2010

The journey from novice to expert in competitive Scrabble players: an investigation of the development of expertise in a community of practice

Edward Jan Okulicz

University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation


http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3154
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
THE JOURNEY FROM NOVICE TO EXPERT IN
COMPETITIVE SCRABBLE PLAYERS: An investigation
of the development of expertise in a community of practice

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

By

EDWARD JAN OKULICZ
B.Ed. (Secondary)

Faculty of Education
2010
Declaration

I certify that this is my original work and that it has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution.

Edward J. Okulicz
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the input, assistance, patience and support of the following:

Wilma and Irina, my supervisors: for not just expert supervision, but support, motivational speaking, good humour and firm hands pointing at the calendar. Your dedication to me during the arduous task of turning me from a mere observer into a researcher was enormous, and I feel so fortunate to have had access to Wilma’s enthusiasm and knowledge of the domain, and Irina’s clinical eye and expertise in socio-cultural theories to guide me.

My interviewees: for their time, generosity and hospitality in the interviews, and their contributions across the Scrabble board. You have been rivals, targets and peers, and the way each of you spoke so evocatively and passionately about your journey and love of the game was inspiring.

The staff and my fellow research students at the Faculty of Education at UOW: for your encouragement, help and curiosity, and occasionally putting up with me hovering in your office doors when I lacked direction or motivation.

And lastly, to my family and friends: for being my support network and acting as sounding boards, sources of ideas, proofreaders and critics.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION ii  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii  
TABLE OF CONTENTS iv  
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES v  
ABSTRACT vi

**Chapter 1: Introduction**
- Purpose of the Study and Rationale 1
- Background 2
- The Aim of the Study and Research Questions 4
- Theoretical Framework 5
- Definition of Terms 8
- Limitations 9
- Organisation of this Thesis 9

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**
- Socially Mediated Learning 11
- Communities of practice 13
- Expertise in game playing 22
- The development of Scrabble as an expert domain 26
- Combining a community view of fostering knowledge with an examination of knowledge itself 29

**Chapter 3: Methodology**
- Research design 33
- Procedure 34
- Ensuring the Quality of the Findings 37
- Summary 48

**Chapter 4: The Interactions of Formative Experts**
- Joan 53
- Esther 54
- Alistair 64
- Discussion 69

**Chapter 5: The Interactions of Middle-Period Experts**
- Naween 80
- Andrew 87
- Bob 94
- Discussion 106
## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table/Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>Codes in analysis of interview data</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>Preliminary matrix of habits and experiences of expert players</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.1</td>
<td>The learning process of Scrabble players</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.1</td>
<td>Player responses to varying levels of opponent</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.2</td>
<td>Relationships and influences in developing knowledge in a community</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.3</td>
<td>Evolution of the distributed community of practice</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This research examined the ways that highly ranked, competitive Scrabble players developed their skills and expertise. Using nine case studies and semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data, the research sought to explore the range of interactions of the experts with other Scrabble players and the curriculum of knowledge that facilitated their journey from novice to expert by building up a case study of the development of both individual players and the community they exist within.

The professional interactions among peers in reference to tournaments, the bonds and friendships that have developed in the social sphere that accompanies club and tournament play, and specific relationships within the community such as mentor/protégé relationships were identified. In addition, the development and maintenance of cognitive and metacognitive skills of the experts, both inside and outside of the community, were explored.

A number of commonalities in the stories of the experts were identified, suggesting that experts have a range of shared habits of participation, and drew heavily upon not just deliberate practice, but also learning from participation, competition and observation, and making use of received wisdom from those who achieved expert status before them. The existence of a community was seen as important, even though the game of Scrabble is an inherently combative, competitive one, and seen to provide opportunities for learning and reflection. The research suggests that competitive practice can form the basis of a productive community of practice that is beneficial to participants, and that for Scrabble players’ development, there is a complex combination of individual and social factors involved in the process.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

This study investigates the way in which competitive Scrabble players gain the knowledge and skills that enable them to progress from novices to experts. It examines how the process of becoming an expert might be affected by the social and intellectual relationships between the players at different stages of development, along with the motives and needs players have during their careers. In doing so it seeks to find what skills are developed by Scrabble players as they become experts, how they do this, and what role social interactions have in the process.

Rationale

Communities of practice, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991), are a way of modelling learning within a microcosm of society united by a common interest or area of expertise, with its attendant culture, language and curriculum. The majority of this research has taken place in educational and management settings, but a potentially rich vein of discovery stemming from examining recreational communities has yet to be tapped. This research has also focused mainly on the results of the participation within the community; broader questions of how the community itself provides and mediates the knowledge and fulfils needs of affiliation and achievement are not well covered.
This study aims to explore how learning happens in communities at different stages of the journey from novice to expert, by looking at distinct roles, relationships and needs of community members throughout their careers. Further, it should demonstrate a pattern of learning needs within a community that may be broadened to look at any functioning community of practice bound by a curriculum taught both deliberately and spontaneously through competitive and collaborative interactions.

**Background to the Study**

The author’s interest in Scrabble spans nearly a decade of competitive play, during which he has progressed from the level of inexperienced novice to highly-rated expert, winning dozens of tournaments, in addition to involvement in the organisation of club and tournament play. The author has also conducted workshops and teaching sessions, drawing upon a background of teaching which includes both English and Computer Science (including game playing theory) to identify the key skills and knowledge involved in playing the game at the highest level. From this experience, a fascination with the game, its intricacies and its *people* has developed.

Though not regarded with the same intellectual respect as chess or go (weiqi), the mastery of Scrabble requires the development of a wide variety of cognitive and metacognitive skills: memory, logical-mathematical pattern matching, evaluation using statistics, spatial envisioning of board geometry, forward-planning, linguistic
knowledge, and the ability to manage one’s thinking and select appropriate learning strategies (Borzycki, 2001). Nonetheless, as a recreational activity, it remains popular; more than 100 million sets have been sold worldwide, and Australia has more than 1000 active club and tournament players (CASPA, 2009).

Scrabble is played competitively at regular intervals by a generally consistent, dedicated group of individuals whose interactions fit very closely with the idea of a community of practice existing within the boundaries of an organisation of players of various levels of dedication and participation. Relationships within this larger group often are quite observably similar to that of mentor/protégé relationships, with experts and journey(wo)men imparting skills and wisdom to newcomers and novices. These interactions occur both within the context of playing the game, and in social discourse peripheral to it.

Not much research has been conducted with Scrabble itself, other than a PhD thesis by Borzycki (2001) dealing with the notion of regular recreational wordplay offsetting the symptoms of cognitive decline. Borzycki (2001) found that expert players developed strategies to increase their processing of information at a rate higher than novices. Cansino, Ruiz and López-Alonso (1998) likewise investigated the thought processes that underpinned the play of the game using the skills already gleaned, rather than the processes that led to the acquisition of these.

Anything else which has been written about Scrabble in academic literature –
such as Wesson (1988) – mentions it only in passing as a potential adjunct to the educational process, for instance as a language activity – although play at the highest level uses logical/mathematical and spatial skills as well. Far from being a simple word game, Scrabble played at a high level involves specialised knowledge and a variety of skills, some of which could be useful in the development of other skills, as Borzycki (2001) found, and some of which are specific to its domain.

From a comparatively simple study looking at the dynamics of a community of Scrabble players, the rich data collected have suggested a number of sophisticated mechanisms working in tandem within the structure of a community of practice that lead towards the development of expertise, and the study aims to examine these in detail.

**The Aim of the Study and Research Questions.**

This study aimed at examining the ways in which learning occurs and expertise is formed in the community of practice of Scrabble players. This aim is achieved by answering the following research questions:

- What skills are developed by expert Scrabble players?
- How are these skills learned and taught?
- What is the role of social interactions in acquiring these skills and knowledge?
Chapter 3 contains a more detailed explanation of the methodology used to answer the research questions. Nine interviews were conducted with expert players as part of a case study, involving open-ended questions about participation in competitive Scrabble events, and within the community of other players. The questions focused on looking at what the interviewees learned in the process of becoming expert, and how they interacted with their peers and other players. Themes and patterns of participation were isolated and similarities in the narratives between each player were identified to try to generalise the steps taken on the journey from novice to expert.

**Theoretical Framework**

Communities of practice are organisations, both informal and formal, united by mutual engagement with a topic or domain and its attendant common activities (Smith, 2003). Building on the idea of cognition in practice, Lave and Wenger (1993) identified ways in which communities fostered meaningful learning, coining the term “legitimate peripheral participation” for the factors within a community that encourage participants to gain meaningful knowledge in their interactions. Legitimate peripheral participation requires real involvement and practice within the community without sequestering, even if it initially is only supervised or at a lower level than expert practitioners within a community or group.

Description of groups as being communities of practice is done on a post-hoc basis; they are not usually started with the definition or structure in mind (Duncan, Gordon &
Hu, 2001). Wenger (1999, p73) proposed three factors by which practice is “the source of coherence of a community”: a joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and a shared repertoire, which can be thought of, respectively, as the domain, the community and the practice itself.

The joint enterprise, or *domain*, functions as the community’s principal identity-giver. It is the shared knowledge that binds its members together as people and practitioners. Mutual engagement, or *community* encompasses the people involved and the roles and relationships – including learning and teaching – they adopt in their pursuit of enjoyment or expertise within their domain. The form or frequency of interactions can vary between communities and between members of the same community. The shared repertoire of practice constitutes the shared resources, ideas and information-sharing strategies that are a part of the domain within which members of the community participate and practise (Wenger, 2005).

Lave and Wenger (1993) describe the processes in being involved with a community of practice as taking place at multiple levels of participation, and encompass both *learning* and *teaching* curricula (p.97), which are alternately learnt and taught by members depending on their position within the community and in relation to those with whom they have interactions.

Wenger (1998) states that there are four premises on which communities of practice are founded: that people are social and this is crucial to learning, that knowledge is
founded and understood within specific domains, that this knowledge is seen as a consequence of participation, and that learning brings about meaningful experience and engagement.

A community of practice can be interrogated by looking at these, or other similarly derived, aspects. With this in mind, the question is to find what knowledge is transmitted and how. The focus of this enquiry is on such a diverse group of people who share a common interest, some common knowledge in a shared domain but of varying skill levels.

The community of competitive Scrabble players is an example of a community of practice in that it comprises a diverse group of players united in their passion for, and skill in the game of Scrabble, coupled with strong social and quasi-professional relationships between them, a hierarchy of experts, journey(wo)men and novices, and a strong body of knowledge, unique practices, customs and language that are understood by and promulgated through the group as a whole.

The author’s own interactions – in preparation and informally – have strongly suggested that these factors unite competitive, aspirational and expert players who share patterns of interaction in a collegiate atmosphere seemingly quite contradictory to the idea of competition. In other words, the strengths of the communal aspects of the group are not adversely affected by the competitive practice that underlies the community itself.
Within this group, the domain is the game of Scrabble, which includes the simple mechanical rules of the game, as well as the list of words permissible in the game, and specific rules to cover the progression of play and scoring. The community involves both the people—novices through experts—and the interactions that bring them together such as informal get-togethers, club meetings and tournaments. The practice, which separates the cohort from being an interest or social group, is the repertoire of knowledge specific to students of the game – strategies, game-playing theory, custom, culture and language, which are distinct to the community itself.

There is a large number of different types of skill and knowledge valued within the community — as Wenger (1998) calls them, “valued enterprises” — that make up the pool of expertise among Scrabble players. Participation in this activity and its attendant competitions involves the interaction in a number of different contexts with other players, and also with the community’s learning and teaching curricula; banks of knowledge that are not static but being refined and added to by both experts and non-experts.

**Definition of Terms**

**Scrabble®** is a Registered Trademark of Hasbro in North America, and Mattel in the rest of the world. It is a popular board game played by forming crossword-like sets of interlocking English words.
Expert, for the purposes of this study, has been defined as a player with a Scrabble rating consistently over 1600 or equivalent. This has been justified in Chapter 3.

Limitations

The limitation of this research relates to sampling. Due to geographical reasons, interviews were mostly conducted with scrabble players in New South Wales. As each State, with different tournaments and clubs may have a different pattern of social interactions or numbers of expert players, attempt was made to include players from other States in order that the conclusions were not limited to the New South Wales community by itself. Otherwise, consent was readily obtained by all those approached, and a high level of co-operation was noted by the researcher, with all interviews taking place in locations selected by the interviewees.

Organisation of this Thesis

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. The introductory chapter establishes an outline for the study, its background, context and need. Chapter 2 reviews some of the relevant literature to both the idea of communities of practice and Scrabble itself and Chapter 3 provides a description and justification of the methodology used in the study.

Chapters 4 through 5 look at the experiences of players as they came to know the community in which they would become experts at different points during the
community’s evolution. Chapter 4 examines the experience and development of formative experts. Chapter 5 describes the same experiences for experts who began competitive play at a time when the community and discipline had developed, and Chapter 6 examines the development of more recent experts who entered the community in a more fully-formed state. Chapter 7 reports the findings of the study, and a discussion of the findings, conclusions and recommendations for other or further study are included in Chapter 8.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter presents a review of literature related to the theories of communities of practice and the nature and development of expertise as well as a summary of the limited research that has dealt with Scrabble. The former, though relatively new, having been popularised in an educational context in 1991, has its underpinnings in older theories, and has been widely examined and critiqued. The study into expertise is one that has tended to see it as a generally solitary journey marked by practice and experience, though recent inquiry has suggested social and environmental components can play roles in its development. Scrabble itself is less well established in literature as a domain of expertise compared to other mind games. However, its profile in research has grown, and in the past decade a small number of studies into what constitutes expertise in Scrabble, and the characteristics of top players have been published.

