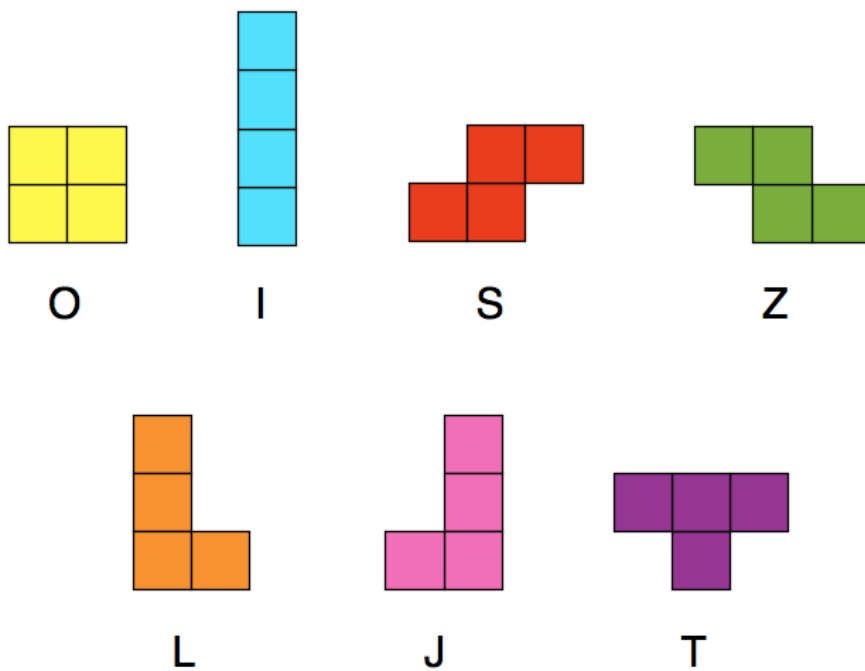


Tetris

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The pieces build before the game gets the chance. An attempt to start slowly and evolve is instantly squandered by a finger assaulting the 'DOWN' arrow key.

A blinking cursor at the end of a full page. Every hour productive. Every minute occupied. Every second accounted for.

The screen is set to a 133% zoom. The volume of the music and sound effects are set to 70% and 50%, respectively.

An inability to adhere to the schedule perfectly will result in an irreparable cascading collapse of systems. I tell myself this because I cannot afford to let it happen. My brain believes me.

The moderato tempo contrasts the fast-paced gameplay, almost as if the pieces are being dragged along by a rope around their necks.

I begin my day before the sun, maximizing the early-morning hours just as I maximized the late hours the night before. Sleep consistently falls to the bottom of my list of priorities, hitting each task with a thud on the way down.

The pieces link in a coordinated harmony. The O piece occupies the corner, the T piece to its right, the Z piece linking with the T. Alternating colors collide in an ever-changing puzzle of its own making.

The sun continues to laze behind me as I walk briskly to class, hesitant to make an appearance on the horizon. I settle into my unassigned assigned seat, coat draped over the back of my chair, backpack to my right leaning against the leg of the table, notebook centered in front of me, pen in hand.

The J and L pieces form a base as the S and Z pieces are turned upright, creating a throne for a prospective T piece. A shrine to the potential interconnectivity of it all.

I review my notes on the readings from the previous day, scanning over precisely highlighted passages, meticulously underlined phrases, and carefully jotted notes that fill the empty margins like intrusive thoughts encroaching on a moment's peace.

The T piece is up next. A gift from the Tetris gods. An enshrined central position awaits its arrival. The 'UP' arrow key rotates the piece once, twice. A third time and it will align with the already-established harmony. Just one more rotation.

One minute until class begins. I carefully craft the title of my note pages for the day. Write it again. Slightly off-center. A little to the left. That 'e' looks odd. I want to write it again. Class is starting.

A mis-click. A malfunctioning key. An uncoordinated finger. The reason doesn't matter; the outcome won't change. The piece doesn't rotate.

The lecture begins before I can get an adequate grip on my pen.

And all that can be done is to watch.

My professor is halfway through the introductory slide before I start writing.

The piece falls into place.

I begin to scribble gibberish.

Upside-down.

All it takes is one mistake for a cascade of others to follow.

A perfect window is created.

There's not enough time.

Disaster:

My notes grow sloppier. There's no time to highlight the headings or align the bullet points. A reflection of the discombobulation plaguing my brain. That 'e' still plaguing the back of my mind.

The idea that one missing square can have detrimental effects on the game may seem ludicrous.

But sometimes that's all it takes.

My notes are illegible at this point. The idea that I will walk out of this lecture more knowledgeable than I walked in is laughable.

