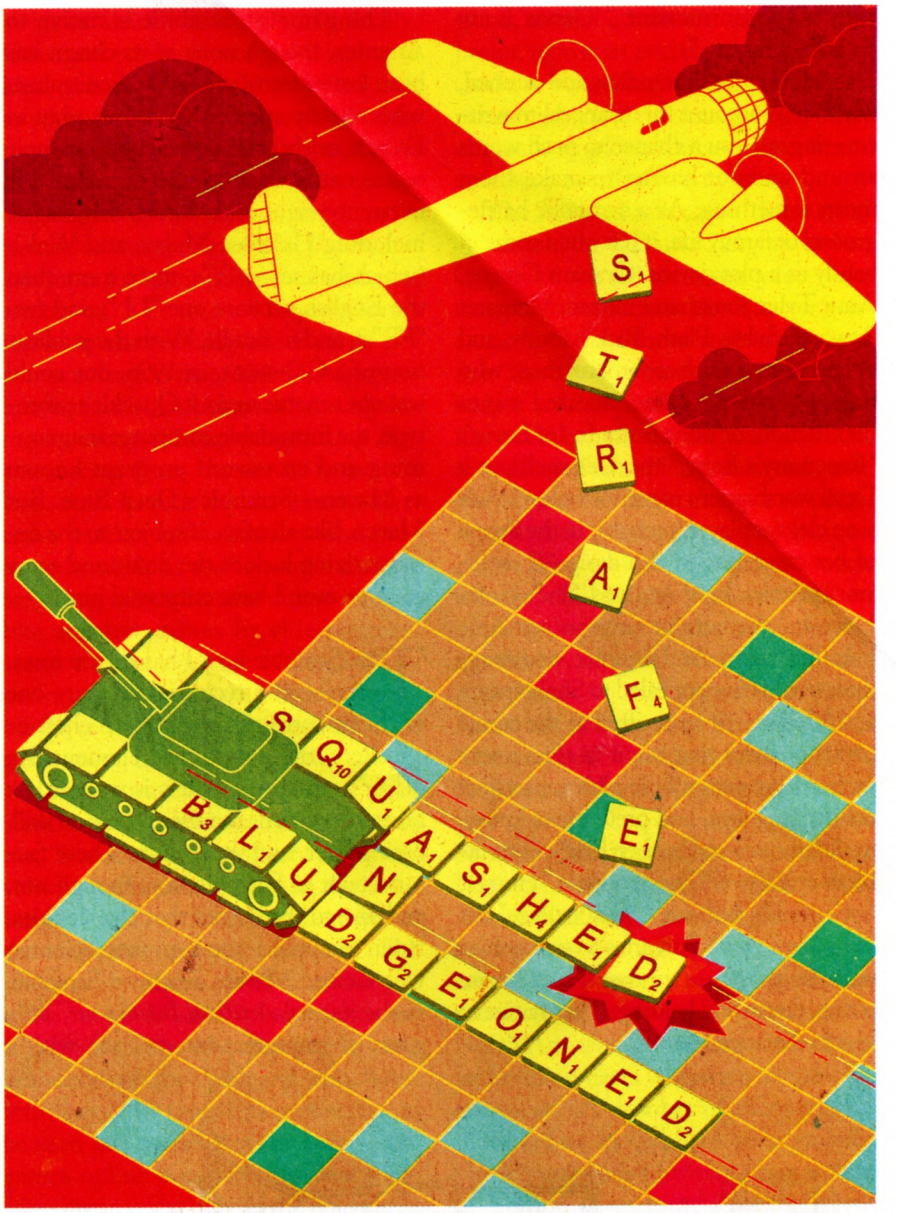
The 2008 Big Apple Scrabble Tournament took place on a weekend in early October. Meg Wolitzer, the novelist, had signed up for the three-day event with her son, Charlie Panek, a thirteen-year-old eighth grader who was competing in Division 4, the lowest tier, but was holding his own against adult rivals. His mother, in Division 3, invited me to watch them play their final games, and we arrived at the venue, a loft on lower Fifth Avenue, a little before nine o'clock on Sunday morning. A light rain was falling, and the Avenue had been closed to traffic for the Pulaski Day parade. A high-school marching band from New Jersey, wearing Polish folk costumes, was disembarking from a tour bus with a clatter of drums and cymbals. "Uh-oh," Wolitzer said anxiously. "Oompah music—just what we needed."