Socially mediated learning

Vygotsky (1978) stated that the social environment was crucial for understanding an individual’s development, and that development of knowledge and understanding happened first externally, interpersonally, before intrapersonal development. Rogoff (1991) describes the social interactions inherent in groups of learners as being conducive to guided participation, cognitive apprenticeships and access and exposure
to a greater number of ideas and concepts.

According to Social Learning Theory, human behaviour results from the interaction of multiple factors: personal, environmental, and behavioural (Bandura, 1986). Social Learning Theory attempts to explain how mechanisms such as observation, imitation and modelling, working in tandem with personal factors and mental states, are responsible for learning and behaviour in humans. Bandura (1977) states: "Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (p. 22).

Input from others is seen as crucial to development for several reasons: Vygotsky (1978) explains that learning is contingent upon access to those with a better understanding of the domain in which the learning is to occur. The Zone of Proximal Development explains that learners have both a current level of achievement, and a further potential level of learning that may be attained with the relevant support and stimulus (Vygotsky, 1978). Bandura (1977) believed that interactions with others were necessary to provide both the models for learning and behaviour, but that these were also potential sources of reinforcement and motivation. Learning can occur through direct imitation, verbal instruction or through symbolic modelling (Bandura, 1977).
Communities of practice

The concept of communities of practice was brought to prominence in education by Lave and Wenger’s 1991 book *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral practice*, though the concept is underpinned by older theories, such as the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky, and Lave’s own investigations into situated cognition. Lave and Wenger's research (1991) was the first significant attempt to specify properties and definitions of what constituted a community of practice by looking at existing examples. The concept of community, involving the people who interact within a shared interest, as being important to good learning is well-explored.

The fundamental characteristics of legitimate peripheral participation are that such activities are either legitimate (of genuine relevance to the community), peripheral (less skilled, less intense or taken with a greater degree of support) or participatory (involves interaction with other community members) (Wenger, 1998). Essentially, to be relevant for development, learning needs to be a genuine example of practice within a community, something that constitutes working towards this, or involves real interaction within the community or members thereof.

These ideas in turn gave rise to the description of discrete communities of practice devoted to the sharing of knowledge within a meaningful social context, which enables effective learning (Lave, Murtaugh & de la Rocha, 1984). Wubbels (2007) defines learning in a community as “primarily invoked by communication between participants” (p.229). Wenger (1998) suggests that learning is part of a larger process
of active participation within social networks, and gives four premises that he feels underpins such learning:

1) We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.
2) Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises – such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry, being convivial, growing up as a boy or a girl, and so forth.
3) Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.
4) Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce. (p.4)

In defining what the communities themselves do, Manville and Foote (in Hildreth & Kimble) describe communities of practice as a grouping of participants “informally bound to one another through exposure to a common class of problems, common pursuit of solutions, and thereby themselves embodying a store of knowledge” (2000, p.29). Essentially, communities bring people together to do similar tasks, solve the same problems and facilitate the spread of knowledge that allows completion of the prior aims. Wenger (1998) likewise divides the roles of a community along these lines, calling them mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. McDermott (1999, cited in Tu & McIsaac, 2001) proposed three equivalent dimensions of
communities of practice: communities, knowledge and integration. Regardless of how
the facets of communities are subdivided, the consensus among theorists is that
communities bring about co-operation in practice and the sharing of knowledge.

The knowledge of communities of practice is observed as the framework through
which learning and social interactions take place. A *learning curriculum* as distinct
from a *teaching curriculum* was defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a “field of
learning resources in everyday practice viewed from the perspective of learners” and its
didactic components come not from traditional teaching as found in a classroom, but
from communal participation (p.97). They cite the degree of participation allowed,
access to information and the meaningfulness of a member’s participation as factors in
determining the degree of success in learning, with sequestration as a hindrance to
learning and participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In terms of knowledge, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) claims are twofold. Firstly, they
claim that the best environment for learning is one similar to the environment in which
the skills are to be used. Secondly, their research went some way towards an overview
of the curriculum of these communities, and identified some of the mechanisms by
which the information is distributed. Five case studies were used to come up with
commonalities between environments and social interactions that were conducive to
good learning results. Lave and Wenger were able to identify characteristics within
four of the environment/communities that led to meaningful learning, and identified the
absence of these characteristics in the other case study as a cause of reduced outcomes.
Wenger (1998) summarises the theory succinctly: that learning is part of a larger process having individuals interacting and interrelating actively in a social community with its attendant practices, beliefs, language and artefacts. Learning takes place as a participant joins the community and begins interacting with other participants, being immersed in its practice, and absorbing the shared knowledge of the community.

Oliver and Carr (2009) found that identification with one’s peers is both a complex construct, and important to success in gaming.

Lave and Wenger (1991) found that communities of practice did not necessarily have visible or clearly-defined boundaries with regards to membership, but instead entailed “participation at multiple levels” (p.98). The structure of a community is made up of individuals who belong to this group and identify as such. Each individual brings different knowledge and experience to the field, and carries different identities. For instance, Bradley (2004) describes novices as dependent upon “experienced members as role models to emulate in terms of identity, not just in terms of experience in the occupation or craft” (p.349). Experts, according to Wenger (1998) are “living testimonies to what is possible, expected, desirable” (p.156) – acting as exemplars for their craft, trade or as examples of what may be possible to the newcomer.

New participants join the community as novices, and learn on the periphery, and gradually their level of involvement and participation increases with their experience and ability (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Legitimate peripheral participation initially entails
meaningful activity related to the domain that is steeped in real practice; it is not of a lower status than expert practice, though it may be developing or less skilful in the case of novices and newcomers. Scaffolding, allowing new participants to become more accustomed to the practice and the culture which surround it, is a key process within communities, particularly where full participation is not possible for initial members of the community (Hung et al, 2005).

As knowledge and confidence increases, participants move more closely towards a hypothetical centre of the community, in turn becoming the keeper and distributor of the knowledge they have received as a result of their participation (Wenger, 1998). The path to full participation includes learning “how to talk, and be silent” as appropriate, suggesting that language and adopting appropriate behaviours are also a part of this process (Jordan, 1989, in Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.105).

Participants in the community may not all be interacting for the same reason. Wubbels (2007) notes that learning may not be the first purpose for involvement in the community for a participant, but “it is assumed that such a community is a fruitful setting for knowledge development and a way of developing social capital and stimulating innovation” (p.226), suggesting that those who wish to learn have their possibilities increased, and those who wish to engage recreationally or socially too have those dimensions heightened.
Wenger notes that as well as different purposes or reasons for involvement, participants in a community have different trajectories, not all of which lead to full engagement, membership and participation (1998). Trajectories in a community, according to Wenger, are a way of understanding a participant’s motion, which “has a momentum of its own in addition to a field of influences” (1998, p.156), suggesting that conscious decisions on behalf of the participant and less-controllable variables that arise from interactions with others both have a role in shaping the experience of all members.

The boundaries and features of the community itself have been built upon in great detail by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002). Brennan’s (2002) study of virtual online groups of shared domain and experience, for instance, found that while there was a desire to meet face-to-face in *affinity groups* conducted entirely outside physical meeting environments, groups without face-to-face interaction and interfacing were not found to be deficient as far as knowledge distribution or support factors. Sorenson and colleagues (2002) amongst others have earmarked the possibility of online-only communities acting as knowledge-sharing networks in the absence of the possibility of face-to-face interaction.

The content and structure of any given community of practice is unique, and can be simple and domain-specific, or move across domains and expertises. No extant communities of practice studies seem to have looked at the processes by which a novel, fluid, changing curriculum is created, altered, debated and distributed throughout a group of goal-united individuals.
It does appear that there has been something of a split in the application of these ideas as they currently stand – into educational settings, and into business planning and knowledge management. By and large these are formal settings, but communities of practice exist in informal settings as well. The idea of the recreational or competitive community of practice is not currently a well-developed one in the literature. Lagache (1993) took the idea of the “informal curriculum”, derived from Lave and Wenger, and applied it to a distinctly informal setting – that being the domain knowledge contained in the recreational discipline of scuba-diving, and examined the participation rates of a number of different kinds of participants in this community. The study, over a period of one year, looked at participation and interaction as measurable phenomena only rather than means of distribution or understanding of the curriculum.

Green (2005) identified five qualitatively-different “spaces” within development that relate to a person’s influence on other learners – action, explicit discourse, learning, practice development and trust – that encapsulate the different support given to a participant within a community, and provide a framework through which to examine participation and relationships between participants.

While the underpinnings of the theory are generally accepted, its development and application have sometimes been the subject of criticism, challenging the notion of communities of practice as a solution for a wider range of learning needs than originally proposed or contexts examined in. Fuller (2007) suggests that the theory was
built upon and taken in different directions in ways that did not take into account Lave and Wenger’s cautions of their work’s limitations and belief that it needed more specific study.

One caution comes from Wenger himself, stating that communities should not be created experimentally by will of the researcher alone; the success or failure is contingent upon the participation of members (2003). Wenger also suggests that learning itself cannot be designed, but only designed for (1998). Where attempts have been made to formulate guidelines for structuring these communities, they have been non-prescriptive by design, such as Schwen and Hara’s (2003) stage-based outline, which, true to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) original definition which is flexible, largely specifies analysis, evaluation and revision rather than specific creation techniques.

Duncan, Gordon and Hu (2001) note that most original research into communities of practice is done on a post-hoc basis, rather than looking at them as representing a specific pattern of social integrations that can be planned. Despite this, the concept of communities of practice has been taken up as a management technique able to be created and harnessed in ways analogous to traditional organisational structures, and this has been a particular focus of the theory’s critics (Fuller, 2007).

Kerno (2008) suggests that the incorporation of the theory of communities of practice into organisational and management techniques comes with problems, and notes that the literature “has tended to favor the positive outcomes” (p.69). Communities of practice within organisations tend to reflect the hierarchical nature of the broader
environment they are part of rather than being a method of being able to structure interactions in a different way to existing patterns (Kerno, 2008). Little empirical, research-based data is available in the literature on communities of practice, either for effectiveness, or affective benefits to participants (Hemmasi & Csanda, 2009).

Even where investigations have been done into the benefits of communities of practice, the findings have been interpreted cautiously. Hemmasi and Csanda’s (2009) study of 579 participants in an employment-based community of practice found a strong level of satisfaction and perception of benefit, though they note contributing factors, such as the make-up of members, enhanced communication and relevance to the job itself, are leading indicators of these benefits. Such factors are certainly found in well-functioning communities, but there is no reason to believe they will be present in all communities, or can be fostered in them, and the existence of such a community could not be considered a pre-condition for these to exist. As Fuller (2007) explains, harmony and stability are associated with the ideas of communities of practice, but cannot be taken for granted within them.

Despite their criticism of the theory sometimes being seen as ungrounded and lacking roots in specificity, Hughes, Jewson and Unwin (2007) suggest that any given approach taken by the writers and researchers to the basic concepts of Lave and Wenger’s work, including “Wenger’s management approach...is only one way to go” (p.5). As discussed previously, one approach not taken in the literature is that of the development of expertise in recreational and competitive discourses. The ultimate aim
of this research, then, is to find how novices interact within a community work to attain the skills shown by experts. What changes along the way? What effects this change and ultimately separates bona-fide experts from competent journeymen? What types of interaction can be observed at each stage of development? Along the way, the novice must acquire skills, language, understandings of the nuances of the group of people one is competing with and against, and these are not just discrete cognitive ideas; many have a basis in interaction and community and would be unlearnable in isolation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Expertise in gaming**

The domain of *competitive* Scrabble is one that has been given scant attention in literature. Widely used as an educational game in Thailand, in the manner of chess in Russia and Eastern Europe, its exact range of skills both cognitive and metacognitive has been the subject of relatively little study, and this has focused largely on outcomes and cognitive measures rather than the process of development. Literature on expertise in similarly challenging games such as chess and weiqi (go), by contrast, is widespread, and indeed chess has been one of the focuses of studies into cognition due to its range of skills and longstanding, reliable measures of ability (Ross, 2006).

Expertise is a topic that has been widely studied, across a number of distinct activities and disciplines, both to examine discrete expertise, and in attempts to define and explain expertise in a more general sense. Notions of expertise have often been
intertwined with the study of giftedness, with a number of different models or theoretical frameworks of expertise coexisting (Ericsson, 2006a; Stoeger, 2007). Some of these frameworks have looked at mental capacity as the primary factor, others see trained performance manifesting itself in qualitatively superior organisation of knowledge, a more enriched learning environment or demonstrated elite performance as the determining factor in what constitutes expert behaviour (Ericsson, 2006a). These ideas cover a broad range of beliefs with regards to theories of learning and intelligence and have been carried out in a variety of domains such as music, game playing and the sciences.

Development of expertise has traditionally been seen as a solitary, psychological journey contingent upon developing better quality and quantity of analysis in game positions (Holding, 1985) or the use of practice (Charness, 1988), rather than something with an essential social component, despite the widespread acceptance of Bandura and Vygotsky’s theories of learning in other educational areas. Classification of expertise has been linked largely to ability as displayed in performance or personal habits such as learning styles (Chi, 2006), rather than by social foundations of frameworks that may be used as scaffolds.

Hoffman (in Chi, 2006) defines an expert as a “distinguished or brilliant journeyman, highly regarded by his peers...who can deal with certain types of rare or tough cases” (p.22). Whatever its origins, experts show consistently superior performance in representative tasks within their domains (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). Chi (2006)
outlines the ways in which experts seem to succeed, threading together a variety of ideas of what an expert is: they habitually identify the best solution, make use of cognitive load-lightening strategies, employ finer or deeper analyses of problems, choose the best strategies and have an opportunistic problem-solving technique within their area of expertise.

