

# Smarter and simple Scrabble strategy

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Scrabble is an old classic game, fairly easy to learn, but really difficult to be great in. How to play the game of Scrabble is a well studied problem. In comparison to other classical games such as *Chess* or *Checkers*, it is much more difficult to be a successful player of Scrabble due to a number of factors where the random component is considered to be the most affecting. The classic games can usually be placed in two categories; either *deterministic* games och *non-deterministic* games.

**Deterministic** A game is deterministic if the players have all possible information about the state of the game, and possible future states.

**Non-deterministic** In contrast to a deterministic game, a non-deterministic game does not let the players now all information about the game's current or future states.

The main factor contributing to the difficulty of Scrabble is the randomness. Players do not have control over what tiles will be handed to them, which leads to each game being unique. Naturally, it is not obvious in which category Scrabble belongs. The first instinct would be to categorize it as non-deterministic, since the players do not have all information about the tiles of the opponent, nor the tiles in the bag. Though after further reflections it can be established that when all the tiles in the bag are picked up, there is a situation where the player could figure out the complete information scope of the current state of the game. This, of course, requires the players to possess all knowledge about how many tiles of each letter exist in the game.

## 1.1 Problem statement

The game require the players to have a good vocabulary and keeping an extra eye on which letter tiles that have already been placed and those who award the most points. Keeping a good balance between consonant and vocals on hand is a key to able to master the next move. Its important to score bonus and prevent to opponent doing the same, by avoiding placing tiles that opens up a bonus square.

This gives the player many factors to take in consideration every time a move is to be made. Such factors are; words that generate higher scores, bonus tiles etc.

If there were to be a strategy where only one of these factors would be considered, which one would be the most rewarding? This study aims to investigate which of these factors has the bigger impact when one is reaching for a win. Three different programmed agents with three different objectives will play against each other in order to show results and let us determine the most preferable strategy.

## 1.2 Acronyms

DAWG Directed acyclic word graph.

HSW High score word player.

BS Bonus square player.

BOR Balance on rack player.

# Chapter 2

## Background

### 2.1 Scrabble

Scrabble was originally created by an american in the 1930s, and arrived in Sweden in 1954 according to Svenska Scrabblefrbundet [10].

The game rules are not too complicated; there can be from two up to four player playing. There is a set of tiles with letters in *tha bag*, from which each player is given from 5 to 8 tiles. For consistency in the report, we say that these tiles are from the player's *rack*. The objective is to form words and lay out on the board, either horizontal or vertical. The words layed out can consist of tiles from the rack, or tiles already placed on the board. The player picks up new tiles from the bag after every move.

A move can be either the player laying out a word on the board, passing his turn or changing some of the tiles on the rack for new ones from the bag. Only one of the alternatives can be made in one round. Each move generates a score, which is zero if no tiles are layed out. Otherwise, the score depends on which tiles are included in the word and also which squares of the board. The letter tiles are posessing a score number, which is higher if the letter is considered difficult to use. In addition to that, som squares on the board generates a higher score. These will be called *bonus squares*.

The last bonus opportunity is to lay out all tiles fom the rack in one move. This will give the player 50 additional points. If ont player has placed all tiles from rack, and there are no tiles left from the bag, the game ends. This will also happen if the players pass their turn four times in a row, where a pass is a move that generates zero points.

All players that have some remaining tiles on the rack will get a penalty, which counts up to the values of the tiles left. The penalty will be drawn of the total score, and the winner of the game is naturally the player with the