Players were drifting in from a hearty breakfast at the Comfort Diner, on West Twenty-third Street, armed with leftover carbohydrates. The diner's owner, Ira Freehof, runs the tournament. His assistant director, Joel Sherman, a wiry bachelor from the Bronx known as G.I. Joel, is a legendary player and a former world champion who figures prominently in "Word Freak," a pungently written best-seller by Stefan Fatsis about the competitive Scrabble subculture. (Sherman's nickname refers to the soundtrack of gastrointestinal disturbances that often punctuate his games.) When Wolitzer introduced us, Sherman covered his ears with both hands and huddled near a wall. "I have sinusitis," he said. "You're distracting me. Go away." Later in the afternoon, we had a cordial chat about his role as the "official adjudicator," but he was hard to draw out. "Socializing is a challenge for a lot of us in the Scrabble community," John Chew, the tournament's Webmaster, noted tactfully. At that moment, we heard a scream, followed by a thud, and a young woman fell to the floor, apparently having a convulsion. A few people rushed over to help, but she turned out to be convulsed, for obscure reasons, with hilarity.

The room was a bright rectangle crowded with tables arranged hierarchically. Wolitzer and her son found their places in "steerage," as she put it. Once the games began, a hush fell, and players hunched over their boards. The tension and the brainpower were palpable. Tiles rustled in cloth bags, and I watched as a top-seeded player laid "pealike," using all seven letters—a "bingo"—which his opponent countered with another bingo, "cr[e]olise." Chew and his colleague Sherrie Saint John—anchors of a live Webcast—took the time to point out a few celebrities. Saint John whispered, "The guy with the red hair, taking notes and shaking his head at careless moves, is Adam Logan, a world champion. Like Joel, Adam doesn't talk much, but he went to Princeton at sixteen. Over there is Sal Piro, the president of the 'Rocky Horror Picture Show' fan club, playing with Frank Tangredi, who wrote an Off Broadway play. The handsome Latino guy to his right is Winter." Winter, a software engineer, just goes by one name. He is the subject of a documentary about his quest to visit every Starbucks on the planet. He told me, "I plot my itineraries to dovetail with Scrabble tournaments. So far, I've been to about eighty-nine hundred branches."

Wonkish misfits with awesome powers of recall, most of them male, seemed to dominate Division 1, and, during a break, I met John O'Laughlin, the baby-faced genius who designed Quackle—a Scrabble computer program that, Saint John said, "thinks almost like a human, which can't be said of everyone here." But Robin Pollock Daniel did not fit the mold. She is a chic blond Gestalt therapist from Toronto, and the highest-ranked female player in North America. While I was watching, she "bingoed out"

(emptying her rack to win with a seven-letter coup de grâce, "bli[n]dgut"), and whooped for joy. A little crowd gathered to congratulate her. A few feet away, however, the great Joe Edley didn't look up or even twitch. He is a three-time national champion, and one of the few players to have memorized the entire dictionary of official Scrabble terms (which, if you were wondering, accepts "blind gut" as one word). Some thirty years ago, he became enamored of "The Seth Material," a New Age text in eleven volumes that was supposedly dictated by Seth, an enlightened being, to Jane Roberts, a medium and psychic, who received the teachings while in a trance. Edley was inspired by Seth to realize his full human potential, and he chose to express it through Scrabble. Meditation and breathing exercises are part of his mental-fitness program. I hovered behind his chair (he has the posture of a yogi and the sang-froid of a Vulcan) while he replenished his rack. "Aneurin," "dentil," "wab," and "pavid" were already on the board, and he instantly played an arcane bingo: "residua." Most top players have day jobs—many in computer science and mathematics—but Edley is a full-time pro, who earns a living by consulting on and writing about the game and teaching workshops for beginners. "There is no point to playing Scrabble unless I make it a spiritual practice," he told me. "The secret is emotional control."



