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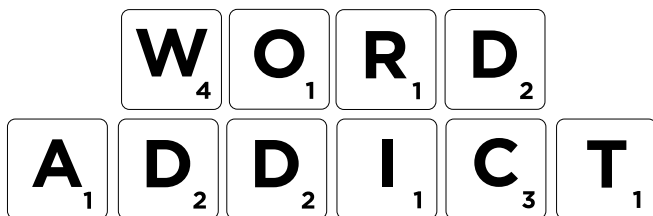
BRAND Crossword Game



SECRETS OF A WORLD SCRABBLE™ CHAMPION
CRAIG BEEVERS

SCRABBLE™

BRAND Crossword Game



Craig Boone

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Introduction

by Craig Beevers

One of the most popular games on our colourful little planet. Most have heard of it, many have played it, and few master it. Scrabble™ is everywhere, whether it be played over a kitchen table, on the latest mobile gadget, or part of a national curriculum.

Scrabble is the toughest all-round game I have ever encountered. There are so many dimensions to it that other games seem linear and boring in comparison. It requires knowledge, an abundance of skill, strategy, risk and reward, luck, and a strong temperament. It is a complete test and a game I'm glad to be associated with. I became World Scrabble Champion in 2014 and I'm immensely proud of being etched in the game's history.

When first playing Scrabble I never really considered just how enriching it is. The words played showcase culture worldwide. A regular player will use the names of Greek letters, currency from every continent, a surprising wealth of old Scottish dialect words, lots of helpful **Q**-without-**U** words from Arabic, and a whole host of other weird and wonderful snippets of everything you can think of or has ever been. Not to mention the enjoyment of playing the game and meeting hundreds of different people from all over the globe.

In this book, I want to discuss all of the aspects of the game, as well as explaining the thought processes for a number of real-life game positions. Whilst it generally takes years to develop the word knowledge required to become a top player, anyone can understand the steps that lead to playing a particular move. So I hope that everyone reading can develop an understanding for the game and learn to play like a World Champion.

About Me

One of my earliest memories of Scrabble™ is loading up the cassette on the ZX Sinclair Spectrum 48K and playing against the computer with its gaudy eight-colour display. Before long it would come up with a prompt asking me if I was sure about that word I'd just played. Because it couldn't hold all of the words in its puny memory, it politely enquired quite often. At five years old my vocabulary was a bit shaky but I used to give myself the benefit of the doubt. If it wasn't a word it should be anyway, right?

That was back in 1986. According to my partner Karen I still spend too much time on the computer. The instruments may have evolved, but I still love my games. Having spent a lot of my youth with pith-helmeted sabremen, blue hedgehogs, and dark elves whizzing across the screen, I eventually graduated to more cerebral distractions. I got attached to the internet at college and university before wandering to my first Scrabble Club in 2003.

In truth I had been hooked by word games for a while, playing all sorts of them on the web. Scrabble was just the best one. I played my first tournament later that year and made it my goal to win a local one-day event, then a weekend tourney, and so on. *Countdown* (a words and numbers TV show in the UK) came along four years later. I took time out from Scrabble to concentrate on it and was fortunate enough to win the series.

Recently I've become increasingly involved with Scrabble associations, their websites, and running or organizing tournaments. I particularly enjoy being part of big events, even when I'm not playing. It also feels good contributing to such a wonderful community.

More personally I'm a mathematical, scientific sort of guy. I like my technology, but I also like to be outdoors and travel. I enjoy characterful villages and towns over big bustling cities. I grew up in Norton, near Stockton-on-Tees in the northeast of England, with a stint at university in Sheffield. In 2014 I moved to Guisborough, a lovely little town on the

outskirts of the North York Moors with my partner Karen and three soppy little dogs, Molly, Benny, and Charlie.

My World

The journey really began when I reached my late teens. I had played Scrabble™ once in a while during childhood, but it couldn't compete with joystick-wagging on the ZX Sinclair Spectrum, button-bashing on the Sega Mega Drive, and later those countless hours juggling virtual memory in DOS, occasionally interrupted by playing the computer game I was trying to get working. By the late 90s, the internet was starting to take off, and that's when I got into word games.

