



# Sudoku of the World and the Originator's Joy

## The godfather of the numerical puzzle in great demand in the west and in the east

**KAJI Maki, Nikoli President**

One day, on my way home on a train after losing money in a horse race, I opened up an American magazine of puzzles I had been carrying around. What caught my eye was a numerical puzzle called the Number Place puzzle. I am not great at reading English.

After jotting down numbers without even reading the instructions, I was able to solve it. Isn't this fun? I bought a bunch of back issues at Maruzen and proceeded to solve one puzzle after another. Just as an experiment, I tried creating a puzzle of my own and I was able to make one.

This is how I came to publish this puzzle in a magazine issued by my company, Nikoli, for which I am the president, in 1984. I coined this puzzle – which is about filling each box in a row or a column with a single-digit number of 1 to 9 – “The Numbers (*suji*) Must be Single (*dokushin*).” The 30-year history of sudoku, which has now spread around the world, began as a coincidence.

As soon as we unveiled the puzzle in our magazine, readers posted numerous puzzles of their own. If they enjoy them, readers who solve new puzzles would try to create one of their own. A great number of new puzzle postings is proof of its success. The way these puzzles, which were sent in, were solved (method used) varied, showing their depth. I changed the long name to the abbreviated sudoku to coincide with the publication of a standalone book of sudoku in 1988. The work was refined over the years and numerous masterpieces were born. (See Nikoli's site, <http://www.nikoli.co.jp/en/puzzles/index.html>)



KAJI Maki, Nikoli President



## A major craze in England

I still cannot forget a letter I received from a woman in her late 40s. She was looking after her ailing mother and she said that the 15 minutes a day she spent on sudoku just prior to going to sleep distanced herself from reality and gave her solace. When I read this letter, I promised to myself that I would never use a scheme, like saying that it is for brain training or to prevent dementia, to sell sudoku. All I wanted was for people to just readily enjoy it.

Sudoku, which had garnered steady popularity in Japan, became a fad around the world some 10 years ago. Sudoku was chosen to be published daily in the major UK newspaper *The Times* in 2014, right there and then, when a Sudoku fan from New Zealand – who had been to the Nikoli office in Tokyo – visited the newspaper firm to market it in 2004.

It became a major craze all over England the following year. This popularity quickly spread to Australia, India, Hong Kong, the United States and everywhere in Europe. Sudoku was entering parts of the world I had never known.

## No trademark registrations overseas

Since then, I have had the fortune of being called upon by people all over the world as the godfather of sudoku. The number of countries I have visited to date – England, the United States, Turkey, Malaysia and Sweden – easily exceeds 20. I was surprised because some treated me like a VIP.

A Japanese woman, who had moved to Spain when she was a child, said that she recalls Japan when working on sudoku. When I explained sudoku at a university in Mozambique, where there are apparently many people who dislike numbers, an instructor told me that he was moved, when he saw all of his students writing down numbers during class for the first time.

Garnering worldwide fame does not mean that my Company reaped great financial benefits from it. The name sudoku was registered as a trademark in Japan alone. Only a small portion of sudoku books is published with the Nikoli copyright overseas, with most of them having nothing to do with the company.

That said, as its originator, I get invited to places where sudoku was popularized. The reason why sudoku got this popular is probably because it was not trademarked.



The US newspaper *New York Times* expressed this as a brilliant mistake. It made me genuinely happy.



Author, surrounded by children, in a shopping mall in Malaysia (Photo: Courtesy of NIKOLI Co., Ltd.)

Unlike crossword puzzles, sudoku knows no boundaries because it does not use any words. The fad has since dissipated, but sudoku has established itself around the world. It appears to be loved by those in over 100 countries now.

A great number of sudoku puzzles created by computers appears to be circulating overseas, but at Nikoli, of course, we insist on handcrafting them. The creators try to surprise the puzzle solvers, who in turn enjoy the special characteristics of the creators. This mutual relationship helps puzzles evolve.

### **Would like to open a base in New York**

Back in 1980, when we launched the first puzzle magazine in Japan, puzzles in Japan only amounted to jigsaw puzzles. It was clearly looked down upon, compared with



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games, magic and quizzes. It was enjoyable to work toward doing away with such prejudice the past 30 years.

I am currently working on conceiving a space, like a café, where lovers of the puzzle can get together and enjoy various types of puzzles, including the plain, flat Sudoku as well as the three-dimensional type like a puzzle ring.

I would like to try it out in Tokyo this fall and then would like to launch one in New York next year. Puzzles are a culture and can also be a lifestyle. Based on this belief, I intend to spread the joy of puzzles around the world.

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