OTTO STEININGER

Charlie Panek is a third-generation Scrabble fiend. His mother still plays with her mother, the novelist Hilma Wolitzer, who is seventy-eight. If novel-writing runs in families, so does Scrabble addiction, and I was hooked at a tender age by my own mother, an English teacher who always hated to sacrifice a lovely word like "glaive" or "deodar" for a more prosaic play with a higher score. She was initiated by my uncle Roy. In 1949, the second year that Scrabble was on the market, 2,413 sets were sold, and Roy bought one of them. He sailed a schooner on Chesapeake Bay, and a friend at the marina had previously introduced him to Scrabble's precursor, Criss-Cross Words, which helped the old salts to while away their becalmed hours. After Roy died, I found the set in his den, with all the tiles—ninety-eight letters and two blanks—still accounted for. (He had kept it with his boating trophies and Army relics, including a Luger that he'd captured at El Alamein.) It has since helped me to while away many of my own becalmed hours. One summer, on a torrid afternoon in Carl Schurz Park, the worn tiles, like a saint's femur, wrought a miracle: I trounced my opponent with the bingo of a lifetime: "bar[o]ques," worth three hundred and eleven points. (It spanned two triple-word squares, with the "q" on a double letter.)

Scrabble is enjoying a second heyday. The first was in the early nineteen-fifties, when demand for sets outstripped production. (In 1954, an advertisement in this magazine showed a wedding party stampeding from a church; the bride explains to the baffled clergyman that the toy shop next door has a new shipment.) Between one and two million sets are sold yearly; one in every three American households is reported to own one; and thirty thousand new games are said to begin, somewhere in the world, every hour. Players of note are a heterogeneous confraternity that includes Barack Obama, the Queen of England, Madonna, Igor Stravinsky, Rosie O'Donnell, Duke Ellington, Nora Ephron, Meadow Soprano, Dustin Hoffman, Justin Timberlake, Chris Martin, Maya Angelou, Carol Burnett, Richard Nixon, and Ludacris, who plays "hip-hop" Scrabble, using words like "crunk," "hizzo," and "pajawa"—a version of the "dirty" Scrabble that was popular with Hollywood swingers fifty years ago. (I heard one of their ancient

jokes at the tournament: " 'Cervix' is my favorite opening.")