Experience, knowledge and practice enable experts to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant information when examining the nature of a problem (Björklund & Eloranta, 2008; Larkin et al, 1980) and rather than processing more possibilities, are superior at determining fruitful courses of enquiry in searching (Klein et al, 1995; Ross, 2006). They tend to exhibit superior metacognitive faculties within their domain, such as adopting learning strategies, reflection, goal setting and analysing their own thinking, though Chi (2006) notes that in some domains experts can demonstrate inflexibility and overconfidence in their thinking.

The origins of these behaviours in experts is contested but the literature tends to support the idea that expertise is a product of experience, especially deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2006b; Hayes, 1985), though there is a lack of certainty in the research as to what, if any, other conditions such as inborn personal traits are necessary or helpful to its genesis (Subotnik et al, 2007). Ericsson (2000) notes that in chess players, IQ scores were not useful in differentiating between expert players, and that general measures of ability were poor predictors of domain-specific attainment. Experts of all kinds make use of a greater knowledge bank and superior representations of problems (Chi,
Feltovich & Glaser, 1981; Gobet & Charness, 2006) as one way of solving problems more quickly and accurately than novices.

The findings that experts’ performance are most evident when examining positions studied during development (Simon & Chase, 1973; Yoskowitz, 1991), and may not be flexible or adaptable to other situations (Chi, 2006) strongly indicate that expertise is something that occurs at least partially as a result of deliberate, effortful practice and effort. Simon (1973, in Ross, 2006) suggests expertise is the end result of a journey variously reckoned to be 10 years or 10000 hours of deliberate study in order to obtain the necessary knowledge and experience, though the presence of noteworthy exceptions has meant that this too is contested (Gagné, 2007).

What these years or hours should be spent on for optimum performance is likewise undetermined with conflicting research even from similar studies. Charness et al. (1989, in Gobet & Charness, 2006) expanded an earlier study that showed deliberate practice was the single greatest factor in explaining the variance of chess experts, but an expansion of the study found two other potential variables: coaching and competition. Further questions yet unanswered include researching what type or quality of experiences facilitate expert development and practice development to occur, and what environments they may be found in.

Arguing the case for environmental input into the process, Ross (2006) challenged the assumption of solitary paths to expertise in chess, citing examples from research that
suggested that grandmasters could be reared, and that the standard of chess players had increased vastly in the last 100 years. Ross also noted similar advancements in other disciplines such as music, and suggested that in general, experts are made, not born – these two findings in tandem suggest that expertise is a result of effortful study with practice as a way of identifying weaknesses, but also to some extent a product of the environment (2006). Mieg (2006) argues that the role of socialisation may vary in a person’s lifetime, but familial, school and peer groups are all potential sites of the kinds of socialisation that provide the kind of support or nurturance that may be a precursor to expert development. The lack of longitudinal studies complicates the attempt to answer these questions even for specific domains or cases (Gobet & Charness, 2006).

**The development of Scrabble as an expert domain**

While chess has been the subject of study and has a rich written history, such an analysis of Scrabble’s progression as an intellectual discipline and object of research is more difficult; the game and its attendant culture is young by comparison, having first been sold in 1948 with competitive tournament play developing in the 1970s (Fatsis, 2001). Scrabble cannot boast decades of analysis and literature devoted to its art and improvement such as exists with chess. Instead, linguistic and game-theory journals of limited run (and of limited interest outside the field of experts), such as *Word Ways*, *Medleys* and *Wordgame* have been written to disseminate knowledge of the game’s
mechanics at the highest level, and any that relate specifically to Scrabble are now defunct (Alexander, 2010).

The curriculum of Scrabble has mutated a great deal over the last few decades, but the rules and dynamics of the game have changed little in 60 years beyond four revisions to the wording of the standard rules (Sauter, 2008), even as the list of permissible words has changed significantly. Experts suggest that it is still a game of spatial and positional analysis (Watkins, 2000). Thus, analysis of expert Scrabble play has always had the idea of move generation, evaluation and selection at its core. Changes over time have consisted of new ideas and theories replacing or confirming older ones based on new evidence from player experience and computer simulation, as well as new experts coming through with their own ideas and theories which are frequently influential on the way other competitors participate in the game at the highest level (Sheppard, 2002).

Significant breakthroughs in understanding how the game is best played came from the use of computer simulations to answer previously insoluble questions about what constituted best practice in certain positions (Fatsis, 2001; Watkins, 2000). These discoveries, however, were products of a number of people bringing their expertise together to investigate a claim and further knowledge of Scrabble expertise. The expert Ron Tiekert suggested a method by which he evaluated moves, and computer programmer Brian Shepperd implemented these ideas on a larger scale, leading to the
birth of computer simulation of moves which led to traditional wisdom being challenged and later supplanted in a variety of situations (Watkins, 2000).

The particular cognitive skills required to play the game at a competitive, albeit not expert level, were examined by Borzycki (2001) for their effects on cognitive faculties in decline. She found that experts displayed superior performance on memory-related tasks where they were related to the game in which they had developed expertise. Cansino et al (1998) identified the main cognitive tasks as pattern-matching and checking validity of possibilities against long-term memory and examined the difference in performance in anagramming with stimuli of different lengths. Experts were noted to use pattern-matching techniques to counteract the exponential increase in difficulty, showing only linear increases in time to solve problems. It should be noted that these studies focused on a generalised view of what playing the game entailed rather than focusing on specific cognitive exertion or habits of bona fide experts.

Tuffiash, Roring and Ericsson (2007) undertook a more rigorous study looking at Scrabble expertise, comparing performance on a number of measures between experts, experienced non-experts and non-players, while also comparing the habits of these groups with regard to practice, study and time spent engaging in competitive play. Their study suggested a strong causal link between a set of skills and the performance on a task measuring them (including length and fluency of word generation) and the tournament rating of the player, and a strong positive correlation between the amount of time spent in study and practice and tendency towards elite status. According to
Tuffiash, Roring and Ericsson, experts acquire “domain-specific representations to support effective encoding and access from long-term memory as a form of working memory” (2007, p.131). However, the study did not find (nor did it seek to find a definitive answer to) the methods by which expert status was attained.

Essentially, research into the development of expertise in game playing has focused on personal characteristics and habits, with limited investigation into the environments in which they occur, even though, as Ross (2006) notes, education and environment are potentially highly significant where the data have been considered. Sosniak (2007) points out that because it is difficult to know in advance who will achieve expertise, the best method is retrospective interview to partially uncover the processes of those who have already done so. Gruber (in Sosniak, 2006) advocated examination through retrospective interviews with high-performing adults as a way of revealing the processes by which their expertise was attained, consistent with the idea that expertise has a significant component that stems from non-inborn potential or ability (Simon & Chase, 1973).

Combining a community view of fostering knowledge with an examination of knowledge itself

Brown and Duguid (1991) suggest three elements make up the process by which knowledge is created within a community of practice: narratives, collaboration and social constructivism. The prevailing literature on expertise in gaming, by contrast, has
depicted it as largely a solitary journey, Ross (2006) being a noteworthy exception.

Tufflash, Roring and Ericsson (2007) state, however, that, whatever they are, experts should seek to examine how “principles and mechanisms proposed to explain high achievement...can be used to explain human performance more generally” (p.133), suggesting worth in examining the processes and experiences of experts in even small fields such as gaming expertise for a broader understanding of not only the domain, but expertise more generally.

The community of players itself is of a kind that is interesting amongst other communities of practice – it combines co-operational interactions, such as those found in a business or management-style model, with a degree of competitiveness, such as may be found in a purely recreational discipline. In addition, members who are combatants and competitors in one context may be strong allies and friends in another. Keeping in mind the criticisms of Lave and Wenger’s theories, their ideas are being used only as a lens through which to understand the interactions of the broader community as seen from the perspective of its best practitioners.

With roles and relationships come specific beliefs and behaviours unique to those relationships. Scrabble players can often be seen quizzing each other on anagrams, discussing concepts with specific language that is alien to the casual observer even in social interactions that could be seen as periphery to the essential practice of the community (Fatsis, 2001). But Lave and Wenger’s (1991) investigations into equivalent communities suggest that these periphery events may be as vital to
understanding expertise as practice and study and competition. The community itself is more than a collection of practitioners – it is a robust social framework for interaction, support and assistance. These relationships can include mentor/protégé relationships, experts taking on roles similar to teachers, but the social dimension can be just as pronounced; Bradley (2004), for instance, claims that experienced practitioners can learn from novices, who often take on important supporting roles to experts in ways which have nothing to do with the exact practice.

The disparate threads of this research have been given examination to some extent, but there remain loose threads to be tied. Investigation of the gradually deepening process, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991) has largely focused on the process and the outcome. Corresponding literature on the nature of expertise, and where it has been undertaken, Scrabble expertise, has mostly looked at ability and performance at the site of the individual. This research seeks to marry the two; looking at patterns of participation, the social processes and the experiences of improvement and affiliation of experts with relation to the actual skills and habits learned rather than, as the research has done to some extent, assumed what these skills are without enquiry.

Finally, this research diverges from similar enquiry in that it focuses on the field rather than the person or domain, though it is informed by aspects of research into both. Rather than identifying what personal characteristics or development patterns are associated with experts, the research aims to identify how those who have become experts received support from their peers. Essentially, the research questions look not
at the individual factors of experts before they perfected their craft, but how their interactions, observations and practice combined to develop and specialise their pre-existing abilities into specific Scrabble skill.
In the preceding two chapters I have outlined the aim of the research as being to examine what constitutes expert behaviour in Scrabble players, and what processes take place during its development. This chapter contains a description of the study’s design, as well as a justification for the methodology selected. Details of the methods used to collect and analyse data will be given, along with the criteria for selection of participants, the structure of interviews and coding practices.

To do so, the research aimed to examine firstly what skills are developed, secondly, how they are developed, and thirdly, the role of social interactions in that development. Through answering these questions, a process of how the individual and social factors that combined to produce experts has been theorised. An analysis of patterns of participation and involvement was used to create a narrative of development of an expert and establish how this development is supported by the community of other players.

**Research Questions**

1. What skills are developed by expert Scrabble players?
2. How are these skills learned and taught?
3. What is the role of social interactions in acquiring these skills and knowledge?
Research Design

The research made use of a qualitative research design. Patton (2002, in Mertens, 2005) describes qualitative research as suited to studies where “the focus of the research is on the process, implementation or development of a program or its participants” (p.233), or where no acceptable quantitative method exists to answer a question. Yin (1994) notes that some “what” questions, rather than being an examination in prevalence of frequency, are more exploratory in nature and these too are well-suited to a qualitative methodology. The questions asked were not ones readily answered by quantitative means; while it is possible to look at statistics of a Scrabble player to look at their progress, this is insufficient to tell us why or how they developed in that way. Further, while some skills – such as word knowledge – are theoretically quantifiable, there is no reason to believe that an adequate instrument to determine this would answer more compelling questions such as exactly which words or strategies are selected for study by experts or how experts go about this learning.

The approach undertaken in this study was a single case study approach, with the data gleaned from semi-structured interviews as a means of knowing the case through its participants (Mertens, 2005). In order to work out how expertise is formed, the researcher conducted interviews with expert players, and from this sample, a case study was built up, seeking to identify commonalities in the individual stories as told by each expert. Yin describes this methodology as being suited to research in which the
questions being answered are explanatory, “dealing with operational links needing to be traced over time” (1994, p.6).

The first research question in this study is an exploratory “what” question, looking at which kinds of skills are learned, rather than a quantitative look at how many of these skills are necessary. The second and third questions are explanatory. This makes a case study a good fit for the research questions. Yin also describes ideal conditions for case study research as being those involving the examination of a “contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (1994, p.9), and these conditions are also true for the study; while the research examines a living, breathing community, it is one that is minimally influenced by the observation of the investigator, dealing primarily with recollections of past activities to build up its description of the community in question.

Communities of practice evolve and create themselves naturally rather than being subject to deliberate manipulation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To answer the research questions it is necessary to draw a boundary between the expert and the non-expert, and this was done by using Scrabble ratings, as described in Section 3.2. Gillham (2000) describes some advantages of speaking to elites within a group of practitioners, including the large bank of knowledge they possess and the likelihood of well-structured, easily-recollected knowledge from their experience and position. Interviewing experts, then, is a way of finding out not just about the experts’ journeys,
but about the evolution of the community itself and what constitutes expert behaviour within the field of expert players.

Because the first research question delves into the problem of trying to define expert behaviour within the context of the community of Scrabble players, namely what skills are learned, and the interviewer cannot claim to know all the possibilities, a relatively open-ended research instrument was selected, that of semi-structured interviews. Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommend interviews as a method for elaborating upon a case study for investigations that focus on events and processes, which is what the research questions sought to investigate. As the research required a method that did not rely on hypothesising, but would examine themes in detail based on the responses of the interviewee, semi-structured interviews were chosen. David and Sutton (2004) note that semi-structured interviews are used not for testing a hypothesis, but seeking to extrapolate on key themes or issues.

Many methodological problems have been noted with interviews, and there is the potential for even sound practice on behalf of the interviewer to be compromised by the responses of interviewees; there is the possibility of incorrect recollections, deliberate misinformation or selective information being given with the aim to deceive, or conversely please, the researcher, and also reluctance to divulge personal history. But interviews have strengths in collecting qualitative data in a way that is flexible, giving a degree of freedom or control to the interviewee rather than leaving it in the hands
solely of the researcher, thus leading to in-depth enquiry unfettered by constricting short-answer questions (Hannan, 2007).

With due care taken, the aforementioned issues did not appear to affect the data collection or the integrity of the data themselves. All respondents spoke openly, articulately and enthusiastically and seemed to enjoy sharing their successes and achievements.

**Procedure**

**Ethics Approval**

An application to conduct this research was presented to the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee, and this was approved in November 2005. Participants were informed of the nature of the research and informed of the confidentiality measures in place, and that if any changes to the research were to occur, they would be informed.