Dial-up modems were the order of the day. I can still remember the high-pitched tone it generated on attempting to connect to the web, then me holding my breath on whether the attempt was successful or not. I loved playing games online. It certainly wasn't for the faint-hearted, but it never really bothered me. I spent many an hour chatting, playing, and arguing with Americans. I felt those across the Atlantic needed to be enlightened about cricket and rugby – much better than that baseball and gridiron malarkey. After racking up hundreds of pounds in phone bills, I went to university in Sheffield and discovered the joys of computer rooms with what was then super-fast internet. I moved from playing a range of games, particularly the card game Spades, to almost exclusively playing quick word games. I mostly played a clone of Scrabble, which had more tiles, a different board, and a love of dishing out **Cs**, **Is**, and **Gs**, which were all worth a measly one point. You also had to place each letter by hand. It was an adrenalin rush to beat people with seconds remaining at the end.

One thing that hasn't changed unfortunately was the level of cheating going on over the internet. It was mostly what's called "anagramming": putting a set of letters into a word-finder and playing what comes up. The quick games just made even more obvious the disparity between the obscure finds and the bad moves. Some even went further, having macros to place tiles almost instantly and programs (or bots) that played the game for them. It was a free-for-all. From the chaos emerged a number of players who have gone on to win big titles in the World of Scrabble.

Towards the end of my three-year spell at university I made the decision to look for a Scrabble Club. Being an exceptionally lazy individual, I was fortunate that all the details of a local club were on a website, only one of a handful that were. I'm not sure I'd have pursued it if I'd had to chase up the info. I always wonder how many people there are who would love the club and tournament scene but don't realize what is out there.

One of the issues of playing online was the difference in the dictionary, or word list as it's also known. The games I'd enjoyed over the internet used an old American word list. The international word list (*Collins Official Scrabble Words*) is made up of the American one, plus UK sources. I had a good knowledge of the most useful American words, but all the British-only words were new to me. Even more word games are available these days, with a variety of dictionaries in use, although the vast majority of words are common to all of them. So one cold dark night towards the end of winter, I ambled to Sheffield Psalter Scrabble Club, which met every week at a local pub. I didn't have a board but it wasn't a problem as there is always plenty of equipment to go round at clubs and tourneys. So I turned up with my pen and paper (the only essentials as both players need to keep score) with no idea what to expect. After a few timid hellos I sat down and played. There was a nice friendly atmosphere with a whole spectrum of people there from different backgrounds, from young students to pensioners. I won most games, but they were closely fought, competitive matches and I lost a fair few too. I fared reasonably well against everyone at the club except for one player, who beat me every time. In the UK, most Scrabble clubs and tournaments are overseen by the Association of British Scrabble Players (ABSP), who maintain a website, rules, tournament calendar and publish a magazine, amongst other things you'd expect from an association. The player who beat me each time, Lewis Mackay, was one of the top ranked players in the country.

One of the things most people don't realize is just how much skill is in Scrabble. At this club Lewis would beat the next best player nine times out of ten, if not more. The next best player would beat some other players nine times out of ten, and they in turn would beat the weakest player nine times out of ten. On a good night a dozen players would turn up but still this broad range of abilities existed. This is typical of most clubs.

After a few months a group of us from the club travelled to a charity tournament. I still remember flashes of it, such as the car journey passing Chesterfield's wonky spire. There are an awful lot of these charity events in the UK. They are not official in the sense of contributing to the national ranking system, but they're interesting little excursions, usually quite short, taking place in churches or similar venues and often raising money for a good cause. Whilst clubs and tourneys have a broad range of demographics collectively, certain events appeal to some more than others. So I arrived in what was something akin to a church hall. Raffles and cakes adorned the sides, with Scrabblers and Scrabble boards in the middle. I would be lying if I said there weren't a good number of light-grey perms about too. After an introduction, the first round of fixtures was read out aloud and pinned on the wall, accompanied by a fair bit of squinting.

I don't remember a great deal about the games, only that I had three of them. I won my first two matches by a comfortable margin. This gave me a high positive spread. *Spread* is what Scrabblers call the points difference. If you win a game 400–325 then you're said to have a spread of +75. It is accumulated over a competition, so if you win again by fifty then your overall spread is +125, lose and the spread is reduced and can become negative if you concede more points than you score. Wins are the first factor in determining a rank position. If two people have the same number of wins, then spread is the tie-breaker.

