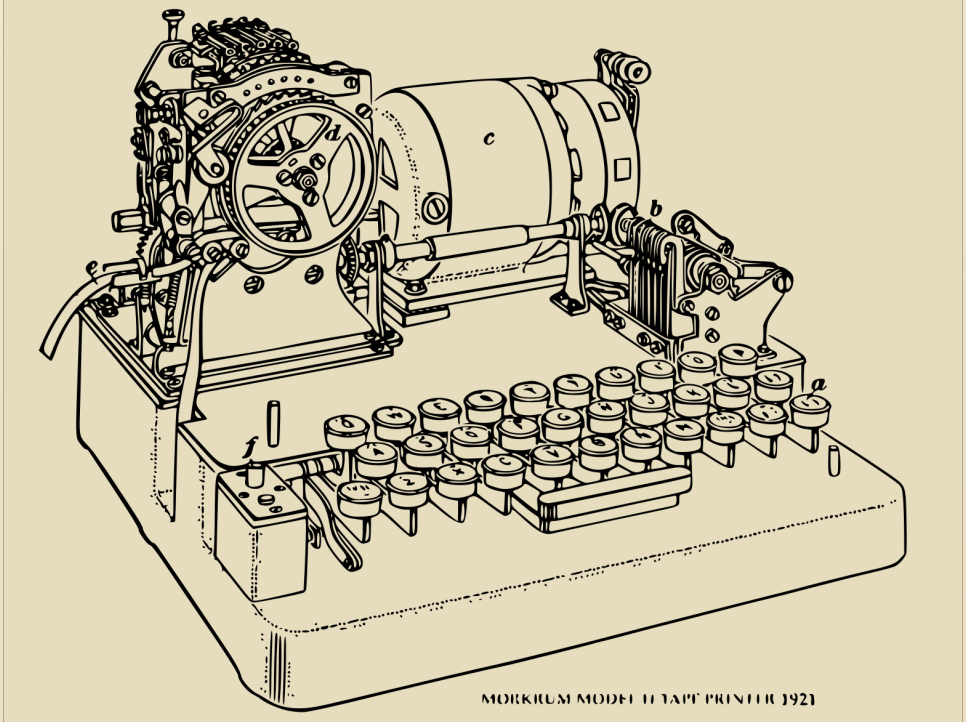
MORTON & KRUM



Chicago, 1906. Two inventors, one printing telegraph, and a race down the Alton line. Send word home faster than your rivals, one keystroke at a time.

1–4 PLAYERS **30** MINUTES

Designed by **Don Schwarz**
Left Field Games

The Story

In 1906, Joy Morton and Charles Krum built a printing telegraph, called a *teletype* machine: an operator typed on a keyboard, and the words came out printed on paper at the far end of the line. The Morkrum machine was first tested on what became known as the **Alton Railroad trials**.

In **Morton & Krum** you are both a train conductor and a teletype operator. At each of six stations your train stops, and you wire a telegram back to the central office as proof of your progress. Everyone sends the same telegram, but each of you has wired your own machine differently, so the same words earn each of you a different score.

> **WHAT THE GAME IS REALLY ABOUT**
> Morse code gives the most common letters the shortest codes (E is a single dot) and the rarest letters the longest. Computers compress data the same way. In this game you decide which keys on your machine are worth the most, then fight to choose words that use them.

Goal

Score the most points over six stations. You score points by typing the telegram's words on your machine. Every key you press is worth the value printed on the slot where you put that key.

Components

- **4 teletype machines**, all identical. Each has a 0–29 word-score track, and 3 key rows lock on underneath it.
- **8 wooden score markers**, two in each player color.
- **15 key-row boards**, double-sided, one difficulty per board: 5 gentle (rows I and II), 5 medium (III and IV) and 5 steep (V and VI). See *The Six Key Rows*, after Setup. Every row has 9 slots, and each slot has a printed value.
- **4 sets of 27 key tokens**, one set in each player color: the letters A–Z plus a `RETURN (↵)` key.
- **32 telegram cards**, double-sided. The **envelope** side (portrait) shows just the two blanks' categories; the **telegram** side (landscape) has the full message with those two blanks in it.
- **8 special tiles**, double-sided. The front of each is a bigram (`ER AR OU EA ST GH CK CH`), and the back of every tile is `REPEAT`.
- **Coal cubes**: 20 per player.
- **4 train markers**.
- **Station board**, in two pieces that lock together: the train-order track (a loop with two sets of four spaces) and six slots along the bottom edge for the telegram cards.
- **Telegram pad**: one sheet per game, with a row for each word (two per station), a column for each player's score, and a total row at the bottom.