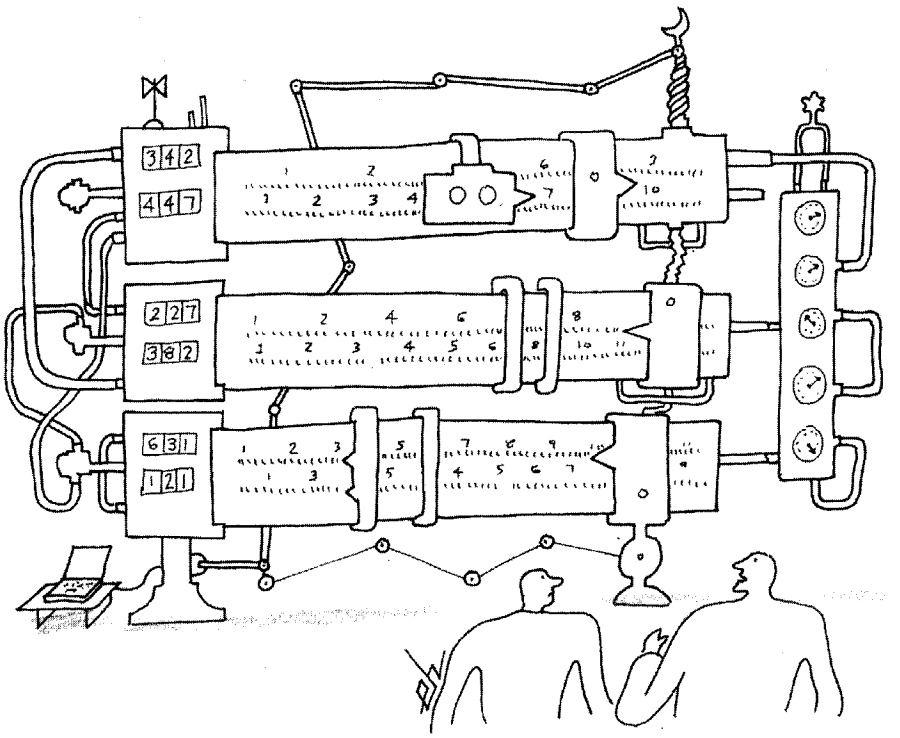
Scrabble is both mindless and cerebral, which may account for its appeal to writers—it gives you a chance to push words around without having to make them mean something. As a symbolic battleground of family life, it has often come in handy as a plot device. Graham Greene, Anne Tyler, Jonathan Franzen, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, Rick Moody, and Patricia Highsmith are among those who have savored the game, injected it into their fiction, or done both. In Ira Levin's "Rosemary's Baby," the tiles spell out a Devil worshipper's name. Nabokov's Ada is an elegant player, probably in the image of her creator, who also designed crossword puzzles. In Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It," the heroine's suitors squabble over their board. And Scrabble, one imagines, would have appealed to Shakespeare and Molière—it lends itself to the comic comeuppances that occur at class intersections, where gullible plebeians affect courtly language, and pretentious know-it-alls are cornered by their bluffs. (In a famous episode of "The Simpsons," Homer, Springfield's Bottom, draws "oxidize" but plays "do," while Bart tries to sucker him with "kwyjibo"—a species of ape, he explains, dumb and balding, that's native to North America.)

The game of Scrabble is native to America, though none of its charm has been lost in translation. The Senegalese, who mostly speak Wolof but play in French, celebrate their Scrabble champions as national heroes. Sets are available in twenty-eight other foreign languages, including Hebrew, Malay, and Welsh (which has seven "Y"s, three more than the English version; one "LL"; and two "FF"s), and in Braille. With the publication of a CD-ROM, in 1996, one could test one's mettle against Quackle's prototype, the formidable computer anagramming and crossword program known as Maven—Scrabble's Deep Blue. But Maven, like all of us, is subject to the democratizing luck of the draw, and every so often even I have outplayed him.

The Scrabble board has fifteen rows, each with fifteen squares, sixty-one of them worth extra points. In chess or checkers, the only occult element is a player's strategy: checkers is won or lost primarily on concentration; chess on skill, brainpower, and aggression. These factors count in Scrabble, too, though not, perhaps, to the degree that chance does. Brian Sheppard, the computer scientist who created Maven, described Scrabble, in the journal *Artificial Intelligence*, as "a game of imperfect information with a large branching factor," which means that no one can precisely control or anticipate the changing shape of the word tree.

Sheppard, John O'Laughlin, and their peers have modelled Scrabble mathematically in an ongoing effort to create an invincible program, and most champions are likelier to have played on their high-school chess team than to have written for the newspaper. The National Scrabble Championship is an annual event that was held last year in Orlando. The winner, Nigel Richards, a forty-one-year-old New Zealander, took home a purse of twenty-five thousand dollars. He also won the biennial World Championship, which was last held in Mumbai, and is more prestigious, though less lucrative (first prize was fifteen grand), and in 2007 he won the Thailand International, the largest of the major contests, with eight thousand entrants. (The Thai government promotes Scrabble as a tool for learning English, although some Thai masters are famous for competing at the highest echelons without speaking or understanding much, if any, of the language, relying on eidetic memory and spatial intelligence. English is just a quarry for the playing chips.)