My third and final game was against a similarly young fellow called Chris. I was leading by 50–60 points and feeling reasonably confident when he tried **JEANED**. I had a feeling it was invalid, but as a relatively new player, you rarely feel certain either way about plausible words like that. So there's always some anticipation when a move is adjudicated. I challenged the word, and fortunately for me it wasn't allowed. Chris was ahead of his time, because **JEANED** was added to the word list a few years later.

That gave me a bit more breathing space and I went on to win comfortably. I then needed to see if other results went my way. If someone else on two wins had won big they would have overtaken me. Luckily that didn't happen, and I was quietly chuffed that I'd triumphed in my first ever tournament.

I say quietly because I have never known what to do with myself when I should be celebrating, although I'm not sure how youthful exuberance would have gone down on that occasion anyway.

So after a few more weeks at the club I kept on improving, but still getting beaten by Lewis. One of the beauties of Scrabble is that it has everything, luck included. On my final night at the club before returning home I did what Scrabblers describe as 'drawing the bag'. I picked everything against Lewis whilst he was crippled by awful letters. I'd defeated my nemesis and later sheepishly waved goodbye to everyone. I'd got the bug for Scrabble. I am a very competitive person, but also lazy, introverted, and passive. My academic studies had finished. But then they had never really got going. I was absolutely terrible at putting my head down and studying, so I relied on natural ability to get as far as I did. My skills growing up had all been about numbers, not words. Indeed, I had to redo my English Language qualification from school. (I thought I'd sneak that a few pages in and hope anyone reading has already bought this.)

Back home I'd been invited by Pauline Johnson to Cleveland Scrabble Club in Middlesbrough, a few miles from where I lived. Pauline had been the driving force behind the club since its inception in 1981 – the year I was born. In the early years the club played twice a week, playing High Score Scrabble. In the 80s this was the main method of play competitively – where wins and losses were irrelevant, only the aggregate of your scores mattered. This changed the game entirely, meaning wide open boards and lots of exchanging tiles until a big score came along.

Thankfully for me, Matchplay Scrabble took over soon after. Matchplay is the more technical name for what most of us would consider a 'normal' game of Scrabble, where the goal is simply to win. Cleveland Club is one of the biggest clubs in the UK and back then it had thirty members. It was more formal than Sheffield Psalter. Timers were used, all the fixtures for the night were organized in advance, and the games all counted towards an overall league or to the A/B/C divisions. Many of the members had been attending for over thirty years.

The best player at the club was undoubtedly Pete Finley. He had represented England in a number of World Scrabble Championships going back as far as the second event in 1993. He had a very posh board to show for his success. Pete and his wife Laura had met through competitive Scrabble more than a couple of decades earlier. I've since learned they were just one of dozens of couples who'd met through the scene. I always particularly enjoyed playing Pete. I loved the challenge. I was doing quite well. I was promoted into the A division and then soon after had my first 'official' tournament, which was organized by the club in the same venue.

This time, however, I struggled against a much stronger field, my racks didn't seem to flow, and I got bogged down in awkward, scrappy games. I won two games out of five, finishing eleventh out of sixteen. Since it was an official tournament I got a provisional rating of 135, but I knew I was a better player than that. The ratings ranged from fifty up through to the early 200s. Almost every national association has a rating and ranking system. Many players take a very keen interest in their rating and whether it goes up or down after a tournament. I loved my numbers, so I was among them.

Given my ample free time – I was unemployed and living at home with my parents – I got into studying words with a program called LeXpert, developed by M. G. Ravichandran. This mostly consisted of being presented with a jumbled rack on the computer. I then had to type in all the anagrams. Anything I missed was displayed. There's a bit more to it, because you try and learn words in a particular order, so you'd start out with the most useful first, and there are a number of methods to this.

It can be hard going when there are a lot of words coming up that you don't know, but initially it's rewarding because it significantly improves your anagramming skills, and you're learning words that will come up fairly often. Back then I wasn't really bothered about what the words actually meant, but there are always one or two outlandish words that come up and pique your interest.

The other program I used a fair bit was Maven, created by Brian Sheppard. Maven allowed you to analyse Scrabble positions. I found this particularly

interesting, seeing how a computer evaluated the game. It also helped me to think about Scrabble; the value of keeping letters or sets of letters. And it showed me where I was making mistakes and improved my play on a more fundamental level, away from simply learning and then finding those words.