**Participants**

Nine participants were selected from a list of the consistently highest-rated Scrabble players in Australia. Two of these had previously been experts before emigrating to Australia, and continue to be so to this day. Seven of the nine have competed in a World Scrabble Championship, and all nine have represented Australia in international competition at least once. Preference was given to New South Wales residents, so the sample is skewed by convenience, but more than half the sample came from other
states. Interstate interviewees were selected by availability for interview during the researcher’s travel between cities. New South Wales and Victoria have had the majority of the country’s top players, including all of the top fifteen, so the geographical concentration of the participants reflects a historical skew pertaining to the location of the expert population (CASPA, 2010). It was necessary to include players who began playing at different times to draw more meaningful conclusions about the development of both players and the characteristics of the community, which were based on the community itself, rather than a geographical or social sub-section of it.

Recruitment was conducted in person at Scrabble tournaments, with interviews occurring shortly after, sometimes during lunch breaks at tournaments, and other times at the interviewees’ homes. Interviewees were asked for written and oral consent to participate in the research.

The playing cohort is widely varied in ability and experience. Expertise is a difficult term to define exactly, but what the interviewees all have in common is a high Scrabble rating, a competitive winning record against other experts and the ability to beat non-experts consistently. Within these boundaries, the researcher sought out players who were both relatively new experts, having only recently obtained a high rating, as well as long-standing experts who have been playing the game for decades. Three of the nine experts had been playing since nearly the beginning of competitive Scrabble, three began with the community having experienced some degree of development and
growth, and the final three interviewees began their play at a time when there was a great degree of sophistication and wide distribution of the playing community.

These expert players in the sample had ratings that indicate a history of consistently beating non-experts, which suggests a level of superiority that would be difficult to explain by luck or variance. A Scrabble rating\(^1\) of 1600 or better was, upon examining historical records of wins against losses, usually indicative of that level of expertise.

Players who have reached expertise are able to comment on various parts of the process of becoming expert; they will all have been novices and improvers at some point. Within this framework, some experts continue to push themselves to improve, and others do not, but the participants share a high level of performance over a sustained period of time on a purely objective mathematical basis. The following is a list of the study’s participants:

*Early experts:*

1. Joan played in the very first competitive Scrabble tournament in Australia in the 1970s, and has retained expert status to this day.

2. Esther is the sister of a former British Champion who went on to become British Champion herself.

---

\(^1\) Scrabble rating is a mathematically-calculated, objective measure of performance – usually falling between 500 and 2200. Its use has been controversial due to demographic differences in ratings due to geographical factors, but the current system has been in use since 1992, so it provides real performance measures over a significant period of time.
3. Alistair began playing when clubs had begun forming around Australia, exposing him to better players, but before the advent of regular tournament play.

*Mid-period experts:*

4. Andrew began playing at school in England in the 80s when the game had spread to an extent where tournaments were regular and he had access to several experts as role models.

5. Naween became an expert while playing in the Arabian Gulf at a time when the World Championships had unified the playing community and demonstrated the development of the game.

6. Bob emerged in the fast-evolving tournament scene of the 1990s as one of the quickest-evolving experts of his time and went on to publish study guides as an extension of his own study methods.

*Recent experts:*

7. Chris became familiar with competitive Scrabble through publications rather than first-hand experience, and transferred that knowledge into practice to become one of Australia’s top players.

8. Michael played in a number of different locations with a relatively slow ascent before settling in Victoria and becoming a consistent top-level player.

9. Richard is the only expert living in Canberra, and has developed in relative geographical isolation from other experts, aided by the use of computers and internet play.
Given that participants were selected for convenience and availability, one type of experience or opinions (possibly overly positive or negative in outlook) may have been overrepresented in the sample. However, because the sample constitutes a large proportion of the active experts playing Scrabble in Australia, it is likely to contain a good cross-section of viewpoints and experiences. The sample of seven men and two women reflects the prevalence of men at the top of the game; as of this writing, the top 10 are all male, though there are seven women among the top 30 (CASPA, 2010). In keeping with the idea of expertise over time, the sample includes players who were in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s at the time of the interview.

**Data Collection**

Interviews were preceded by a detailed examination of the participant’s recent playing history, in order that recollections about particularly notable points – such as tournament wins or participation in high-level competitions such as World Championships – could be requested.

The structure of the semi-structured interviews revolved around a series of questions which the researcher aimed to ask within a period of 30 to 45 minutes per participant. A list of the questions designed as the basis for the interviews is included in this section. In some cases, multiple questions were answered simultaneously by an extended answer to a previous one naturally leading in that direction or other questions
were re-worded in light of previous responses with the aim of getting more specific information on a facet of the topic referred to, rather than asking the questions verbatim in a fixed order.

After the set questions were answered, more detailed questions were devised in an impromptu fashion to enable elaboration on interesting themes touched upon in the answers. These questions were asked to clarify or get more information on an aspect of the interviewee’s narrative.

It was the intention of the researcher to examine the extent of participation within communities of practice for each interviewee – including but not limited to habits of participation (frequency, types of activity) in tournaments, collaborative curriculum building (despite its fierce competitive peak, experts regularly work together on analysis, game-playing theory and practices to increase the overall standard of play in the community – often to their own relative detriment) and social activities part of and periphery to the group and its practice.

Interview questions were constructed so as to encourage each interviewee to describe their progress and experience narratively in order that commonalities between their stories could be identified. These questions dealt with how they became interested in the game, what study or preparation they did to improve their skills, and what social interactions ran peripherally to their practice as a player. The questions also focused on habits of participation and experience, as well as the location, nature and frequency of
practice and interaction. A significant part of the community’s discourse happens online, in addition to the interactions at organised events, so the types and locations of meetings and practice undertaken by participants were examined.

In addition to this, expert players were asked questions about their efforts, achievements, planning and status in an attempt to gain an insight into qualitative differences in participation during phases or stages of the transition from novice to expert. In addition, questions sought to discern the motivation towards developing expertise.

**Interview questions related to the first research question (What skills are developed by expert Scrabble players?)**

These questions largely focused on trying to get the interviewees to summarise the nature of their own expertise; what constituted expert behaviour, what skills they felt were important to develop, and what they felt their strengths were.

1. **What abilities or skills have you improved the most during your game’s development?**

2. **What gave you the impetus to improve your game to the expert level? What drives you to keep your game at this level?**

**Interview questions related to the second research question (How are these skills learned and taught?)**
These questions look at both the individual and group aspects of learning, and seek to extrapolate on how expert players teach themselves, and take the specific advice or help of others to facilitate the development of their skills.

3. How did other people help you develop?

4. How consistent are you in practising? Do you have periods in which you spend significantly more or less time practising or playing the game than is usual?

5. Do you help other people improve your/their game?

6. Do you observe or analyse other players?

Interview questions related to the third research question *(What is the role of social interactions in acquiring these skills and knowledge?)*

The final selection of questions looks at specific interactions, the social, competitive and collaborative, and their extent and importance to the interviewees.

7. *What kinds of interactions with the community were most common when you started playing Scrabble?*

8. *How important are the relationships you share with your friends and competitors in the community?*

9. *How important are the social interactions surrounding clubs and tournaments?*

The interview data were recorded using a tape recorder. From then, each interview was digitally encoded, first to PCM WAVE file format, and then to low-loss MP3 format and saved to a password-encrypted folder on the researcher’s home computer. From
here, noise reduction techniques in Adobe Audition 2.0 were applied to reduce ambient noise where required.

Notes were taken during each interview to make a record of non-verbal elements occurring alongside the spoken responses which could not be picked up by audio recordings, such as facial expressions or gesticulations. Transcriptions from audio recordings were completed by the researcher within two weeks of the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Commonalities in the stories of interview participants with similar playing histories and levels of attainment were sought, and where these were identified in multiple interviews, they were considered as themes for subsequent coding; that is to say, before any interviewee’s experience was taken to be descriptive of the community as a whole, it had to be shared by at least one other participant.

The patterns which were examined were selected by using Miles and Huberman’s (in Yin, 1984; Huberman & Miles, 2002) method of placing observed types of participation into matrices for each type of interviewee data, along with information on the frequency and intensity of the kind of participation. The narrative data of participation can be mapped against the historical rating data to help construct a narrative showing relationships between levels and types of participation and involvement and attainment. From information collected from members of the group,
aspects and characteristics of the group and how it nurtures expertise were examined through inductive theorising – that is, making sense of the findings after their collection (Gillham, 2000).

A two-fold approach was taken in analysis. First, substantive statements were identified in each interview to identify the most important ideas, processes or beliefs present in each interview transcript. Analogous to the way in which Lave and Wenger (1991) identified common elements in five separate groups that fit the concept of communities of practice in varying ways, similarities of individuals within the community of expert Scrabble players were identified, with a view to explaining the roles and relationships inherent between members of this community and the game they play, for the purposes of explanation-building.

Secondly, a number of categories were identified in these substantive statements – some relate to intellectual practice, others to social practice. In addition, a number of different statuses or categories of participation, drawn from Lave and Wenger’s categorisations of novices, old hands and experts were used to group common experiences by interviewees together to identify patterns over each player’s career. By comparing involvement, affiliation, participation and achievement – both social and practical – at various stages, through the journey from novice to expert, which has been completed in all participants, a narrative of the process was pieced together from the commonalities in all nine interviewees’ discrete stories.
Ryan and Bernard (2003) explain that themes are “the conceptual linking of expressions” (p.88), and suggest that repetition, analogies and linguistic connectors are useful pointers to the presence of themes. Since the interviews conducted all asked respondents to describe their playing history from start to finish and comment on their participation and achievement, themes unravelled naturally and recursively, with some recoding needed for earlier interviews in light of what had come out in later ones. A list of codes can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Codes in analysis of interview data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOV</th>
<th>Experiences of novices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEV</td>
<td>Experiences of developing experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXP</td>
<td>Experience of experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL</td>
<td>Relationships within community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRA</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STU</td>
<td>Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM</td>
<td>Competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REF</td>
<td>Reflection and analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After completing the interviews, it was found that there were significant changes between the aspects of practice, study and reflection/analysis between novices and experts, with developing experts showing elements mostly in line with experts but at different levels. As such, recoding in light of these preliminary findings suggested it was more practical for the purpose of explanation-building to place these ideas into a matrix (Table 3.2), with findings placed into each cell of the matrix representing factors or characteristics of the interviewees’ journeys at that particular stage.
Table 3.2: Preliminary matrix of habits and experiences of expert players

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Novices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yin (1984) describes building explanations of phenomena as a process of suggesting a set of causal links. The narrative data gained have been used to provide a picture of the practices and activities of a number of distinct groups of players who have varying roles in this community – and a number of these patterns can be shown to have a contributory effect on the level and rate of attainment.

**Confidentiality**

Limited biographical information from the data has been provided where it is necessary to understand the participants’ journeys and illustrate their character and experiences. Because of the small number of experts, other Scrabble players would be able to identify many of the participants from reading the data in Chapters 4 through 6, and this concern was raised with each participant before proceeding with the interview. No participant expressed concern with sensitive information being published or used in the research, and only information relevant to their Scrabble-playing history was sought or included in the data examined.

**Ensuring the Quality of the Findings**

Lincoln and Guba (1989) suggest that the idea of “trustworthiness” to assess the quality of interpretative inquiry is more suited than concepts taken from quantitative research
methodology, and that quantitative measures have equivalents in qualitative research. Four of these criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). This section will look at some of the potential issues with the research that might call these into question, and what steps were taken to minimise their effects.

**Credibility**

Research is credible if “there is a correspondence between the way the respondents actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints” (Mertens, 2005). The two methods used to ensure credibility were triangulation and member checking.

Methodological triangulation was used to ensure greater validity and accuracy of responses. Harvey and MacDonald (1993) define three types of methodological triangulation, one of which is where a single researcher uses two or more research techniques. Many of the details were able to be verified from looking at the players’ records of tournament participation, while others were consistent with oral and written histories from other sources. An example of the latter is that the first tournament in Australia, described by one interviewer, was also written up in *Take 5* magazine some years ago. Further, because in some cases multiple interviewees referred to the same events, it was possible to compare their recollections to ensure consistency in the data.
The interview technique used also made use of clarifying questions as a form of member checking, which entailed asking supplementary questions at various points during the interview to ensure that the interpretation of the researcher was in accordance with the intent of the participant, usually in a form such as “So do you mean...?” or similar. In addition, interviews concluded with questions about the general themes of their story, trying to get an overall summary of how they felt and what they thought about their development to help make sense of the individual answers.

**Transferability**

Mertens (2005) suggests that transferability is the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other situations and contexts, and that sufficient detail of time, place, context and culture (thick description) is required. The research generated a good deal of thick data, as the context of each participant’s time and geographical location was sought in the interview, as well as their perception of and position within the developing Scrabble culture. These contexts were important, because the patterns of participation of each interviewee only makes sense in the light of what kinds of activities and learning experiences were available at that time and place.

Yin (1994) describes the difficulties inherent in generalising the findings of one case study to other potential research participants or environments, but recommends the researcher “try to generalize findings to ‘theory’, analogous to the way a scientist generalizes from experimental results to theory” (p38). The use of thick description ensures that the characteristics of the community’s culture during its development are...
relatively faithfully represented. Even so, the research itself cannot *prove* the characteristics and dynamics drawn as conclusions from the interview data, but they are intended to stimulate discussion and provide an alternative lens through which the phenomenon of communities of practice can be examined.

**Confirmability**

Mertens (2005) describes confirmability as meaning “that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher’s imagination”; that there is a logical link between data and analysis. It is important for the researcher to faithfully report what is there, rather than interpret the data in a way that conforms with presuppositions.