Now things are really amping up. The pieces are coming faster, this time not by choice. This is where the real game is played.

My next class is on the other end of campus. My attempt at efficient footsteps pales in comparison to the speed my brain runs at.

An O piece appears the second there is no ideal place to put it. The game's sick sense of humor.

But I can't give up now. I refuse to stop, even for one second. Because if I do, it all falls apart.

The piece perches on the edge of the highest row, now a mistake begging to be fixed.

I reorganize my mind as I walk, as if it were a spreadsheet. Cells are moved, rearranged, or deleted altogether. I adapt. I overcome.

An S piece falls. Perfect.

My next class begins. The information flows from the lecture to my pen. The information manifests from my pen to my brain.

The S piece is rotated and used to clear the obstruction. The top row of blocks disappears. The board returns to a state of infinite opportunity.

Class lets out a few minutes early, leaving me a perfect window of opportunity to catch the bus.

Who's laughing now?

There's a spring in my step now as I hesitantly press the germ-infested button for the crosswalk and hear the reassuring "wait" to know my request has been heard.

Pieces are controlled with deft fingers and mindful precision. New combinations are formed with each passing second. The score increases exponentially with the speed of the blocks.

The crosswalk beeps, a metronome for the symphony I am composing in my mind for how the rest of my day will play out. Different parts come together as a whole, all contributing to the music being made.

But pride goeth before the fall.

I'm still busy composing symphonies from the other side of the street when I watch the bus fly by, solidifying not only that I have been left behind, but that my absence was in no way registered. No hesitation. No mercy.

The speed of the pieces increases even more rapidly than before. The music heightens stress levels and stakes as fingers go slick and anxiety takes over.

The beeping of the crosswalk mocks me now as I stand frozen in the wind, like a passenger left behind as a ship departs for a long voyage.

Any semblance of control over the board goes out the window as the pieces are frantically rotated.

I attempt to control my breathing as I assess how my schedule for the day will be impacted by the missed bus.

Windows spring up like gophers, all shouting above each other, begging to be the first one resolved. Any deviation of focus from the piece at hand would result in failure, though.

Tears spring to my eyes and blur my vision as I look for 30 minutes that I can shave off another task.

It's all too fast.

Because a missed task today is another task for tomorrow. Another task for tomorrow that I don't have time for.

The Z and S pieces look the same when they hurdle downward at 90 miles an hour toward impending doom.

If I don't finish my work, my grades will slip. If my grades slip, my GPA plummets.

The game shows no mercy.

If my GPA plummets, my law school application suffers. I can't afford to go to law school without a scholarship. I can't afford to take on \$200,000 worth of debt before I'm 25.

One more rotation and the outcome could've been different.

If I'd walked a little faster, I might've made the bus.

But what could have been is a small consolation as the score flashes onto the screen.

I board the next bus and stare into the distance, drawing blood from my lips as I contemplate the endless ways the rest of the day could go wrong.

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I continue with my work, refusing to stop despite the feeling that it's all fruitless.

The game is finished. All that's left is a blank board.

I check the tasks off my to-do list, wondering if I'll ever see the end.

A board of infinite opportunity.

Tomorrow's another day, another chance to soar or to fail. Only time will tell.

Equal potential for control and catastrophe.

Sometimes the game is too easy, so you make it harder. Just so that you're prepared for when things do get hard. Just so that when things inevitably go wrong, as they always have, you know how to handle it.

Sometimes pieces fall to the wayside; maybe ignored, maybe forgotten. Like a dreaded homework assignment, or an eldest daughter.

Sometimes you do everything you can to juggle the pieces on your plate, and it's still not enough. And it'll never be enough.

Even those who master the game are not granted control of the world around them. Research suggests that skills sharpened inside the game rarely survive outside it¹.

¹ Timm, J.D., Huff, M., Schwan, S., & Papenmeier, F. (2024). Short-term transfer effects of Tetris on mental rotation: Review and registered report – A Bayesian approach. *Attention Perception & Psychophysics*, 86(3), 1056-1064.

Improvement stays contained, obedient to the glowing grid. Control does not transfer.

But there's always another round. Another blank board, another new day. Another chance.

Even in its imperfections, it's still music. My music.

Because that's all this is: a game to be mastered.

Tetris.

References

Liu, M. (2017). *7 types of tetrominoes*. Medium. [Image]. <https://markmliu.medium.com/the-tetris-proof-60a7a69a8e04>

Timm, J. D., Huff, M., Schwan, S., & Papenmeier, F. (2024). *Short-term transfer effects of Tetris on mental rotation: Review and registered report — A Bayesian approach*. *Attention Perception & Psychophysics*, *86*(3), 1056–1064. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13414-024-02855-0>