I felt like I was playing better each week. Later I played in my second tournament, where I won four out of five games and finished third. The year ended, and for the next – 2004 – I made it my goal to win a local event. I made a good start at the club, getting a new highest game. I'd won the match 660–260 with six bonuses against an opponent who'd beaten me by one point a few months earlier. It's a funny old game, and one that always keeps you grounded. I soon became Pete's bogey player. He was superior, but I kept beating him. More tournaments followed. I tried my first weekend event in Durham, organized by Pete and assisted by his wife Laura. It was a different experience to what I'd faced so far. Over 100 players in a university building, staying overnight, and seeing all those faces from further afield across two days. I did moderately well, but nothing to write home about.

Soon I was playing more and more events. I'd taken part in a national head-to-head knockout competition. I'd won my first match 4–0 but was eliminated soon after, losing 4–2 with a poor run of tiles. Looking back, it was easy to get carried away with drawing badly, obsessing over not getting any **Ss** or blanks. But ultimately you have to just do the best with what you've got and accept whatever happens. Soon after I had a great run of games in a local five-round event at Newcastle. I ended up winning all five matches and won the tournament. I had had my first win in only April, so it was a surprise and it only spurred me on to do more.

I had a great year. I won other nearby one-day tournaments in Peterlee and Middlesbrough. At the club I had completed all my overall league games. I was top, but Pete would overtake me if he won his last couple of games. Whilst I was sitting at a table elsewhere, he walked over to me and congratulated me. Laura of all people had just beaten him. I had my name engraved on the club shield and got to keep it until the same time next year.

Whilst for me the competitive scene was largely about pitting my wits against other people and striving for success, you do get a lot of different things out of it. Whatever level you're playing at, there is something to play for, with divisional structures in most competitions. Since Scrabble has so many elements, it has a wide range of benefits which aren't immediately obvious. Scrabble certainly developed my language skills, got me out in the world and seeing more of it. It helped me a lot socially.

I kept on playing and studying, winning the odd local tourney here and there. I enjoyed the occasional weekend event, usually pitting myself against a few of the top players from further afield. It was always a bit of a buzz to play a big name. I remember holding my own against 2005 World Champion Adam Logan before he pulled away towards the end of the game.

In late 2006 I found myself in contention to qualify for the World Championships. This was a really big deal for me. To make the England team I had to finish as one of the nine highest English players in the ratings at the end of the year. Unfortunately, in practice it meant players would get their rating up to a point they were happy with and then not play at all in the last three or four months of the year, so as to not risk a rating drop.

My last tournament of the year came along, a national team tournament involving England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Because of so many players turning it down I got invited to the English side. I had a horrible tournament and missed out on the World Championships place. I could take the disappointment as I hadn't expected to make it, but how it happened – the fact that such an obviously flawed qualification procedure was in place and that people were gaming the system so blatantly – made me angry. It was one of very few bitter moments I've had with Scrabble.

Soon after I switched my attention to a different game: the UK words and numbers TV show *Countdown*. I had a break from Scrabble and tried to accustom myself to a completely different dictionary. I did my best to 'forget' the tens of thousands of obscure words which wouldn't be valid on *Countdown*. Unlearning words is much harder than learning them, because

most Scrabblers are so reliant on instinct – just seeing words and not having to think about it any further. But I was now seeing words and having to work out whether they would be allowed or not. I was comfortable in front of the lights and cameras. Under such circumstances, with the pressure on, I felt in control and in the zone. This was important to me, as it's not something you can really learn. I did well in the main series, winning my eight games before coming back for the finals. After putting a lot of pressure on myself I ultimately won the series and felt extremely relieved. I also left a load of my shirts and goodies in the studio. Oops. It was a great experience and I feel proud to be associated with *Countdown*, a TV show with a long and illustrious history, one of the few things that everyone in the country is familiar with. So I returned to Scrabble for 2008, amid lots of congratulations and handshakes. I felt like I was really gaining momentum and would soon be able to compete on level terms with anyone. My studying kicked in and I was on track to qualify for the World Championships held the following year. I had managed to scrape through to the National Scrabble Championship final, which was a best-of-five held in London and relayed to an audience in another room – a common setup in Scrabble.

My opponent was Allan Simmons, an Englishman living in the Scottish Borders. He'd been playing in competitions and writing about Scrabble longer than I'd been breathing. He was a familiar face and we'd played a number of times before. After the odd bit of radio and some newspaper interviews, we were introduced to a few dozen spectators by TV presenter John Craven. The audience would be watching through a combination of close-circuit television, on-stage commentary, and a giant Scrabble board covered in velcro.