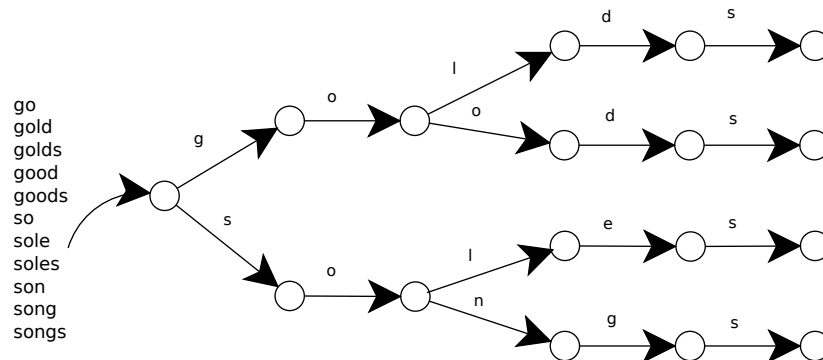


Figure 2.1: Trie. Small dictionary consisting of 11 words represented as a trie.

highest score in the end.

### 2.1.1 Computer agents

The portion of randomness that exists in the game makes it difficult to create agents that can win easaily against a human player. Where a great player in ches

## 2.2 Research

As mentioned above, this is a well studied problem, and many papers and articles are to be found where different problems in the game of Scrabble have been studied. This paper will mostly refer to Appel and Jacobsen [2] who discovered a way to represent the dictionary wo that it takes up minimum space in memory.

### 2.2.1 Dictionary

Appel and Jacobsen [2] came to the conclusion that a word search will be incredibly fast in a *Directed Acyclic Word Graph*, which in this study will be referred to as a *DAWG*. A DAWG is generally built from a trie, and can be explaind like a minimized trie. Where a trie has a lot of redundancy, becuase

of edges and nodes being identical, no such thing occurs in a DAWG. All the identical edges and nodes are removed, and reduced to only one occurrence. As an example in the paper mentioned, the dictionary consisting of more than 100 000 words taking up a memory space of a half mega bytes, could be reduced to occupy only 175 kile bytes.

### 2.2.2 Word generation

The problem of generating legal moves can be reduced to one dimension. Instead of doing a search in two directions (up and right) it is possible to use an algorithm that generates words only horizontally. The argument is that generating a word vertically is basically the same thing as generating a word horizontally. The only difference is that the board is transposed. Therefore, the algorithm to generate words is limited to only generate horizontally, and for each move we do two searches, where one is over the transposed board.

#### Anchor squares

A key in the algorithm implemented are the *anchor squares*, which are the empty squares next to a non-empty square as can be seen in figure 3.1. These are important since words can only be built from already existing tiles. In the very first move there is only one anchor; the center square, since the player making the first move always has to start in the center square.

#### Cross-check sets

When placing a word horizontally, the vertically placed letters also have to create a legal word. It is quite easy to establish that if we place a word horizontally, the vertical word can increase with only one letter at a time. This makes it possible to calculate, for each anchor square, which set of letters that are possible to place at that square. The calculations can be made before each move, and allows the player to place a word by row, without considering the rest of the board. The set of available letters for one square is in Appel and Jacobsen's paper [2] referred to as a *cross-check set*

### 2.2.3 Game strategies

If one is a beginner at Scrabble, there are many small tricks to learn to advance quickly. Some of the tricks can be listed as:

- Difficult letters. Letters with high score are usually more difficult to place and should be used as soon as possible.



Figure 2.2: Anchor squares. The adjacent tiles are the anchor tiles from which the word generation begins.

- Balance on the rack. It is easy to get stuck with only consonants or only vowels on the rack, keeping a good balance can therefore be a good idea to avoid deadlocks in the future.
- Bonus squares. Hitting the bonus squares can generate a high score. Although it is preferable to avoid opening opportunities for the opponent to do the same.
- Word extensions. According to Sheppard [1], the ability to find extensions (i.e. prefixes and suffixes) to already placed words, is a key to being a successful player since such moves can generate very high scores.
- Vocabulary. There are many short words in the language, and it is instantly rewarding if a player can learn many short word letters.



# Chapter 3

## Implementation

The study is based on an implementation that follows the example of Appel and Jacobsen [2], with some small modifications. Since implementing a DAWG seemed like a time consuming project, a choice was made to stay with the trie. The advantage with a DAWG is that it saves a lot of memory, but there were no problems with memory space, and therefore an unnecessary thing to focus on.

