Scrabble Can Build or Break Friendship

My Sunday morning began with a Wall Street Journal article about Scrabble. The story, which featured scrappy young Nigerian players, underdog victories, and applications driving the most rigorous systematic analysis of the game to date, decided that the future of Scrabble lay in defensive play. It was one of the saddest, most depressing articles I've encountered this week—and utterly in keeping with social trends toward cynicism and narrow self-interest.

We haven't always played Scrabble in our house, but it's always been around. I grew up poor—the kind of poor where you eat meat twice a week, and beans are a good source of protein, and you get invisible Christmas presents, and your black and white television craps out when you're five years old and you don't get a replacement until you're ten—a 12-inch screen. No cable, just antennae, which would pick up signals better in certain areas than in others.

I grew up "poor" rather than "in poverty." My parents were both well educated artists. Our (small) apartment was filled with books and wooden blocks and board games like Scrabble. And poetry (my mother was a poet) and music (my father was a classical guitarist). Furthermore, during the day, my surroundings were safe and engaging—we lived in a rural area, on the Connecticut shore. There are crucial differences between being poor and living in poverty, and one of the most important is the sense of limitation or despair that attends impoverished conditions—I did not see my world as being bounded or limited by possibility.

Still, the lack of toys, television, and infinite disposable physical energy meant that our family tended to play board and card games or listen to music as a means of recreation. And so

as soon as my sister and I were old enough, we played Scrabble with our parents.

Playing Scrabble together opens up space for competition within a framework of cooperation

Our first games weren’t great—low-scoring contests normally won by my father or mother, who'd routinely net over 200 points. Nothing impressive. We rarely exceeded 450 points total. Breaking 100 was considered good for me or my sister. We didn’t know how to play, didn’t know the words, the techniques, the strategies. Too, the game began to grow unpleasantly competitive when I and then my sister reached High School—we became invested in winning, to the detriment of the game itself.

When I hit college, though, Scrabble came into its own as the family game par excellence. This was due to an observation made by a girlfriend at the time. Following a victory of mine, she pointed out that because the group had failed to break 500 points, collectively we had all lost. At first I thought this

was motivated by spite. Later, though, she directed my attention to the inside of the box, upon which the rules were printed. Sure enough, the language on the box stated quite clearly that 500 points was the score four average, amateur Scrabble players should reasonably be expected to achieve.

This changed the game for me, and for my family and friends. The implication was clear: playing Scrabble, which I'd always viewed as a winner-take all, zero-sum game, had a team component. If one player scored 496 points and the other three each managed (somehow) to score 1, and that one player won, but the combined total for the game was 499, then collectively, the group had failed to measure up to the "average" for a game of four players: 500. This meant that according to the game's own logic, while one should be aiming for the best score possible, one should also be looking to ensure everyone else was maximizing their scores, up to a certain point. In other words: Scrabble is a game about competition within a framework of cooperation. The essence of Scrabble is not doing everything one can to defeat one's opponents, but rather to defeat them within a matrix of collaboration. It would not be an exaggeration to point out that this lesson, which I first understood playing Scrabble as a young man, has been salutary for other areas of my life. Winning a friendly post-prandial competition or losing in a broader winning effort became equally enjoyable pursuits.

Our scores quickly reflected this. From struggling to break 500, my family routinely scored in the 600-750 point range. The winner was the person who played the best words in the best places—but that distinction applied more or less equally to myself, my parents, and my sister. We learned more words through competition, and were able to push the boundaries of the game, while blossoming within its framework. Risking more in the context of succeeding at the game was elevating our individual and collective game to new heights—we weren't risking less in an effort to dominate, or to win. By

cooperating, all of our scores were increasing. All of us were winning. One might view that as sportsmanship.

I’m glad that Nigerian iconoclasts have demonstrated that they can defeat their former colonial occupiers in an equal contest of wits. That seems important on its own, a useful lesson for all who might erroneously believe in an essential cultural or social hierarchy. As an American, I’m not a huge fan of Great Britain—not in the past, not in the present—and usually happy to watch them lose to the people they exploited for so long, under almost any circumstances. I will say this: Scrabble is best as a pedagogical tool encouraging friendship and mutually-supportive growth, not as a means of recreating intellectual trench warfare. I hope these Nigerian Scrabble players continue to win—but also that this victory does not come at the expense of Scrabble’s best and finest attributes: its capacity to encourage a conception of the common good.