

# Scrabble Tournaments Move Toward Banning Racial and Ethnic Slurs

The fight against systemic racism has taken aim at Scrabble. An agreement is at hand to bar offensive terms, though some players endorse using them for points.



By [David Waldstein](#)

July 7, 2020

Josephine Flowers became a ranked, competitive Scrabble player more than a dozen years ago, and to commemorate the moment, she inscribed her custom-built game board with one of her favorite sayings: “Never underestimate the power of words.”

The phrase serves as a constant reminder to her that, even when people say that the words formed on a Scrabble board are supposedly divorced of meaning, they can still inflict pain.

That is why Flowers, who is Black, and several other members of the North American Scrabble Players Association, have called on the organization to ban the use of an anti-Black racial slur, and as many as 225 other offensive terms, from its lexicon.

“You could be sitting there for a 45-minute game just looking at that word,” said Flowers, a mental health worker from West Memphis, Ark. “And if you don’t know the person who played it, then you wonder, was it put down as a slight, or was it the first word that came to their mind?”

The issue may never come up again.

Hasbro, which owns the rights to Scrabble in North America, said Tuesday night the players association had “agreed to remove all slurs from their word list for Scrabble tournament play, which is managed solely by NASPA and available only to members.”

John Chew, the chief executive of the association, seemed to agree. He had asked the organization’s 12-person advisory board to vote on the matter in the coming days, but the statement from Hasbro was presented as a *fait accompli*, which could rankle those who oppose expurgating any words from the lexicon.

“It is the right thing to do,” Chew said Tuesday night.

Julie Duffy, a spokeswoman for Hasbro, also said the company will amend Scrabble’s official rules “to make clear that slurs are not permissible in any form of the game.”

The game that Hasbro sells in retail stores has not included slurs in its dictionary since 1994. But the players association, one of the most prominent governing bodies in competitive Scrabble, had still allowed them. The agreement could also affect what words may be played in online versions of the game.

Technically, Hasbro has no control over the 192,111 playable words on the word list used by the players’ association, but it does license the organization to use the name Scrabble, and it is not eager to see slurs associated with its brand. It said it was committed to “providing an experience that is inclusive and enjoyable for all.”

If a word is taken out of the association’s lexicon, it cannot be played in tournaments sanctioned by the organization.

Many software companies license the group’s lexicon and provide it to online versions of the game, meaning those words

would become ineligible in those versions of the game, too.

Scrabble tournaments had previously allowed slurs on the basis that, however egregious, they are part of the English language. The guiding principle for players has been that points — not messaging or tact — win games.

But now, as people in the United States and many parts of the world campaign against systemic racism after George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis police custody, a wide range of previously untouchable monuments, team names and, now, the rules of a board game, are under scrutiny.

Chew, the son of a Japanese mother and a father of English ancestry, formally petitioned the organization's advisory board last month to remove some or all of the 226 words labeled offensive by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, especially the racial slur that the dictionary says is "almost certainly" the most offensive in the English language.

"When people are dying in the streets over racial tensions and this word still has so much power," Chew said in a telephone interview from his home in Toronto last week, "you have to tell yourself this is just a game we are playing and we have to do what we can to make things right, just in our little corner of the world."

The debate over the use of slurs in Scrabble is not a new one. In the 1990s, the Anti-Defamation League called on Hasbro to disallow the use of slurs after a complaint about an anti-Semitic term, and Hasbro was happy to oblige.

It was the competitive players who objected. In a compromise, slurs and profanities were taken out of the official Scrabble Dictionary, but clubs and tournaments could follow a separate lexicon, produced by the players' association, that allows for the slurs.

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Updated June 29, 2020

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"It is very difficult for a lot of people to understand why those words are still acceptable in Scrabble," said Stefan Fatsis, the author of a book on competitive scrabble, "Word Freak."

But, he added, "it is also hard for them to understand why 'qi' and 'aa' are words. For Scrabble players, they are just instruments with which to score points."

During the 1990s furor, Steven Alexander, who is white and Jewish, was one of many players who wrote letters opposing any expurgation. He still opposes most exclusions, but he has amended his position after recent events.

"The one word that has actually been used to rally mobs into terrorism is the N-word," he said. "It's a word of conspiracy, a tool of oppression. If Black people demand something, a white person like me shouldn't necessarily put their views first."

Chew's initial proposal came after an association member wrote a letter on the organization's Facebook page calling for the body to take action. Chew agreed and made the proposal, then opened the topic for debate, which he says was fairly evenly split.

“I couldn’t have found a bigger wedge issue if I tried,” he said.

For those who objected to removing the words, Chew said, the three main arguments were: A word’s meaning is irrelevant in Scrabble; it’s a slippery slope, and — one he repeated with a tone of incredulity — if some people are not offended by the presence of those words, why should anyone else be?

“I can go through about 50 responses in a day before I need to get out the brain bleach,” Chew said.

He also noted that some members have told him that, since he is not Black, this is not his fight. And there are Black players who oppose removing the offensive words.

“If I’m going to lose the game playing a different word, then I’m going to use that word,” said Noel Livermore, a Black competitive player from Florida who opposes removing any words. “I need to score points and on that board, they don’t have any meaning.”

Livermore, who began playing with friends as a teenager in his hometown, Kingston, Jamaica, has played in tournaments around the world and calls Scrabble “a numbers game disguised as a word game.” When opponents have played a slur on the board against him, he does not even flinch, he said.

But he recalled once using an obscenity when playing against a woman.

“I apologized,” he said. “But I need the points. I’m not going to lose the game.”

John McWhorter, a professor of linguistics at Columbia University who is Black, said he feels Black players like Livermore should be the ones to decide the matter. If not, he said, then the proposal is merely an exercise in a few white men “testifying to their goodness as anti-racists.”

Professor McWhorter proposed using asterisk tiles in place of the offensive words so that no one has to stare at a slur during a game.

“But one thing that worries me about this is, we are fetishizing slurs” he said, “What is the next thing we can’t use, and how do you decide what’s a slur?”

The post that set off the debate was written by Jim Hughes, a top player from Austin, Texas. He said the organization needed to show support for social and racial justice following the protests over Floyd’s killing. His Scrabble club in Austin has proposed a scholarship program to help underprivileged children gain access to Scrabble clubs and tournaments, and make it more inclusive by eliminating words that can cause harm.

Hughes acknowledged playing slurs in the past to collect points.

“But just because something has been acceptable for so long doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt,” Hughes said.

Some of the most commonly used slurs in Scrabble are actually three-letter words, popular not for the sting they inflict, but for their ability to slip into small crevices on the board and rack up big scores. Flowers said she has played one such small word regularly without understanding the meaning. She also used an anti-Semitic word in a national tournament years ago and said she regrets it.

That is why she advocates banning any word that a group considers offensive to them

“I’m surprised it’s even a question,” she said. “Where are the hearts and the thoughts of the people who want to keep these words? Why are they so attached to offensive words when there are so many other words to play and enjoy?”

A version of this article appears in print on July 9, 2020, Section B, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Points, but at What Cost? Slurs Are Off the Table