After a couple of games the match was tied 1–1, with the first to three being the winner. The pivotal point came when Allan laid down **?NDIRON** for over seventy points. I hadn't heard what he'd declared the blank as, so I asked for clarification. **ANDIRON** and **ENDIRON** are both words meaning the same thing: a metal support for logs in a fireplace. I was holding a **Z** and the blank was one square below a triple letter score. He announced '**A**' and I immediately threw down a cheap comeback with the **Z** making **ZA** onto

the **A** for over sixty points. But I'd completely failed to notice that Allan had played an invalid word **NAIAS*** in the process of laying down his big move. It dawned on me soon after and I couldn't believe what I'd done.

I could have challenged his play off the board, although whatever I did he still would have got a similar score next turn because he had other options. But I would also have had the chance to counter with a big score of my own, depending on what tiles I'd have picked out. I went on to lose that game and the final 3–1. I had played moderately well, but a few holes in my word knowledge and that silly mistake had hindered my chances. I was disappointed and frustrated, but felt my chance would come again. Knowing I would be playing in the World Championships in Malaysia the following year helped keep me focused and positive. I resolved to do better, but the next year I got off to a terrible start in the National semi-finals. Played across fourteen rounds, two players out of sixty made it through to the final. I had lost two of my first three games and I had a mountain to climb. Things started to flow for me, and with one round to go, my fate was in my own hands. If I won I was in the final again.

I played another up-and-coming relative newcomer in Mikki Nicholson. She needed to beat me by at least 100 points to have a chance of qualifying. Mikki gambled a couple of times early on with dodgy words and lost. In a bit of an anticlimax I comfortably ran out a winner and found myself in the National final again.

This time I faced David Webb from Hertfordshire. He was not far from being a hometown favourite, living a commutable distance from London. It seemed to generate a bit more publicity and I found myself doing more interviews, in particular one surreal experience with a London radio station. I had been brought down earlier so I could take part in a live game played over the radio. There's nothing like playing a visual game on audial medium right? After a good few minutes of heated debate delivered in fluent cockney between a radio presenter and assorted eaterie staff next door, it was decided the contest should relocate into the back of the radio van. A few moves spanned a couple of hours and I eventually returned to my hotel to laze around and eat sausage rolls.

After a reasonable night's sleep in what loosely resembled a tenth floor caravan in the heart of London, I got on with the main event. David had been playing brilliantly all year and had risen to the top of British rankings. I anticipated a tough final. Fortunately for me, the tiles fell my way and I held the edge in the first game. I worried about getting caught up by a big **Z**-play from David, but ultimately I only had to avoid doing something stupid to go up 1–0. In the end, David not only couldn't get a big **Z** play, he couldn't play **Z** anywhere at all.

The next game followed and went comfortably in my favour whilst David struggled with poor racks. We had a break for lunch and did our bit of socializing and chatting on-stage. I got to trot out some of those tedious lines they must teach to sports stars in media training. Still, it really was anyone's game, as there are few absolutes in Scrabble. The third game followed a similar path to the second, and I triumphed 3–0. It was a harsh scoreline, as David couldn't really have done much more. It just went my way. I won £1,500, and after a bout of playing Word Soup on pub quiz machines with a friend and having no idea where the hell I was going, I got my train home and found a couple of rather nice camera lenses to spend my money on.

A matter of weeks later and the World Scrabble Championships (WSC) were upon me. It was held in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, just over the border from Singapore. I felt proud to be going over representing England as National Champion. This was the first time I'd ever left Great Britain and I'd never flown before. The twelve-hour flight over to Singapore wasn't too bad and gave me a chance to watch some films, but crossing the border was tiring. Two sets of customs and an insane amount of traffic. Motorbikes and scooters essentially filled every available space for miles in the lane next to me. As well as the Worlds, I had been invited to another tournament. The Causeway Challenge had been growing exponentially year on year, organized by the tireless Michael Tang. He had helped to organize the WSC in the same hotel as the Causeway, so the players had the two biggest international events almost back to back. Around forty different nations were involved, hundreds of different players, thousands of Scrabble games, and millions of points scored. The hotel where it all took place was part of a larger self-contained