A potential complication in synthesising explanations from data stemmed from my pre-existing relationships with the experts interviewed given my own status as a highly-rated Scrabble player. Rubin and Rubin (2005, p32) suggest that successful interviewers must “sensitize [themselves] to these biases and learn to compensate for [their] own slant”. In conducting the interviews, I was careful to avoid speaking for, or assuming to be able to speak for the interviewees due to the existence of prior knowledge, and aimed to avoid filling the gaps or silences with my own assumptions or experiences, only taking into account what was said in the transcripts. In keeping with the idea of multiply constructed realities, any contamination by my a priori assumptions or beliefs had the potential to contaminate the sample and influence the conclusions towards my presuppositions unduly.
Summary

This chapter presented a description and justification of the research approach, including questioning strategy, subject selection, data collection and analysis.

A qualitative research methodology was selected for its ability to examine the characteristics of expert players, and through them, the community they exist in. A single case study using a sample of nine expert participants chosen by rating was deemed suitable to sufficiently depict the patterns of participation of experts generally. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore each expert’s history of development and interaction with the broader community, with the transcripts of these interviews coded to find recurrent themes and consistencies. This enabled the development of a general narrative of how expertise develops, as well as a depiction of the community in which it develops and how social factors play their part in its development.
This chapter presents data gleaned from interviews with three experts who started practising at a point when the competitive Scrabble scene was not well-formed. The game itself was played by fewer players, and at a much lower level of skill than it is today. The three interviewees whose stories are presented here attained a high level of success through the 1980s and 1990s and are still active competitors to this day. Though not at the game’s very top echelon, they still qualify as experts by the criteria used in the study. Their stories show the development of the community over a long period of time, comparing their experiences when they began to what the community is like now.

The major developments in Scrabble during the early years are the staging of the first ever competitive tournament, the shift from “high-score” Scrabble (both players playing to maximise the total score between the players) to “matchplay” Scrabble (both players vying to see which of the two would score the most points) and finally, the growth in the community to a point where there began to be collaboration, competition and co-operation between players who would otherwise not meet or communicate, through the development of tournament play and personal correspondences. From these came shared resources, players learning from peers or betters and a greater understanding of how to play the game at a high level – essentially, the formulation of a very basic curriculum.
Joan

Joan began playing at the age of 10 with a neighbour with whom she was friendly. She enjoyed playing the game against her opponent, and was aware of “being the equal of this person who had to have been about 10, 12 years older than [her]”. While playing, Joan developed her anagramming skills until she was aware of having a talent for this, but she was not aware of being a better-than-average Scrabble player because there was “no yardstick, nothing to compare with”. She continued to play the game intermittently for most of her early life. Joan’s initial learning was purely self-directed, and unaided because there were no study guides or word lists available, and no more knowledgeable peers from which to learn.

Joan’s first exposure to competition came from a newspaper competition in the National Review. Participants looked at a board diagram and sent by post the best possible move they could find. An elimination process filtered the entries down to eight finalists – of which Joan was one — who would go on to compete in the country’s first real Scrabble tournament. To prepare herself for the finals, the initial task she had to complete was to map her experience onto a different set of allowable words, by identifying which ones she felt were the most important.

[T]hey used the Heinemann dictionary, which was new at that time, it was part of the promotion for the Heinemann dictionary, and that was the time that I first went through the dictionary and looked, made a list of two letter words. I
realised that that was important, and so I did that and, that's when I started using the dictionary to learn words.

Joan combined her love of Scrabble, still at a very formative stage, with competition in pistol shooting. She didn’t have any specific goals for her Scrabble at the time other than “to win”. Gradually, she became less willing to focus on pistol shooting, attracted by the lure of her newfound mental pursuit:

When I started playing in tournaments, Scrabble took over gradually from what my other competitive activity was at the time, which was pistol shooting. And so you know, for a while I had continuing goals in pistol shooting, and Scrabble was like fun, and then gradually I got more and more involved in Scrabble and less and less willing to put the time in that I needed to maintain my standard in shooting which needs a lot of practice also…. And I enjoyed, I enjoyed the… the strategy side of it though I didn't think about it in concrete terms then, and I enjoyed the words, the verbal side of it.

Despite the lack of specific goals, Joan described herself as having always been near the top and in the early years having grown in skill at a commensurate rate along with her peers and competitors. She became aware that she would have to practise to stay near the top to continue achieving her ambition of winning consistently. Joan describes the level of skill at the start of competition as being much lower than today in an absolute sense, but that she was among the most skilled in a relative sense.
When Scrabble started here, it was started after that Hobart tournament by just a few of us and no-one was ever hugely better than I was, I was always right from the beginning one of the top people. Looking back now we certainly had much less skill than one does now, but I developed along with the development of organised Scrabble in Australia, so I was always good at it from the start.

This form of Scrabble being played was quite distinct from the modern game, both in strategy and set-up. Rather than being a one-on-one combative game, this tournament was played in pairs. From the start, Joan took on something of a leadership role, organising her partner’s learning, deciding on the words to be learned and how the lists would be created and studied, and from this, mutual co-operation in learning stemmed, as both players were working toward a common goal.

A unified, collaborative community was some way off, but Joan facilitated her partner’s learning, which would not have otherwise happened. Joan met her partner and “organised his learning in that I said you've got to learn all the two-letter words, then we tried, we went through and made a list of the three-letter words and we tried to learn those and that was mutual”.

Organisation and learning were processes that were generally solitary ones due to the lack of communication between players and the lack of pre-made resources.
At that point in time you basically had to go through it yourself. Nowadays it’s much easier for someone who wants to become very good because a lot of the hard work has been done by programmers, list makers and publishers.

Joan’s effort was rewarded, as she and her partner were able to win the tournament through superior word knowledge borne of their study, as the essential building blocks of expert play had been studied specifically by Joan and her partner. Identifying, isolating and learning the most crucial components, based on her experience playing the game for many years, allowed Joan to do this more successfully, and when tournaments became more regular, she was always one of the top players in New South Wales because of her command of the dictionary, even as a relative novice.

Of the community when she began playing, Joan recalls “hardly any general communication among Scrabble players except face to face”. Clubs were few and tournaments were infrequent, meaning players were not able to practise or compete regularly. Of tournaments, Joan recalls:

I suppose [regular tournaments] didn’t happen until the clubs started to multiply and each club would have an annual tournament, I suppose, of course, then there was the Australian national tournament, sometimes there were two Australian nationals, at least one year there were two national tournaments: one for people who played with one dictionary [Chambers], one for people who played with the updated dictionary [Chambers with the US Word List].
Despite her achievement, largely due to her self-directed learning, the ability to organise information, or access it in a form that was already organised, enabled more rapid learning. At the start of competition, the only way of studying was to read the dictionary, or use lists created by other players who had done the same. The advent of computerised lists enabled enterprising Scrabble players to create customised lists in specific orders, to isolate words that are necessary to play the game well.

Yeah, [my game] got stronger again once I had access to a disciplined way of learning, I mean, well, what did one learn? In the early days, people had, what did people do, they circulated lists, they made lists, people wrote books and you bought books like the Griffon list [of acceptable words] and learnt words, um, but you didn't have any easy way of organising that information until it could all be computerised.

The advent of more clubs, state organisations and the formation of a national body forged more co-operative links between players across the country. A unified National Championships began running in the mid-1980s. Prior to this, a tournament known as the Moomba Championship had been the de facto national title. Communication between players from other States and cities began to increase in frequency, both in person and by correspondence, friendships formed and gradually players began sharing their work, sometimes out of goodwill, and sometimes for money. When asked if players freely gave of their knowledge, she says:
Oh yes, yeah, extremely. Barry Harridge was one who was extremely nice and helpful and he, I think, must have been one of the first people to use computers to generate lists of various kinds. He developed the book called the Consogram book, and that was his concept entirely and I think he was the first person to use, in Australia, to use computers to generate lists. Then there was a guy in America, Parker I think it was, who developed a learning program that he sold and (laughs) what was it called? I can't remember. It was like LeXpert [an anagram and word study program], it was a learning program like LeXpert but it was for sale and by that time, there was enough, uh, web I suppose, Internet communication that people could access those things.

The passing of knowledge occurred not just from peer-to-peer – experts helping other experts to create a broader base of knowledge — but also involved processes whereby expert players gave knowledge to less experienced and skilful players.

I suggested that the three … Australian reps at the World Championships should hold a teaching session for players who wanted to come. We invited I think, something like the top 24 players in NSW to come. Okay, so when I first suggested that, Bob said "Why do you want to teach these people, they're going to come up and beat you", and I said and I thought then and I still think that first of all you have to nurture Scrabble in Australia, you have to get people coming up you can't just have you know, people on the top who are good and the rest who would like to be but don't know how to get there. And, secondly, I mean
it's a generational thing, the new generations have to take over from the old and so knowledge has to be passed on.

Joan experienced a large amount of success throughout her playing career, including being both New South Wales and Australian Champion, but believes that she has slipped in ability and been overtaken by other players, including those that she had mentored. As an expert, she is able to describe her perceived failings in a detailed way:

I forget words. I think of words because I've thought of them before and I can't remember if I've thought of them before and they were words or if I’ve thought of them before and they weren’t words. Sometimes my defensive play isn't as good as it should be, sometimes my endgame isn't as good as it should be, and I think that when I was more on the ball I would have been able to do those things a little better. I see [myself] as still being part of the top scene, I'm not right at the top but that's true, it reflects where I am.

She still sees herself as taking a leadership role in the game. Although some of the specialised knowledge has weakened, her finely-honed and long-standing expertise at the basic fundamentals of the game enable her to discuss aspects of strategy and word study to players who play at the same club she does, a club at which she has been the strongest player for many years.
Her method for training and teaching new players involves facilitating them seeing the game through the eyes of a more expert player – by putting a group of players of varying abilities in the same situation and getting them to solve the same game problem. Ideas as to the best solution are shared, and this gives newer players an insight into the decision-making processes that top players use, as well as giving them an understanding of word knowledge in the context of a real game situation.

We all have the same racks, we talk about moves, we talk about reasons for them and strategy, and that's part of my teaching with other people. I'm reasonably good at explaining and talking about strategy, so I definitely think strongly about that….I certainly find that I don't always have the best answer, someone else will have the best answer, and then after getting the answer, part of the routine is to reflect, what part of your thinking wasn't there that you didn't see that answer. You know, what part of your strategic thinking or your word knowledge, or your rack management thinking, which part wasn't there, and then you can try to address that missing part.

Joan is able to identify both skilled and potentially skilled players by watching them. Of one of her club-mates, she says:

He was a person who had only been playing over the net and had really become keen very quickly and was very interested in strategic issues as well as in
increasing his word knowledge. And he just lapped everything up, it was really interesting to see how he appreciated points that were raised.

Scrabble presents a challenge for the newcomer seeking to learn from the master player – lopsided scores and winning margins are not uncommon. Joan’s club uses a handicap system whereby newer players are given a head start. Joan stresses that this is as much for her benefit as other players, as it gives her an additional challenge, and means that not every game is easily winnable due to her advantage in skill.

A handicap is a way of theoretically, it’s a way of theoretically giving the opponents an equal chance of winning. If the handicaps correctly reflect opponents’ skill levels, then at the beginning of the game each has an equal chance of winning and that’s, I think that’s better for both players. One, for the lower rated player, it means they get, they lose often and it’s not fun to lose often and it’s not good for your self-esteem regardless, and for the higher rated player it gives them more of a challenge, and uh, it, because if you're a higher rated player playing someone who is quite lower rated which... we have quite marked differences at Balmain, you are going to be in the position of being able to beat them quite easily and that's not fun, in a game.

Joan believes that it is essential for the community to have players coming up, challenging the experts and supplanting them, and for new generations to become involved to ensure greater competition and so that the knowledge within the
community is passed down. Of the modern community, Joan notes the relative ease of access to information on how to play better.

Totally, much easier nowadays, it's all there for you. I remember in my first competitive days in Australia, the first time I was selected to go to a World Championship there still weren't computer generated lists…. That sort of thing was not available to players in general unless they thought of it themselves.

Joan shows no bitterness about her having been surpassed by more recent players. Having been an Australian representative at high level international competitions, and been involved in nurturing newer players, she takes pride in the achievements of peers, while still trying to play at a level that’s “not embarrassing to [herself]”.

After I had been in my third World Championship and I, I thought, I really thought I've been there, done that, achieved as much as I can, and also, I guess, I guess part of maturity is pleasure in seeing other people win too, because you know… their achievements mean something even if it means they’re beating you.

Through supporting players with advice and coaching, and being supported by the community through friendship and financial aid when she represented Australia, Joan has been both a giver and receiver of goodwill and assistance throughout her thirty years playing the game.
**Esther**

Scrabble has been such a long-standing part of Esther’s life that she “[doesn’t] remember a time when [she] never played, because there was always Scrabble around”. She had played with her family, particularly her brother, who went on to become British Champion in the 80s. Esther’s brother thought that given that she was competitive with him, she should play as well, and in 1981 Esther began to play tournaments.

It took about a year before Esther was a serious contender at tournaments. She even achieved a good placing at her first event. She recalls that “because the results were good, [she] kept going” to clubs and tournaments. Esther was hungry for a challenge, and sought out better opposition, and opportunities to study.

At this point in England, the game was still played to the high-score rules, and Esther acknowledged that while the game was skilful, there was a larger component of luck than there is today. Due to the short length of the tournament, and the larger amount of luck, Esther was successful in winning a British Championship very early on in her career. Esther attributed this success to both skill and luck on her part:

> I’m not saying I don’t deserve to win it, but because it was played for high scores, so it was all about, playing with people who played the same as you did,
leaving open boards and that. It was skilful but it was different. The fact I won it was more luck than ability.

From the beginning, Esther preferred competition against peers and betters to easy wins over less able players, not because of snobbery, but because she enjoyed the challenge of potentially losing a game and winning it. Esther calls the unpredictability of the game one of the reasons she was drawn to it. She explains that “every game is different. It’s just so interesting, what’s going to happen next”, and that certain wins over lesser players are of limited appeal.