Top competitors, whatever country they represent, subject themselves, like Olympic athletes, to gruelling training regimens—mostly with speed anagramming and memory exercises that employ flash cards. No one rises through the ranks of his local and national Scrabble associations without doing "alphagram" drills (mastering a long list of commonly occurring letter combinations that contain multiple bingos); memorizing the "vowel dumps" ("aalii," "aerate," "aioli," et al.) that help to clear out an unpropitious rack; and learning the hundred and one two-letter words ("aa" to "za"), along with their common "hooks" ("ex," for example, has seven front hooks: "dex," "hex," "kex," etc., while "ta" has sixteen back hooks—"tab," "taj," etc.). Also essential is a knowledge of scientific terminology; variant spellings ("wangun"/"wanigan"); high-scoring slang words ("zin," "tranq," "mojo"); exclamations ("jeez," "huic," "yucch"); eccentric plurals (one "pirog," but two "piroghi"/"pirogen"); archaic past tenses ("throve," "thriven"); units of weight or currency—a fertile category ("jiao," "qursh," "vatu," and "zloty," among doz-



"Well, it's as we suspected—twelve inches equals a foot."

ens); and admissible letters of a foreign alphabet ("kaph," "peh," and "fe," all Hebrew, but I could go on). "*Mens sana in corpore sano*" may not be Scrabble's motto, but there are many odd deities on Olympus, and any virtuoso who can unscramble a fifteen-letter anagram in a minute or two, mentally, as Sherman, Edley, and Logan can, deserves a niche there. (You can try one of the words that humbled, but also hooked, Stefan Fatsis, who started his research as an embedded reporter and became a combatant: "megachiropteran." Your time is up—it's "cinematographer.")

Crazes behave like epidemics, but in Scrabble's case the bug has never died out, and the Internet has revived its potency. Toward the end of 2000, games.com, a site then owned by Atari, which was owned by Hasbro, which controls the rights to Scrabble in North America (Mattel owns the trademark for the rest of the world), offered one of the first interactive, multiplayer versions of the game, and it was suddenly possible, at whatever hour, to find a partner, or to make a foursome, and to join a community of besotted logophiles from every continent. (A number of Scrabble clubs also hosted games, and still do, including The Pixie Pit, a British site, and ISC.ro, which is frequented by Joel Sherman and many other cognoscenti.) I have probably met more interesting strangers playing online Scrabble than I have in a lifetime of travel to exotic places. A Ghanaian taxi-driver from Brooklyn invited me to Prospect Park, where his Scrabble club held weekend tournaments. A tattoo artist in Alberta surprised me, between plays, with her knowledge of Gerard Manley Hopkins. An Oxford don beat me soundly, but so did a used-car salesman. I have played Aussies and New Zealanders (Scrabble is popular in the antipodes), an impertinent prodigy who confessed to being eleven, a cardsharp in Las Vegas, a lawyer in Bangalore who traded places with his wife for the endgame ("She's the family closer," he said), a corgi breeder, and a Jane Austen fan ("elizabennet"), who added a few words that Jane never used—"feeb," "ottar," "vas," and "zineb"—to my vocabulary.

