Why Scrabble® is Such a Great Game

Words and anagrams, strategy, elements of luck and risk, intriguing possibilities and calculated probabilities, elegant geometry, and, in the end, the ability to measure one's skill at putting it all together in quiet, yet intense, competition against another. That, in a nutshell, is what attracts so many to this game. Add the social interaction afforded by clubs and tournaments and the pure fun of playing with words, and it's hard to find a game with more appeal. No two games are ever the same, even between the same opponents who may play each other hundreds or thousands of times over a lifetime.

Granted, it's not for the simple-minded or weak of constitution. To be good, one must study a lot, play a lot and find a way to handle the oh-so-annoying vagaries of the game. While it's true that, in the long run, the best players win most often, it's also true that, in the short run, almost anything can happen. A stronger player always starts with an advantage over a weaker player, but that advantage can be overcome by a bit of luck.

In that sense, the game is more like poker than like chess, where the stronger player almost always wins. Yet, the luck element is not nearly as capricious as in poker. In Scrabble®, a player can, with judicious choices and occasional exchanges, shift the luck factor back in their favor; never completely, but often enough to make the study effort worthwhile. Luck of the draw is a factor, but nowhere near as much as in poker.

In another sense, the game is more like chess, because there is complex strategy associated with beginning, mid-game and endgame play. Good decisions depend on having at least an intuitive grasp, or even better, a mathematical handle on what's likely to happen in any given position. Tracking the letters played, choosing one play over another because it offers a better opportunity on the next turn, knowing the most probable letters you can draw out of the bag, when to defend versus when to open offensive opportunities – these are the types of considerations good players ponder on every play, all within quite restrictive time limits. Each player gets 25 minutes per game, to use as they wish. Speedy thinking is a definite advantage.

Still, in the end, Scrabble is a game of words. Words are the game pieces that players must manipulate to maximum advantage. Each game starts with the same 100 tiles, with the same letter distribution as the previous game. As such, the game lends itself to statistical analysis and probability calculations, yet always applied to real words that are used in our language. One doesn't need to know the meanings of any of the words played (witness some of the great foreign players who speak little English). Yet, with every definition one takes the trouble to learn, cultural understanding and the ability to communicate becomes a little better. Not many games can make that claim.