I don’t particularly mind losing because I feel like it’s a challenge to beat them next time. Beating low rated players every time, you know, bit of a waste… no, not a waste of time, but you know.

To fulfil her need for better competition, Esther and a number of other strong players formed an elite group. She described the club as being comprised of “a few of the top players from Bristol”, including a future World Champion. “There were about 10 of us”, she said, “[who] decided just instead of playing weaker players, we’d set up our own club and it was good.” Esther felt that without being pushed, she would not be as good a player.
At the same time as she was getting practice from top players from her area, Esther was collating lists and studying the published word list and isolating what she felt were the most important words for her to know – seven- and eight-letter words.

I had a really easy job in Bristol for about, well, for a few years, so I spent a lot of time going through the word book, Chambers Words at that time, because there were no computers and no word lists. So I just went and produced this 8-letter word booklet which meant I was threading through the book getting 7s and 8s out.

This was a fairly time-intensive process, and one a player beginning today wouldn’t have to do. When asked if Esther thought a new player would have to expend as much effort as she put in given that specialised lists have been published and can be generated by computers, she was in two minds, and notes that her study method worked well for her because she was more actively involved in compiling lists and deciding on her own course of learning.

[Today] it’s all done for you, you don’t actually go through and study yourself. I think you still have to do the legwork. If I have to read a printed out list, I’ll fall asleep. If I actually write a list, or type a list out myself, I’ll remember it a lot more than having things handed to me.
Today, Esther, though an infrequent tournament participant due to family commitments, keeps her skills sharp by practising with a nearby friend who has made considerable improvement in the last few years. She is aware of being a stronger player than her regular opponent, and observes his skills and compares them to her own, just as she does with her rivals. Esther believes her strategy allows her to beat players who have done more study than she has, so those players she also has a word knowledge advantage over will not beat her very often.

He’s just… 5 minutes up the road. He’s in the same situation as me. Young family. If I go to a club it takes me 40 minutes to get there I play 3 mediocre games or whatever. We can get 7 games in an evening, it’s just convenience. I think, hopefully he’s got a lot out of playing, we’ve been playing for three years. He’s come a long way. Hopefully he sees that as a benefit. I just get to play face to face, I’d much rather play face to face…My word knowledge is better than his, playing someone else like whose word knowledge is far superior than mine, all I can think of is that some of my strategies are not… better but better than someone... with a better word knowledge. There must be something. If it’s not the words, it’s something.

In addition, Esther takes some pride in the fact that offering herself as a regular opponent has enabled Victor to improve. She attributes his improvement to a combination of exposure to her as a better player, but also to his hard work. Esther believes “having a partner, someone to play with who’s better than you is great”.

-67-
Conversely, practice, even if with a slightly weaker opponent, is important for Esther because in the absence of time or motivation to do dedicated study, she can be exposed to new words or attempt plays she is not sure of without penalty.

I remember words if they’re played against me, much better than if it’s on my rack… so if someone plays a really clever word, I’ll remember it forever. Also, I like to at the end of the game, check things up…write it down and check afterwards, hopefully, if [you] get the same combination again [it will] [s]tick in your mind. Which is why I don’t like seeing non-words on board…When someone plays a word, I like to know if it’s true or not.

Esther relies on practice to facilitate her memory of what she had learned some time ago. She still relies on her initial study completed twenty years ago, using a different dictionary to that which is currently used today. She still achieves very highly, and achieves results that are good enough to sustain her for the amount of effort she puts in.

Unless I were able to study more which I’m not in the moment I don’t think I deserve to be in the top 10. I suppose playing more would help, but yeah, I’m happy where I am with the amount of study I do.

She admits that being overtaken by competitors to the point where she would no longer be in the top section would make her renew her efforts, but she sees this as unlikely.
Esther maintains a positive outlook on her performance, controlling her psychology so she is able to come back from a loss and continue playing at a high standard.

I think a lot of it is not, I think I’m quite positive, even if I lose, I try not to let it get me down. There are players that I know once they lose 2 or 3, you know they’ll lose 10 because that just… I try to move on.

As with when she began playing at an expert level, access to strong competitors is important. Asked if she felt she would be able to continue to play at a high level without competition against other experts, Esther replies in the negative. Sydney, where there is the greatest number of experts, is where she wants to stay. “If we moved out of Sydney, I’d find it hard to keep playing,” she says. The Scrabble scene provides a motivation to stay put. “I’m not going to move anywhere I can’t play,” she adds, underlining the importance of the game to her.

**Alistair**

Alistair began playing the game competitively in the early 80s, by which time there was a small, but growing Scrabble club scene. Players were able to meet once a week for social and practice games. This development meant the presence of more accomplished players from whom novices could learn. His interest in the game had started with playing at home with his family, and though he had been competitive at this, high achievement was not part of his initial plans.
When I started off at the club, no particular aims then. After I’d started playing tournaments I thought, I ought to play in the top section. That was my aim. I didn’t really think I’d be a top player but I thought I should be able to get into the top section so that was an aim.

There were enough players at tournaments that it was necessary to divide players into sections based on ability, and getting into the top section was Alistair’s aim once he began to compete frequently. His initial understanding was that the main difference between the top players and the rest was word knowledge, and believed that “if [he learned] words, [he could] be a competitive player in the Masters section, which is what [he] wanted”.

Alistair’s early practice was sufficient for him to work out, as Joan had, without being told by anyone else, that he had to learn the shorter words.

At that stage, um, yeah, we had two-letter word lists and I was trying to learn the twos and I learned some of the threes and, yeah, I realised even then that we had to be familiar with those words on the list. I did make a point of learning those two-letter words. Didn’t take that long to learn the two-letter words.

The shift from high-score to Matchplay in the mid-80s changed the game enormously, forcing players to engage in wholesale changes of tactics and strategy. The inherited
wisdom of the early years, with the exception of which words were acceptable, became useless, as the dynamics of Matchplay Scrabble were completely different to what had gone before – the curriculum had changed. The goals of playing the game became different, and this necessitated considering different aspects when deciding to play a move.

[W]hen we changed to playing for a win which was about 84, people realised they had to learn different skills and the particular thing the change was, you had to turn over tiles. And before then, people used to say, don’t turn over tiles, conserve your tiles, you play a short game. There was a general recognition that if you turned over tiles you were going to get more blanks and Ss. It didn’t really matter if you didn’t get a consistent high score as long as you got more than your opponent.

Alistair independently came up with a method for monitoring his own progress as he began to develop as a player. Rather than looking solely at how often he was winning, he identified a group of statistics that he wanted to examine, and began to collate them over time, to measure the effectiveness of his own study.

I used to keep tracks with a book with my scores in it and I used to track my average score and the number of bonuses I got per game. By this stage I was getting them regularly. I used to get 1 to 2 per game, sometimes 3 and um, I can
remember when I first got 400, that was a big significant thing to get 400, you know, I was averaging in the low 300s probably at that time.

Although progress was not as quick as he desired, Alistair remained determined to improve as he enjoyed the game. He perceived the top players as being “so much better” than him, and continued even though he was not winning as often as he desired. The challenge was formidable but enticing, and it was not continued solitary effort, but observation of other players that led to the first breakthrough:

Maybe I thought, I must find a way to win this game…[A]fter a few years, I found the way, and the way was I followed what Dennis Boon was doing. Dennis was one of the leading players at the time. He used to make lists of six-letter combinations to make sevens.

These combinations of letters, referred to as “stems”, are sets of letters that combine with a large number of other letters to make a seven-letter word, for which a bonus of 50 points is awarded. Learning a stem is a way of memorising a number of similar, useful words, as well as providing an easy memory aid to identify and solve anagrams.

Alistair took upon Dennis’s study technique, and began to create lists of words of his own, using the strategy he had observed in an expert player. During lunch breaks and whenever a dictionary was handy, Alistair would study words. He also watched the games of experts during club sessions to get an idea of playing strategy and style.
Dennis was probably a bad influence on me because he used to fish like crazy. There was a big contrast between Dennis and Roger Blom. Roger Blom would just, because he knew the whole dictionary pretty well, he would actually play according to what was on his rack. He’d find the best scoring word on his rack and play it.

“Fish”, in Scrabble parlance, means to play off one or two tiles for a small score in the hope of drawing a high-scoring play such as a seven-letter word. Though he had learned from Dennis’s methodical study technique and gained a large number of new words, he was still not achieving at a level he felt was high enough for his knowledge. During the 1985 Victorian Championships, he made a decision to change his style of play and abandon the “fishing” technique he had absorbed through observing Dennis. This led to success, as he won his next tournament and got into Masters, where he has remained ever since.

The decision to stop fishing for seven-letter words and stuff, and score consistently when I could was the turning point. Although having the words in the background was very useful.

Alistair was able to use the study tactics he had picked up from a mentor more effectively by reflecting and evaluating his practice and making changes. The combination of his own knowledge, bolstered by the effort of organisational study that had gone before brought about success. Even then, there remained a scintilla of doubt
about his actual ability. Despite his rating and results putting him up amongst the
country’s elite, success in high level competitions and qualification for international
events continued to come as surprises for Alistair.

When I did achieve high things like getting 3rd places in the Australian
Championship and I won the NSW Championship the first time, it was totally
unexpected, it wasn’t part of my expectation, it was beyond, beyond my goals.

Alistair became one of the country’s top players, and a key figure in organising the
game, running the Dandenong club for 15 years and spending several terms as National
Ratings Officer, responsible for processing results so that national rankings could be
produced. From here, he became more involved in what he describes as the politics of
organisation, which took up the time he had previously used for study and
improvement. Alistair explains that he feels as if he plays well enough to continue
playing, but the politics sometimes saps the enjoyment out of his pastime, and from
time to time a combination of his lesser success and frustration with organisational
aspects makes him ponder quitting.

It could happen anytime. I could say, I mean one of the issues is the politics of
Scrabble which I’ve put up with for 20 years, really I don’t like it. At some
point I’ll say enough is enough.
Alistair notes that disputes, sometimes “not even [about] issues of substance”, with other players about decisions made were negative experiences that made him less inclined to interact with other players and spend time on the game.

When I say politics, there’s two aspects of that. There’s being on committees and being Presidents and things, and I’ve done that. Those sort of things are necessary, it does take time, it does take away from your effort, it does take away from your game, but I accept that. I was prepared to make a contribution. There’s a lot of, you have to have committees, you have to have organisers, but there’s a lot of negative things which you spend fighting battles that shouldn’t really have to be fought and that’s really disheartening. Although those things have always been in the background and there’s been a lot of personal stuff behind the scenes, I know it’s been going on, relating to that. …Scrabble politics has always been quite nasty.

Despite this, Alistair continues to evaluate his practice as an expert Scrabbler with keenness, continuing to set goals for himself, though these are of a somewhat lower difficulty than what he has achieved throughout his playing career. He still likes to keep track of his ranking within Australia and prides himself on being able to still win tournaments, and is able to attribute his successes to both luck and skill where appropriate.
I watch the ratings and I use that as a measuring stick. I like to get a tournament win occasionally. You sort of feel as though you, you perform, you get a feeling about your performance. I’m not sure how to answer the question. Sometimes I’m happy with my game, sometimes I’m not. Sometimes I might have a couple of wins but I think, that was just lucky, sometimes I have a string of losses and I think oh, gee, that’s just unlucky… I like to play as well as I can, but I don’t think you can say you’re ever satisfied with your performance because you’re not but I think if I keep to my current level I’m probably doing as best as I can.

Today, his rating puts him outside the top ten in the country, but he spent many years there. Reflecting on the way the game has changed since he became an expert, Alistair notes the presence of “a generation playing at a higher level I don’t think I really want to. I don’t think I want to be quite as concentrated and focused as that”. He still competes actively and often, but concedes that many of his previous goals, such as qualifying for World Championships and winning major titles, are no longer realisable.

There was a time when I thought, “Oh, I could win an Australian Championship or I could qualify for the World Championship”, which I did a couple of times, well I didn’t win an Australian Championship. But I got a couple of placings. There are times when I could have expected that. I don’t really expect that now. I don’t think I’m motivated enough to really put the time in which I’d have to do to get there. Realistically, I think I’m basically trying to keep my rating in
the top 10 and probably no more than that. I don’t see it as realistic that I’ll ever be a world championship player or an Australian champion player or anything like that, I think the time for that has passed...I can’t stay at the top of my game all of the time, it doesn’t happen.

In keeping with the generosity and considerable time expended with volunteering to run state organisations, rating systems and clubs, when asked whether he would give up time to help a player if they asked for his assistance or advice, Alistair says without hesitation, “I’ll help an individual, yes. With their game, I don’t mind doing that.”, though he reported that he was not helping any individual player at the time of the interview.

Alistair’s organisational work, continuing to this day, has had a profound effect on the community, supporting and helping players of all abilities. His work in establishing and maintaining ratings systems has allowed players from all around the country to monitor their progress and improvement over time, something that he had to do by hand in exercise books when he began playing. A large part of the monitoring and reflecting progress is now automated and computerised, and more information about achievement is available to players as a result. Despite the arguments and disputes, Alistair continues in some of these roles today, continuing to help through being part of the game’s organisational structure, rather than as primarily an informal teacher or mentor.
Discussion

These three interviewees each describe the early days of competitive Scrabble from slightly different perspectives. Joan does so from a position of having had the development of the game largely follow her at first, and through her improvement likewise tracking the development of the game closely, as noted by her belief that there was never anyone significantly better than her. Esther was always near the top, but had a number of peers from which she could learn and compete against. Alistair, by contrast, came into the game with some development having occurred in the community, and started near the bottom, working his way to the top.

This development is relatively minor compared to what would develop later, and Joan describes this well when assessing her own place within the modern game – that new players have emerged and surpassed her. The advent of more frequent tournaments, and more frequent communication and publication of material would later enable their successors to achieve more, and more quickly.