A virtual board is identical to the horizontal model. The computer randomly assigns the tiles, and you can swap or shuffle them electronically. Once you register, your point rating (a kind of batting average) is posted next to your screen name. It is calculated by the system used to seed competitors in club and tournament play, where games are weighted, so that you forfeit more points for losing to a weaker player, and win more for beating someone who outranks you. The urge to improve one's status in the pecking order easily becomes a fixation that sometimes inspires unsportsmanlike behavior: downloading an anagramming program, or disconnecting from the server to avert a loss. And here I should like to alert those parents and educators who promote Scrabble as a wholesome exercise for young minds that the online version, like amphetamines or video games, seems to induce a state of fiendish hyperfocus in susceptible subjects. ScrabbleBlitz (high-speed Scrabble), on games.com, transformed Nora Ephron, she wrote, into a "teenage boy." The *Times* columnist Deborah Solomon told me, "I used to be a productive individual who read serious fiction in the hours before I went to sleep. But that was in the innocent, un-Scrabbled past." She plays every night on ISC under the screen name Duchamp—a nod to the French Dadaist, who claimed to have renounced art for chess, and who, Solomon says, "in that sense, deserves to be seen as a pioneer of the ruined-by-games online present." My own ruination became apparent to me one morning, as dawn was breaking, after an all-night marathon with a regular partner who called himself qatmandu ("qat" is one of eleven admissible "q" words without a "u"). Careless with exhaustion, I failed to block a triple-letter score that permitted him to exit with a game-cinching, fifty-point play: "xi" and "xu." ("Xi" is a Greek letter; "xu" is a monetary unit of Vietnam.)

In 2004, a new gaming site, quadplex.com, began offering free Scrabble, and among its habitués were two plump, bookish brothers in Calcutta—Rajat and Jayant Agarwalla—who were twenty-three and eighteen, respectively. They grew up in an extended Marwari family (the Marwaris are famous traders), and, in 2000, Rajat, who has a business degree from the University of Bradford, in England, started a software company that Jayant, who is an avid tournament player (India is a Scrabble hotbed), joined as a partner when he finished college. They originally employed three engineers, and now have a staff of twenty-five.

The Agarwallas became "distraught," Jayant told the Calcutta *Telegraph*, when Quadplex started charging a fee—like many of their peers in the Napster generation, the brothers ardently believe that "the contents on the Internet should be free as far as possible so people across the world benefit from them." In 2005, they decided to implement a word game identical to Scrabble in most respects, which they originally called Bingo-Binge. Too many bugs, and too much volume, crashed the Web site, and an improved version of the program, renamed Scrabulous, was released later that year. At the suggestion of an American user, Jayant said, the brothers "checked out" Facebook, and, in 2007, they launched a Scrabulous application that quickly became Facebook's most popular game. It is widely rumored that Hasbro offered to pay ten million dollars for it, although the company denies having done so, and, in July, it sued for copyright infringement. Facebook was pressured to disable the application in North America, infuriating some of the half million users who were logging on every day. (A number of them argued that Hasbro should have been grateful to the Agarwallas for recruiting a new generation of customers for the travel sets, custom editions, tile jewelry, and other Scrabble merchandise and paraphernalia on the market.) Mattel, meanwhile, had pursued legal action in India. In late September, the Delhi High Court ruled in the brothers' favor: it was legitimate to clone the Scrabble board for online play, so long as its name didn't capitalize on the trademark. Scrabulous has since become Lexulous. It is played with eight tiles, and the bonus squares have been rearranged. As of this writing, the Web site and the Facebook application are up and running, in competition with an authorized Scrabble application designed by Electronic Arts. Jayant told me via e-mail that his lawyers had advised him to make no comment while Mattel's appeal is pending. (Hasbro dropped its suit in December.) He and Rajat continue to collect ad rev-

enues from their site. They have, however, professed innocence of any intent to trespass on intellectual property, casting their enterprise as a public service.

Before Lexulous, Scrabulous, Scrabble, and Criss-Cross Words, there was a game called Lexiko. It was invented during the Depression by Alfred Mosher Butts, a young architect from New York. (If there were a Nobel Prize for relieving the ennui of adolescence, family life, unhappy marriages, happy marriages, and the Friday after Thanksgiving, he would deserve it.) Butts lost twenty dollars on Lexiko the first year he was in business. He eventually earned about a million dollars in royalties from Scrabble, and kept track of every penny, Fatsis writes, using some of it to buy back an ancestral farmhouse near Poughkeepsie, but he was never resentful of the vastly greater profits that accrued to others. (One has the feeling that he wouldn't have bothered to sue the Agarwallas.)