Setup

1. Each player chooses a color and takes the machine, the 27 key tokens and the 2 score markers in that color, plus 20 coal cubes.
2. Choose one player to be the **operator**. The operator tears one sheet off the telegram pad, writes each player's name at the top of a score column, and keeps the sheet for the whole game.

3. Shuffle the 8 special tiles and turn **one fewer than the number of players** to their REPEAT side, at random (1 with 2 players, 2 with 3, 3 with 4). Place the rest bigram side up. Put all 8 where everyone can reach them. A tile stays on the side it starts on for the whole game.
4. Shuffle the telegram cards and deal **6**, envelope side up, into the slots along the bottom of the station board: Station 1 on the left to Station 6 on the right. Return the rest to the box. Everyone can see all twelve categories from the start, so plan ahead, but nobody sees the telegrams themselves until their words are chosen.
5. Put the train markers in random order on one set of the station board's spaces. The train in space 1 is the **leader**.
6. **Draft key rows.** Of each difficulty, lay out **one more board than the number of players**: 3 with 2 players, 4 with 3 players, all 5 with 4 players. Turn half of each difficulty's boards to each side, flipping a coin for the odd one. Return the rest to the box. Boards stay on the side they start on. Starting with the player at the *back* of the train and moving forward, each player takes one row. Then go back the other way (the leader takes a second row right away), then forward again, until everyone has 3 rows. This is a **snake draft**. Lock your rows together under your machine in any order. Your machine now has 27 empty slots.

THE SIX KEY ROWS

Rows differ in how their value is spread out. Gentle rows have no bad slots and no great ones, so they forgive mistakes. Steep rows have big slots and several costly ones: placed well, they score a little more, and placed carelessly, they cost you. The stars are a hint about how hard a row is to use well. Every row is a fair choice.

Row	Slot values									Difficulty
I	+3	+2	+2	+2	+2	+2	+1	+1	+1	★
II	+3	+3	+3	+2	+1	+1	+1	0	0	★
III	+4	+3	+2	+2	+1	+1	0	0	−1	★★
IV	+4	+3	+3	+1	+1	0	0	−1	−1	★★
V	+5	+3	+2	+1	+1	0	−1	−2	−2	★★★
VI	+5	+4	+2	0	−1	−2	−2	−2	−2	★★★

Playing a Station

The game is six rounds, one per station. Each round has four phases:

1. **Bid coal**: decide who arrives first.
2. **Fill the telegram**: in arrival order, choose the words. The first train may also claim a special tile.
3. **Wire your machine**: slot any keys the words need into your rows.
4. **Transmit**: everyone types both words and scores them.

1. BID COAL

Everyone secretly takes any amount of their remaining coal in a closed fist, zero included. Reveal at the same time. **Every player pays their bid**, win or lose, and the spent coal goes back to the box.

Move every train to the other set of spaces on the station board, highest bid in space 1, then down to the lowest. That is the new train order, and the order in which players act this round. **Ties** go to whichever tied player was further forward in the previous train order.

You get only 20 coal for the whole race. Coal left over at the end scores nothing, but it breaks ties.

2. FILL THE TELEGRAM

The station's envelope shows two blanks, **A** and **B**, each with a category. The telegram itself stays sealed: you choose words knowing only the categories.

> STATION 3 · ENVELOPE (SEALED)
> A: TREE B: WEAPON

In train order, each player takes **one** turn:

- **Choose a word** for an empty blank. It must fit that blank's category and be spelled with the letters A–Z only (no punctuation). Proper nouns and compound words (one dictionary entry) count, without spaces (`STLOUIS`), but phrases don't. Words may repeat, even in both blanks. As soon as a word is chosen, the chooser spells it out loud and the operator writes it in its row on the telegram sheet. If anyone challenges a word, whether it fits the category or how it's spelled, look it up in a dictionary (an atlas, for a place).
- If you are the **first** train this round, you may **also claim a special tile** from the shared supply on your turn and add it to your machine. You keep it for the rest of the game. You can't claim a tile if your machine has no empty slot.