The similarities in these stories are that competition was infrequent and the development of a base of knowledge that was readily available had not taken place yet, though there was some collaboration in Joan's early experience in developing and sharing knowledge. Though Joan and Alistair have taken on more of a leading role in organisation and assisting other players, Esther still participates this way, albeit in a
more selective fashion. In addition, the presence of challenging peers was seen by the three early experts as being important for improvement.

The need for practice is a strong theme for early experts, as actual competition being infrequent necessitated skills being tested and evaluated in non-competitive environments. Alistair’s use of statistics and Joan honing her skills by playing a game against herself are examples of this, Esther’s selection of strong playing partners in her practice games suggests that practice needs to be meaningful and challenging to lead development forward.
Chapter 5

THE INTERACTIONS OF MIDDLE-PERIOD EXPERTS

This chapter presents the experiences of three expert players who began playing Scrabble at a time when the work of earlier experts had created more coherent communities around the world. National associations had been formed, tournaments attended by players around the world were occurring and players in decent-sized playing populations had access to numerous means by which to learn and improve their games, including other players who could act as mentors and examples.

Naween

Naween began playing at home in 1986 while his family was living in Bahrain. Describing himself as a competitive person who also enjoys cricket, badminton and table tennis for recreation, Naween took to Scrabble because there was “not much else to do at the time” living in the Middle East with its hot climate. Naween remembers being “half decent” before he began playing at the Bahrain Scrabble League, which his father brought him to. Of the initial competition, Naween recalls it being strong, but not in comparison to today.

Back in those days, there was competition but I wasn’t that good those days as I think… most of the… rest of the world weren’t as good as well. But I obviously was improving all the time.
Naween experienced a great deal of success at a young age, winning the Gulf Championships when not even a teenager. He attributes this to the lack of competition, and concedes the same level of achievement would not be possible today with the level of skill he had when he was playing in Bahrain. Players who aspire to major tournament wins, Naween believes, have to be “playing against world class players… so it’s a different ball game… compared to 10 or 15 years ago”.

Despite this, Naween remembers one player having an input into his development through giving advice on various study methods.

I did have a mentor in the Middle East, his name was Roland Filio. I think he played in the first worlds 91, 93 and maybe even 95 I’m not sure. Yeah. He sort of helped me a lot, just in terms of the way of studying words, not so much strategy. But yeah. Basically, my fundamental vocabulary stemmed from like the way he learned words and all that sort of thing.

Naween’s skill and the generally lower standard of play at the time resulted in him being able to play in the World Championships in 1995. Having theretofore mostly played in the Gulf, this provided Naween an opportunity to play top-class players he had not played before and get “a feel for what the rest of the world was like”. It also encouraged and inspired him to improve:
[B]ack in 95, when I finished 23rd, I was probably determined to do a lot better because I knew I wasn’t that good compared to the rest of the world so then obviously put in the extra effort and just tried to do better next time. Because, I just obviously wasn’t good enough [to win] at the time and there was only one way to improve at the time, learn more words and I suppose, try to improve your strategy if there were any gaps there.

By reading the word list and using techniques he had gleaned from his own practice as well as observing other players, Naween began to accumulate knowledge of allowable words, using the simple method of notation to monitor his progress through the text he was using.

I think the only way, one of the ways the main way to improve your game is to learn more words, so if you had a photographic memory or a great study method, or you could just you know retain like word knowledge then that’s definitely the way to go…. [The] basic study method that we used, that I used, was just sort of grabbing a dictionary and sort of going through all the pages from front to back, making notes here and there. Like, I sort of had various ways of remembering words.

Learning words was the primary way to become better for Naween because he felt that strategic development is contingent upon good word knowledge. The appropriate time
to develop strategy “comes down the track once your vocabulary gets to 75000 words or whatever”.

Naween’s observations of other players and interactions with his mentor generally involved monitoring words played and interrogating study techniques employed by other players. This is still true today, as Naween keenly watches players because he “enjoy[s] it, the words they play”, but he never looked to other players as strategic exemplars, nor does he “copy other people’s strategy or anything like that”.

I basically know my shortfalls so I’m pretty sure, like I know where I need to focus to improve my game, it’s just a question of whether I’ve got the motivation to put in the effort to learn those extra words and become better.

Having been spurred on to improve by seeing the standard of play around the world, Naween improved to a level where he was a competitive international player. With this, his goals for achievement continued moving beyond his current level. From being competitive at a world level in 1995, Naween has set his sights on winning a World Championship.

That’s a definite goal. Because at the last worlds, when I went into it, I sort of figured, I’m probably sort of, ranked maybe top 10, just based on like who was there. So, I thought I was a good chance to you know, do well and I was quite lucky to finish 3rd. You always aspire to be the best…I’ve slowly been steadily
improving since my first competition back in 95, so I sort of feel I can sort of hold my own against the best. There’s still, there’s heaps of improvement for myself to do.

Naween practises, often against opposition significantly weaker than him, because it is through practice that he hones his competitive skills, and identifies weaknesses in his game. He is most aware of his need to improve “when [he] make[s] silly mistakes” which suggest a need to “go back to the word book and do more study”. Naween plays nearly every fortnight at a club “with a couple of top players”, and also regularly on the Internet to access better players around the world, as he sees there as being a relatively small number of top-class players available.

I wouldn’t say [practice is] essential because as long as you sort of like you’re in the zone and sort of get regular practice, it probably doesn’t matter to a great degree who you play against. But if you play against excellent players, that’s only a bonus… It would be good to have a bit more competition amongst ourselves for starters…. [W]e’ve got maybe 6 world class players in Australia… So it’d be good to get a few more players among the elite group if we may, to match our wits against the rest of the world.

Practice is important to Naween, but he stresses that it need not be regular for the most part. A player who takes an extended break from the game will, according to Naween, “fall off the pace a bit, just like any other game”. He also notes that the process of
forgetting words causes players to decrease in ability, but doesn’t put this on the same level as in physical games, believing that “you really sort of go backwards too much compared to other physical games, where [if] you don’t exercise for 2 or 3 months, obviously you’ve got problems there”.

Naween is willing to play opponents of all abilities at clubs and tournaments. Playing lower rated players “doesn’t faze [him] at all” at a club, but at a tournament he admits his “strategy might change a bit in terms of the number of openings [he] makes on the board” and playing a riskier game based on his knowledge of his opponent’s game based on his observations of their style and ability.

Naween feels that he can identify players with potential to improve beyond their current ability, “probably not straight way, but after a few games, give it a month or so”, and expresses a willingness to help other players with advice, as he himself had been helped earlier.

I’ve got to sort of, I’ve got to have a feel for where exactly they’re at, at the moment, to be able to tell them you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do this. So as long as I know where they stand, I should be able to help them out.

In addition to having the benefit of previous wisdom of peers, new players today have a greater number of tools with which to learn. Naween regularly uses the LeXpert word study program which sorts words into pre-determined lists, and notes that methodical
study is easier for newer players than for those that attained mastery before the advent of such tools because they are more able to direct study to their weaknesses.

LeXpert and programs like that are fantastic. Especially for people that probably just start from scratch because they can obviously start from A to Z, compared to people who’ve already been there, who already have got our gaps. It’s harder for us to sort of pinpoint deficiencies.

Asked where he sees himself in the world, and what he has to do to get better, Naween feels that he’s “not far off the pace”, and is motivated to get ahead of players he perceives as competitors. He monitors his progress by examining his rating change over time and looking at qualification for major tournaments in the absence of any easy way of looking at progress over time.

I sort of watch my ratings and that sort of thing. Obviously that sort of plays a part in selection for the World Champs and all the big tournaments that are going on in the moment. I don’t... it’s hard to track yourself I suppose.

Naween sees word knowledge and strategy as having two distinct ceilings of achievement. Word knowledge is finite, and could be mastered perfectly. But strategy, which Naween feels is dependent upon that word knowledge, is more difficult, and he also identifies other strategies that fall outside the specific rules of the game but affect performance.
There is a ceiling in terms of word knowledge. If you’re a supercomputer there’s no ceiling there, but in terms of strategy it’s almost impossible to play a perfect game because it involves other factors like psychology, and just the opponent’s temperament and all that sort of thing. So no, from a strategic view, I wouldn’t say there’s a ceiling as such. You can never be, you can never be 100% perfect strategic player.

Despite the perceived impossibility of perfection, Naween is determined to keep improving as much as he can. For Naween, he has been playing the game for a sufficiently long time that he knows he has both skill and love for the game, and wishes to continue playing to bring about the improvements he feels that are necessary in his game.

I suppose given that I’ve been playing it for so long, reached a certain level… you become really good you know you want to stay at it.

Andrew

Andrew grew up in England in a family that played a number of games, and his father was a keen crossword solver. He had begun to read at an early age and always loved word games, and describes the moment he became hooked on Scrabble as “a moment of epiphany in a way”. This moment was when, during a family game, his father hooked an S onto the word MILE to make SMILE, which “transformed the word”,
opening up a series of possibilities in the game not present before – words could be extended from the front as well as the back, changing the meaning as well as the board.

Andrew went on to start a club at his school and played regularly with a group of “about half-a-dozen or eight” schoolmates, of which he was the “best player”. Word reached Andrew of the existence of a National Championships, and his interest was piqued, though he didn’t qualify for the event itself.

I discovered there was a National Championships. And along with another friend of mine at school, [who] was also keen to enter. At that time you had to submit evidence of a high score you’d achieved. And we both failed to get in, but straight out of there I discovered there was a club circuit and tournaments and so forth. In my late teens I guess I started going to a club, the local club and eventually went along to tournaments.

Andrew showed promise from his first club meeting, beating a “well-experienced tournament player” in his first game. Andrew recalls being “pretty good straight away” but not having realised it at the time due to his failure to qualify for the National Championships, the qualification process for which was “a cheat”, with Andrew and his schoolmate submitting genuine games of 450 to 500 points but missing out to people submitting unrealistic scores. “You never really know how you are against the rest of the world,” he reflects.
There was a Scrabble club at Oxford where Andrew was attending university, and he began to play and observe the club’s two expert players, Barrie and John, who he described as “very strong”, but had “very different styles of play”. In addition, Barrie and John were “very encouraging” to Andrew as he was developing as a player, and John in particular served as an exemplar of a player with good word knowledge and tactics.

Barrie Knox used to love fishing for bingos and they both had massive vocabularies, so it was very good to play against them. But John was much more happy to turn over tiles, play 5s, 6s and 4s which Barry wouldn’t do. He’d tend to play a two-letter word, a three-letter word, then a bingo. He was more a fisher than an aggressive player as John was. So I learnt a lot from their contrasting styles of play. They were both strong, and Barry and John both won tournaments, Barry more so than John funnily enough but I modelled myself more on John because we both found we could come to beat Barry more often at club, simply because it wasn’t hard to combat his fishing tactics.

Andrew felt the input and challenge of superior players while he was improving was important to his initial development, as well as his overall level of achievement. Without John and Barrie, Andrew thinks he “wouldn’t have been as good as [he] [is] today”. As well as admiring their word knowledge, he sought to apply their strategic decisions and considerations to his own developing game. In an early tournament, Andrew recalls impressing John with the word DOGESHIP to win a game and achieve
second place and admitted this was “a huge boost to [his] ego” which “made [him] want to continue”. At the time also a keen chess player, his rapid improvement made him more inclined to want to play Scrabble in preference to chess, feeling that if he had plateaued he would be less likely to persist.

Despite this, Andrew initially didn't set specific goals, competing just for the enjoyment of both playing the game and winning. Of particular enjoyment was being able to learn and deploy words, and use strategy to win games.

Well I think I’ve always enjoyed the angle of pitting your wits against one person and being able to outsmart them with your superior knowledge. It sounds egotistical, but that’s what I like about it.

Another British expert, and future World Champion, Mark Nyman, was the “huge star” of the game at the time, and Andrew asked another player why he was so good at the game. The simple response was that Mark “knows a hell of a lot of words and doesn't miss much” provided a model and goal for Andrew to aspire to in his own practice. Having realised that knowing words and finding them were two different skills, Andrew made it his mantra to “know a lot of words and not miss them”, and adopted suitable study and revision techniques to achieve this.

The development of an expert vocabulary was attained by Andrew by physically leafing through the source dictionary for words and making annotations to ensure that
he had thoroughly learned the words therein. This process was “laborious” and not as accurate as learning with the aid of computer-generated lists, but proved successful.

Even so, he felt that despite his excellent knowledge, his results and rating lagged his ability somewhat. He attributes this to the possibility of nerves making him play suboptimally and recalls having “a pounding heart” during games and feeling insecure about his demonstrated prowess. People who are nervous and get flustered “tend to make mistakes”.

Noting that he now feels very “cool, calm and collected” during tournament play, Andrew identifies a number of ways he could improve his game by learning words that are not part of most tournament players' vocabularies, and continuing to examine his game.

I think it’s through discussion with your peers and people who observe you, you can ask them what your strengths and weaknesses are. I tried to do that at Oxford, and I asked Barrie and John what my weaknesses are, and they couldn’t really think of anything other than that I had to learn more words.

Andrew had been near the top of the English Scrabble rankings for a number of years when he emigrated to Australia, and soon found himself a fixture in the top echelons of the game there as well. Though he doesn't win as many major titles as he'd like, he believes his consistency in maintaining his position in the top three speaks to his ability
in a more meaningful way. In comparing the skills of his former and current country’s players, he notes the UK has a better culture of analysis, with more players able to look in-depth at game positions and solve problems, as well as a higher level of demonstrated vocabulary.

Despite a high rating, Andrew doesn’t get satisfaction from a numerical indicator of his performance. A rating is “just a measure of what I’ve done”, and admits there are “plenty of areas [he] could improve...I do risk things and strategic vision I sometimes lack.” As well as getting input from other players, Andrew does considerable amounts of self-reflection and analysis to work out where he may be able to improve.