### 3.1 Game limitations

To limit the work load to fit into the time span, some limitations were made to the game. This study focuses on games played by only two players, and the implementation is therefore customized to handle only two player games. The players have two options during a turn; either lay a word, or pass the turn and receive zero points. In other words; the possibility to change tiles if no word can be found is removed.

The bag is also minimized, and do not contain any blank letters or other special tiles that are not letters. The result is that a Q or a W never can be used. In addition, the game is played in Swedish by the agents.

### 3.2 Agents

To see which of the very basic strategies listed in section 2.2.3 is the most successful one against the others, three agents with different strategies were implemented. They would play against each other in order to generate results for later analyze. This section describes the three different agents implemented, and their strategy in the game. In order to evaluate which strategies are the more rewarding, the agents are implemented with only *one* strategy.

An agent who calculates the total score of a move and chooses the highest one will easily win over the tested agents in this study. The agents will be referred to as follows:

HSW High score word player.

BS Bonus square player.

BOR Balance on rack player.

### 3.2.1 High score words

One strategy one can use when playing Scrabble is the fact that some letters are more worth than others. These letter are less commonly used in the language and is therefore more difficult to use. Naturally, one would want to use them as soon as there is an opportunity, to not risk getting stuck later in the game. One of the agents tested in this study follows the strategy of placing higher score generating letters first. By all legal moves generated, the agent will chose the one were the word itself has the highest score.

### 3.2.2 Bonus squares

Sometimes, it can be more rewarding to place a relatively short word than a longer one. This is because of the bonus squares spread out on the board. The can multiply the value of either one letter, or the entire word placed, and can therefore generate quite high scores. The second agent strives to place words over bonus squares, to hopefully generate a high score. If there are several opportunities to reach a bonus tile, the most rewarding one is chosen by the agent, i.e. the word reaching the bonus square with the highest bonus.

### 3.2.3 Balance on rack

An important thing to think about when playing Scrabble is to plan for the next move. If a player ends up with only consonants on the rack, the possibility of laying out a word is reduced. The third agent tested tries to always keep a good balance between vowels and consonants on the rack, to avoid deadlocks later in the game. The agent knows the *ideal ratio* and tries to lay out words so that the words left on the rack returns a ratio as close to the ideal ratio as possible. Tests with different ideal ratios are made.

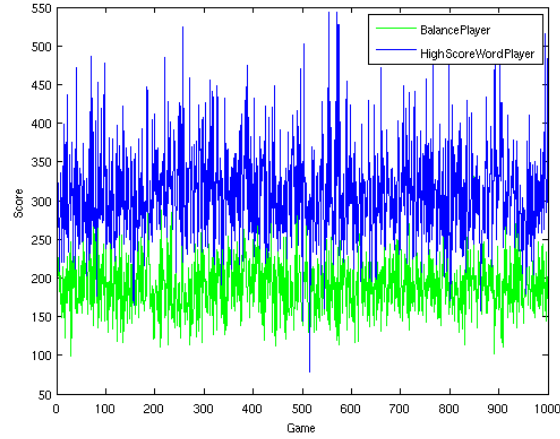


Figure 3.1: Scores. Scores of the two players in 1000 games.

### 3.3 Test results

Each of the agents has been tested against the other to, to let us evaluate the impact of each strategy. Explanations of the agents can be read about in section 3.2.

#### 3.3.1 High score words vs Balance on rack

Testing parameters:

- Balance 1: 5 vowels of 8
- Balance 2: 3 vowels of 8

#### 3.3.2 Balance on rack vs Bonus squares

#### 3.3.3 Bonus squares vs High score words

## Chapter 4

## Conclusions

# Chapter 5

## Discussion

Naturally, the agent that only considers a balance between tiles on the rack is not very successful. An improvement could be done to let it try to place a word with as high score as possible *and* keep the balance.

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