This phase ends **as soon as both blanks are filled**. The operator then turns the card over to its telegram side and reads the whole message aloud with the chosen words in it:

> STATION 3 · MORTON AND KRUM
> LIGHTNING STRUCK OLD CHESTNUT NOW LOOKS EXACTLY LIKE CANNON

With 3 or 4 players, the players at the back of the train may not get to act at all. That is what the coal was for.

> **EVERYONE TYPES BOTH WORDS**
> It doesn't matter who chose a word: *every* player types both of this round's words. Choosing a word means choosing one that scores well on your machine and badly on your rivals'.

3. WIRE YOUR MACHINE

Everyone does this phase at the same time. Look at the two words. For **each letter in them that isn't on your machine yet**, put that key token into any empty slot in your rows. Do the same for your `RETURN` key the first time you need it, and for any special tile you claimed this round. A key is worth the value printed on its slot.

Keys never move. Once a key is in a slot, it keeps that value for the rest of the game, in every word you type, including words your rivals choose. Putting a rare letter in your +5 slot is a bet that you'll get to type it later.

Out of slots: your machine has 27 slots, exactly one per key. Every special tile you claim also takes a slot, so you may run out (you pick which new keys get the last slots). A key with no slot still gets typed, and scores **−4** each time. Put your unslotted keys in a pile beside your machine (the arrow on the machine points there) as a reminder.

4. TRANSMIT

Every player types both words on their own machine, left to right, then presses `RETURN` after each word. Every keystroke scores the value of that key's slot.

Score one word at a time on your word-score track. Before each word, put one marker on 0 and your other marker beside the track, then move the first marker forward or back by each keystroke's value. You may add the keystrokes in any order, so add the positive ones first and your marker never goes below 0. If it passes 29, put your second marker on the +30 space and keep counting from 0. When the word is done, read your score out loud (add 30 if your second marker is on +30). The operator writes each player's score in that player's column, on the word's row. Special tiles are optional, and change what counts as a keystroke:

- **Bigram** (e.g. `ST`): each time the word contains those two letters in a row, you may type the bigram in place of both letters. It scores **its slot + 7**, and the two letters underneath don't score.
- **REPEAT**: may replace the key you just typed in that word, a letter or a whole bigram, even after another REPEAT (with `ER`, `CATERER` is C A T ER REP). One per player. It scores **its slot + 2**, and the repeated letters don't score.

EXAMPLE

The words this round are `CHESTNUT` and `CANNON`. Krum's keys sit in slots with these values (some placed in earlier rounds, some just now): C +1, H 0, E +3, N +2, U −1, T +4, A +2, O −2, RETURN 0. Krum also owns `ST` (in a +1 slot) and `REPEAT` (in a +3 slot).



CHESTNUT scores 1 + 0 + 3 + **8** + 2 − 1 + 4 + 0 = 17. CANNON scores 1 + 2 + 2 + **5** − 2 + 2 + 0 = 10. Krum reads out 17, then 10, and the operator logs them in the Krum column. Morton types the same two words on a differently wired machine and scores something else.

End of the Race

After the sixth station is transmitted, the operator adds up each player's column and writes the sums in the total row. The player with the **highest total score** wins. If players tie, the one with the **most coal left** wins. If they are still tied, the one whose train is further forward in the final train order wins.

Solo Game

Play as normal, but skip the bidding: you act alone. At setup, lay out one board showing each of the six rows and choose any 3 of them, and turn one random special tile to its `REPEAT` side. You're always the leader: each station, you choose both words and may also claim a tile. Try to beat your best score.

Strategy Tips

- **Draft for the categories you can see.** All twelve blanks are on view before the draft. Everyday words suit a gentle row; a *cheese* or *mythical creature* blank full of rare letters (*zebra*, *quartz*, *jazz*) is a reason to save a steep row's big slot.
- **Draft for how you play.** Gentle rows forgive a misplaced key. Steep rows pay once you can tell which letters you'll type all game: big slots on your busiest keys (`RETURN` is pressed twice every station), negative slots on letters you never expect to type.
- **Watch rival machines.** Machines are public. The best word scores well for you *and* badly for the player closest to you in the race.
- **Steer toward your own keys.** A word full of new letters fills everyone's best slots alike; one built from keys you've already wired high scores for you alone.
- **Tiles are a bonus, not a prize.** Bid for the word. A tile costs a slot and pays best once your machine has some shape, so think twice before claiming at Station 1.
- **Save coal for the middle.** At Station 1 every machine is empty, so any word scores about the same for everyone (with 2 players, second still chooses a word, after seeing the first). Stations 3–5 decide most races.
- **Win it or bid zero.** A losing bid is coal thrown away. Count your rivals' coal; if you're ahead, matching is enough.
- **With 3 or 4 players, don't be last.** The back trains may not choose a word at all. Staying out of last place is often worth more than first.