When Butts's architectural firm downsized, in 1931, and he was laid off, he took stock of his mental assets, and decided to invent a game. The idea for Lexiko came to him while reading "The Gold Bug," a story by Edgar Allan Poe, in which the hero decodes a cipher that protects the hiding place of a pirate treasure by correlating its symbols with the alphabet. Butts realized that the key to Lexiko would be a formula for distributing the vowels and consonants, and assigning them point values, that represented their relative frequency in educated English usage. In the course of his research, he hand-computed every letter in every word on the pages of several newspapers, primarily the *Times*. The Scrabble letter count is a tribute both to his genius and to his doggedness. A more generous allotment of "S"s or blanks, for example, would have made the game too easy, and a stingier allotment of "E"s, "A"s, and "R"s would have made it too discouraging. With only four "U"s, the "Q" is a potential albatross but also, with a value of ten points, a potential bonanza. If you try to play English Scrabble with a French set, you begin to appreciate how much finesse and calculation Butts's feat required.

Butts, by his own admission, wasn't a good speller, and he was always happy when his Scrabble score reached the humble benchmark of three hundred points. (The highest individual score on record is eight hundred and thirty.) His wife, Nina, a former schoolteacher—she had, in fact, been Alfred's teacher—is said to have outplayed him. But the couple's matches helped Butts to tinker with the game's design. He added the board, the blanks, and the colored premium squares that doubled or tripled words and letters, and he changed the name to Criss-Cross Words, in 1938. The big game companies, however, rebuffed his overtures, and the U.S. Patent Office twice rejected his applications.

By word of mouth, Criss-Cross Words began to acquire a small fan base, and Washington, D.C., where my uncle Roy spent his shore life, was one of its epicenters. Butts made the sets in his living room, and sold them by mail order—at two dollars each, plus a quarter for shipping. Friends did the product testing, and gave him their critiques. He also organized Criss-Cross socials at his parish church, in Jackson Heights, Queens. One of the testers, a social worker, gave a copy of the game to James Brunot, who had served under President Roosevelt, as the executive director of the War Relief Control Board. Brunot was ready for a new career, and, in 1947, he approached Butts with a business plan: he would assume responsibility for the manufacturing and the marketing of the game and pay Butts a royalty. Alfred accepted—he was tired of his unprofitable cottage industry, and his firm had rehired him.

Brunot made some minor changes to the board and to the rules, notably adding a fifty-point bonus for using all seven letters. He and his wife also came up with a catchier name. But Scrabble was a sleeper until 1952, when Jack Straus, the chairman of Macy's, who had discovered the game while on vacation, placed a big order, which triggered an avalanche. Brunot, his wife, and a small staff of workers had been making the sets in a converted schoolhouse in Connecticut, but they couldn't keep up with the demand. He licensed Scrabble to Selchow & Righter, the company that owned Parcheesi (which was later sold to Coleco Industries, which went bankrupt and was acquired by Hasbro in 1989). By 1954, Fatsis writes, "an astounding 3,798,555 units of Scrabble were sold." (Total sales are now estimated to be more than a hundred million sets, in twenty-one countries.) David Riley, the director of the NPD Group, a market-research company that tracks the toy and game industry, described Scrabble to me as "one of the greatest success stories in the business." He added, "New dolls, stuffed animals, action figures, and lawn games are fads that come and go, but Scrabble, like Monopoly, is an evergreen."