Quick Reference

The whole race on one page. If you have played before, this is all you need at the table.

SETUP

1. Each player takes the machine, 27 key tokens and 2 score markers in their color, and 20 coal cubes.
2. Pick an operator. They keep the telegram sheet and write down each word as it's chosen and everyone's scores.
3. Turn special tiles to their REPEAT side, one fewer than the number of players (one in a solo game). The rest stay bigram side up.
4. Slot six telegrams envelope side up under the station board, Station 1 to 6.
5. Put the trains on one set of spaces in random order.
6. Lay out one more board of each difficulty than there are players, half on each side. Snake-draft three rows each, starting from the last train, and lock them under your machine.

EACH STATION (SIX ROUNDS)

1. **Bid coal.** Everyone hides a bid in their fist and reveals at once. Everybody pays, win or lose. Move the trains to the other spaces, highest bid in space 1; ties keep the old order.
2. **Fill the telegram.** In train order, each player chooses a word for an empty blank. The leader may also claim a special tile (only with an empty slot). Once both blanks are filled, skip to the next section. The chooser spells each word for the operator; a dictionary settles challenges. Then flip the card and read the telegram aloud.
3. **Wire your machine.** Everyone at once: put each key the words need that isn't on your machine yet into an empty slot, including RETURN and any tile you just claimed. Keys never move once placed. You only have 27 slots, and tiles use them up too, so something may end up without a home.
4. **Transmit.** Everyone types both words on their own machine, pressing RETURN after each one. Score each letter on your track. After pressing RETURN, read the total out loud, and the operator writes it down.

END OF THE RACE

After Station 6, the operator adds up each player's column and the highest total wins. If there's a tie, the player with the most coal left wins, and after that, whoever's train is furthest forward.

Playing solo? Skip the bidding. Lay out a board showing each row and pick any three, and flip one tile to REPEAT. You're always the leader, so each station you choose both words and may also claim a tile.

SCORING A KEYSTROKE

A letter or RETURN	the value of its slot
A bigram tile, like ST	its slot +7, may replace both letters
REPEAT (one per player)	its slot +2, may replace a repeated letter or bigram
A key with no slot	−4, every time you type it

Before each word, put your marker back on 0 of your word-score track and take your second marker off +30. You can add the keystrokes in any order, so count the good ones first and you'll never dip below zero. If you go past 29, put your second marker on +30 and keep going.

KEY ROWS

Row	Slot values									Difficulty
I	+3	+2	+2	+2	+2	+2	+1	+1	+1	★
II	+3	+3	+3	+2	+1	+1	+1	0	0	★
III	+4	+3	+2	+2	+1	+1	0	0	−1	★★
IV	+4	+3	+3	+1	+1	0	0	−1	−1	★★
V	+5	+3	+2	+1	+1	0	−1	−2	−2	★★★
VI	+5	+4	+2	0	−1	−2	−2	−2	−2	★★★

SAMPLE CATEGORIES

Color	RED IVORY GOLDEN PURPLE
Cheese	BRIE FETA GOUDA STILTON
Dance	WALTZ TANGO POLKA MAZURKA
Gem	OPAL ONYX TOPAZ ZIRCON
Sound	BANG HISS CLANG WHOOSH
Mythical creature	DRAGON SPHINX KRAKEN SATYR
City	ALTON JOLIET PEORIA CHICAGO
Profession	PORTER BAKER SHERIFF COOPER
Tree	OAK BIRCH HEMLOCK HICKORY
Weather	FOGGY MUGGY BREEZY STORMY
Drink	TEA COCOA CIDER LEMONADE
Zoo animal	ZEBRA KOALA HIPPO GIRAFFE

Any word that fits the category counts, as long as it's spelled with plain letters A–Z. Compound words and proper nouns count (skip the spaces); phrases don't. A word may be used again. These are just to get you thinking.