Until last spring, when I fell off the wagon and registered my old nom de guerre on scrabulous.com, I hadn't played Scrabble for a year, except once, at a ski lodge, with an old friend, on my uncle's set—I'd sworn off the Net. The new site took some getting used to. Some of its features were appealing—you could, for example, set your dictionary preference. At a hundred and seventy-eight thousand six hundred and ninety-one words, the Tournament Word List (TWL), used in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Thailand, is considerably shorter than SOWPODS, the combined American and British tournament word list (two hundred and sixty-seven thousand seven hundred and fifty-one words), which is used everywhere else that Scrabble is played in English. Games.com automatically censored slurs, curses, and profanities. Not every player was happy to be deprived of versatile little score-enhancers like "wog," "spic," "jew" (the verb), "lez," "goy," "honky," "cunt," "darkie," and "fuck." Even the chat box blocked bad language, and some of the best players were super-friendly evangelicals whom I met late at night, perhaps resisting more carnal temptations. Temptation takes many forms, however, and loitering in a "lobby"—an entrance foyer where one waits for a "table"—before leaving it to pair off with a perfect stranger isn't unlike cruising a mixer. You size up potential partners by their ratings and their screen names—a mask tells something about the face behind it.

At games.com, the matches were untimed, and sometimes one got stuck with a dawdler. My favorite partners, however, shared my traditional view that fifty minutes, the length of a tournament game, was just brisk enough and just leisurely

enough to make the most of one's tiles. (I doubt that I could have found some of my proudest bingos—"ki[n]gpins," "reovir[u]s," and "tequila"—had I been rushed.) At lexulous.com, you can choose a practice game against the computer, although, compared with Maven or Quackle, the Agarwallas' digital mastermind is a nitwit who leaves the triple-word scores undefended, offers lame hints, misses bingos, and squanders the blanks, and whom I beat at least half the time. Most people, however, seem to prefer a ten-minute quickie, and it took me a while to realize that some of my perkiest opponents were actually "coffeehousing"—trying to rattle my concentration by keeping up a steady stream of banter while the clock was ticking.

Facebook is a place for more desultory encounters, live or delayed, single or several at a time, some lasting all day, some for a month, with players making a word whenever the spirit moves them. (A monthlong game of Scrabble, in my opinion, is about as appealing as a monthlong sex act.) The young have always mocked their elders by throwing time away, and Scrabulous became notorious among employers as a waster of man-hours. Last year, a YouTube takeoff by Kreole Parody, set to the tune of Fergie's "Glamorous," captured the anarchic thrill. The song spawned parodies of the parody, including a video that featured a coy, scantily clad Fergie imitator furtively playing Scrabulous in her office cubicle; hiding her board from a prissy supervisor with a handlebar mustache; and, supine on a bed, receiving a shower of tiles, like a hip-hop Danaë. Another video nicely sums up the phenomenon: "Used to do all kinds of shit, all I do is type and sit." But, as Jayant Agarwalla pointed out, some players can't do much more than type and sit: they are the housebound, the elderly, or the disabled, for whom, as he put it, the game is "their only window to the world."

My own obsession has often made me a willing recluse. Until the CD-ROM went on sale, powered by Maven, I used to keep in form between matches by playing Scrabble solitaire at the kitchen table. The greatest drawback was that I couldn't bluff myself by laying a "phony" (a plausible but nonexistent word like "pukha" or "burlock"), or by deliberately misspelling a common noun ("fettel") to lure an opponent into making it plural, then challenging it off the board—a legitimate if churlish ploy. In some games, I assigned the racks different strategic functions or personalities—the tortoise and the hare, logic and intuition—one hand playing fast and free, and the other with cool deliberation. When my son was little, this spectacle troubled him. "You're a schizo," he once told me, proud of his fancy insult, and shaking his head sadly at the score pad, which had page after page of columns marked "J1" and "J2." One day, he may appreciate that "schizo" is worth eight points more than "cervix" if you can open with it. ♦

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Judith Thurman talks about Scrabble.