I analyse my games, try to estimate equity loss. I try and go through every tournament game to work out mistakes I made and quantify value for them...

It’s...about words you miss and opportunities you miss... strategically, of course, I miss things. Not really words these days, it’s board blindness.

With a dedicated study regimen, and what he believes to be a powerful vocabulary, Andrew does not put much weight on what he calls “random fluctuations” in his results, so periods of less strong performance do not faze him. An expert looks “at the longer game [rather than] just a fraction of a lifetime’s games” and realises that “only over an extended period of time you can show your ability”. Andrew seeks to make long-term investments in time to bring about better results in the future, stating a desire to “keep playing at a high level and be able to appreciate... the game’s finer points. In a
global community of strong players, it’s nice to be able to play and discuss at the same level.”

Andrew readily names players he respects and admires, citing one player who “compute[s] endgames faster than a computer” as one he still aspires to, and notes that even if Australian Scrabble players had lagged UK ones, there are still players to be “wary of”. His future goals include winning a World Championship, and that even though he is already thought of as one of the world's best players, would “love to have that” as well. He attributes his results, which while strong have been less than he felt he deserved to the vagaries of luck:

I was in the top 10 for most of the last World Championships, and it was very disappointing for me to drop down to 21st, or whatever it was at the end of the day because I lost my last four games. And I had some bad luck in those four games. So that was a very galling experience I suppose. I think I saw myself as deserving to be in the top 10 at least but not necessarily at the top.

Goal setting is a part of Andrew's planning and study, and he sets reasonable goals in the context of the situation, rather than trying to “wrest a goal into a concrete figure” such as rating. Andrew treats “each rack as a problem on the way” and seeks to answer “what is the best way from this rack of maximising your chances of winning or extending your lead?” Performing at a high level is important; a friend once asked Andrew the question “what’s the point of playing if you’re not the best?”, and while he
enjoys the camaraderie, he doesn't believe he would enjoy the game as much if he were not performing highly.

Andrew believes he has probably had an impact in Australian Scrabble”, citing that his main competition, who emerged since his emigration, professed to admiring his work in the game. Describing himself as “quite approachable” and willing to “help anyone who asks”, Andrew gives back to the game both through sharing his thoughts with other players and some involvement in the game's organisational structures, which he finds “tedious” but something he feels is important, and that he does a good job of administering.

Bob

Bob’s initial exposure to competitive Scrabble came, unlike the other players interviewed, almost by accident. He began playing at work with a colleague who enjoyed the game. After this colleague left, he continued playing against another player at his workplace for 10 years before being introduced to the club circuit through his colleague’s daughter’s piano teacher, a skilled player.

Barbara Berlin used to coach Peter Sheehan's daughter on the piano, and Peter, my friend from work, told me there was a club starting at Turramurra so I decided I'd go along and have a look, seeing as I was single at the time and didn't have too much going on in my life, thought I'd check it out. I was living
in Ermington at the time so it was a bit of a drive. I went up there a week later and we got started basically at Turramurra.

Bob recalls having already attained a high standard of Scrabble ability through his ten years’ informal play at his workplace, mastering the mechanics and tactics of the game, and what happened at a club level was a consolidation of those skills as he learned the unusual words that were acceptable from Barbara, the club’s organiser, whom he described as his mentor, both for her knowledge and her encouragement. Barbara was generous with her knowledge and would assist her clubmates with improving their game:

She was very good at handing out, passing on all of her knowledge…and she’d just have a way of presenting a five-letter Z word or something that would make you remember it. She’d make lists of words available. She’d encourage me to keep coming back and said nice things about me, and things like that. She was a good generous person, when she was running the Turramurra club she took me under her wing and probably claimed me as one of her successes because I went on to do very well after starting out with her club. But she did teach me a lot, mainly the value of those heavy-letter five-letter words, even six-letter words and things like that.

The lists of words Barbara gave out at club were part of a body of knowledge that was wide but had not yet been put into easily-studied forms for quick learning. Bob recalls
the lists being “pretty limited, it might have been one A4 sheet”. These lists were
distributed around the Turramurra club to help everyone.

We had lists of “not so foul vowels”, top 100 seven-letter words, I think most of
the words we had came out of the [Across The Board] magazine which were
published and we photocopied them and passed them around, and there wasn’t
any software around in those days.

Bob’s earlier experience playing socially combined with the mentoring he received
from Barbara meant that he was well prepared for tournament play when he played his
first friendly event in 1989 at a private home in St Ives. The New South Wales
Championships that year was not just his first serious competition, it also brought him
his first meetings with the top players in the State, though he was playing in the third
division at the event.

In actual fact I didn't play the top line players because I was playing in the B
section. It was a 2-day event that I won, I think they gave me a couple of
hundred dollars for it which was pretty good so I thought there was a bit of
money in it as well. It was a pretty successful opening tournament as far as I
was concerned.

Despite the success, Bob doesn’t recall the win being particularly inspiring, or being
what spurred him to attempt to gain expertise. Striving for the top occurred as a result
of a car accident in 1992 which left Bob house-ridden for several weeks. Having little
to do due to being confined to crutches, Bob had time to devote to study words. He
decided to learn the four-letter words, and he attributes his “unexpected” fourth placing
at the National Championships that year to his newly-acquired knowledge. Bob had
already learned the value of five-letter words and heavy-letter-containing words from
Barbara, but it was his own initiative and, according to Bob, guesswork, that made him
study the fours.

That was the funny thing, I just noticed that people didn't know them very well,
and I figured they had to be… maybe I just sort of analysed and thought, I've
got to go forward and I knew most of the 3s, that’s probably what brought it
about. When I first started playing, Peter Shaw gave us a list of the 3-letter
words so we knew most of the 3-letter words by the time we started playing in
the club. In those days - nobody knew any of the 4-letter words, 5-letter words
or 6-letter words. They just knew the 3-letter words and the high probability 7-
letter words. And I don't know, I think there was a woman called Lena Boyd
who had a good knowledge of obscure words. The other players really didn't
have a really good knowledge of the 4s and 5s. As far as I could tell.

Bob’s newfound success coincided with the setting up of the first proper ratings system
in Australia. Due to his good results in Tasmania, and in New South Wales
tournaments, Bob was “pretty well up there towards the top when the first bunch of
figures got put out”. His study methods had become slightly more sophisticated. He
made cassette tapes of him reciting various useful words and listened to them in his car. He also began to learn the words’ meanings as a way of making study more interesting, and this culminated in him improving on his 1992 result by winning the 1993 Championships. He remembers learning the five-letter words to have been a big part of his success.

Probably by that stage I'd decided I was learning the five-letter words and had a pretty good grasp of those words. I remember playing APIOL against Joan Rosenthal, A-P-I-O-L, I don't know if it won me the game but it was a good play towards the end of the game and nailed the championship. So the unusual five-letter words, I'd looked at them, I'd made some tapes. I guess I found those fascinating as well, trying to learn the meanings at the same time.

The excellent results that Bob achieved after learning a wider variety of words encouraged him to continue studying more words of different lengths and types. As well as observing that other players did not have certain words in their arsenal, Bob identified groups of words he had not theretofore studied, or even come across passively during a game, and focused on them.

I think that because I knew I hadn't imbibed everything and obviously the more you learn the more you're gonna improve and I knew there, all the 6-letter words were out there to be learned. All the 8s, a fair percentage of the 7s I'd never seen them before.
Other players had done their own learning and compiling, and Bob began to use not only their work, but also his own initiative in making his own lists. Computer software was made available to generate lists after Bob had been playing for a few years. He recalls getting a list of useful seven- and eight-letter words from a fellow player and began to publish them on his freely-accessible website in the mid-90s, one of the first established Scrabble sites with such information available.

I made my own lists, all the 8-letter words ending in ATE, or seven-letter words ending in INE and whether they’re verbs or nouns…[T]he lists that I made, they would be a great help for others. But the lists that I was given back in the day were a help to me, but I think those words, those lists were all computer generated. Mine, they probably started from the use of TEA, the Electronic Alveary, that was the software I used a bit in the old days to find all the seven-letter words ending in INE or something like that. The software was there, the lists were there. Putting them in a useful sequence, by probability or parts of speech helped learning. That helped, I did some myself, some I got from others.

In addition to his website, Bob helped players learn words through the publication of self-authored word study books. For Bob, the creation of these books involved methodical study to identify the words, find out their part of speech and classify them.
Obviously when you're writing a book or researching the book you're going over and over the words, you find it, you highlight it, you type it, you check it, you know, then maybe you recheck it, so each word you've probably looked at 5 or 6 times before it goes to print. For me that was just a labour of love, that was my...the learning process was to write the books and you know also I didn't really mind making that information available to others as well.

Of his books, he is aware that he’s helping players who will be competition for him if they absorb the knowledge he has gone to the effort to organise and collate. Bob seems to relish this, suggesting that it has “raised the benchmark…in Australia”, pointing out that Australian representatives at International events are doing considerably better than they were in the past, and that he wants to help with “putting Australia on the world Scrabble map”. Bob feels that fostering strong competition and helping others benefits all participants in the process.

I mean it wouldn't be much fun as you know if you are just belting everybody all the time. I think the people see, maybe they see you as someone they want to chase and they try harder and it keeps on raising the level as far as I can tell.

The existence of strong competitors, Bob believes, also made it easier to attain and maintain a high standard. In addition, they contributed to a “really good social scene around the tournament” that Bob became involved in from early in his playing career. Bob observes that in Sydney, players socialise readily after tournaments, whereas
players from other states tend to “disappear at the end of the day’s play”. The players
that Bob competed against became both rivals over the board and friends away from it
as a result of the mix of competitive and social interactions.

John Holgate would be the main one. Then Paul Cleary came up from Sydney
and he sort of, he was a very difficult customer. Trevor Halsall would be
another one. Rod Talbot, back 5 or 10 years ago. Joan Rosenthal, Jean
McGiffen, I suppose all rivals but John Holgate was the main one, he was a
friend as well.

Bob cites the social scene around the tournaments as being as satisfying and enjoyable
as the tournaments themselves. He enjoys them both because he thinks he is successful,
but also because “it’s good to see other people, and to see the scene going, different
people coming in and meeting different personalities”. He played regularly until
recently at club for camaraderie even when the calibre of opposition being lower than
him meant he would not learn as much as playing other experts. Due to the Internet and
computer Scrabble games, he doesn’t see club play as being essential anymore, though
he enjoys helping others to improve their game.

I never really shirked playing a game against a weaker player. I’ll play them all
at the club and don’t care who it is. If they want to learn about the game when
playing me I didn’t mind helping them. I remember once when I played
KHODJAS, that lady there, she was quite a good player I thought, when I played that word on her she never came back which was rather sad.

Bob’s interest in raising the standard of play has led to him running a variety of events, and he has offered assistance to many groups, such as running events for schoolchildren as well as adults. Bob “enjoy[s] imparting knowledge that way”, and made a checklist for running a 10-week Scrabble course, which he would run if there was demand. He notes that the demand is not always there, and some players are less receptive of advice given. These players “are denying themselves the opportunity to do well”.

As well as being one of the country’s top players, and an avid participant in the social activities that surround the club and tournament scene, Bob took an interest in organisational matters. He was elected President of his State association, acting as a spokesperson, organiser and taking a keen interest in fostering new players, new clubs and otherwise spreading the game, or helping others to spread it.

As well as continuing to publish word lists, tournament news and other information, he also uses his website as a repository for computer software that can be used to run tournaments and rating systems. Bob notes that people from “[p]laces like Malta, South Africa, Nigeria and Malaysia have all gone there to the website and downloaded the software and the instructions there and now have their own rating systems going thanks to Australia”. He also maintains the International Ratings list, which collates results
from major tournaments around the world to provide a single list of players in an  
approximate order.

[T]he International Ratings, has been happening for at least 10 years on [my]  
website. And that... gets a lot of traffic, a lot of interest. Okay, so it’s only got  
76 tournaments, but that’s still quite a lot. You work it out, when you think of  
the number of players, nearly 1000 players around the world are represented in  
there over 70 tournaments. It’s probably the best you’re ever going to get.

Today, Bob continues to use the methods of compiling books and making tapes as his  
primary study method. He makes a small amount of money from the books, which  
make it a worthwhile endeavour, and learns words at the same time. He also plays his  
tapes when performing errands, increasing the amount of time he is exposed to words.  
The words chosen by Bob for the tapes were ones he had not seen before, which made  
them useful for learning and revision.

When I made them, I only put down words I didn’t know from a bar of soap  
and I have used them to drive me to work, when going on bushwalks, when  
doing physical exercise and learning at the same time. Sometimes I walk up and  
get a Chinese meal with a tape, I’m saving petrol, I’ve gotten fit and learning  
words. My tape study has been very important in honing, certainly, in learning  
the words which are needed to keep me up there.
Bob believes the word study techniques he has used, which involve both comprehensive study of the words themselves, but also understanding the word’s meaning, prevents his game atrophying if he doesn’t study. Bob knowing what part of speech a word is helps him retain the word in memory, and provides useful information in a game, such as what extensions or other plays can be made using the word once it is on the board.

My own personal viewpoint is the way I’ve learned the words because I’ve learned them in such a way that they’ve stuck with the meanings and their part of speech. Where some players that might be learning all the anagrams from six-letter words, they might just start forgetting them after a while. If I’ve learned such and such is a verb, eventually it’s going to stick. It’s going to be there forever. Once it sticks, it’s going to be there forever. I just think the learning technique I’ve got, hopefully would mean I won’t atrophy too much if I didn’t do any learning for 12 months.

Though Bob’s rating fluctuates, at the time of this interview, he was experiencing enormous success, having recently won a major tournament and come second at another the next week. Bob believes that the more time put into study, the greater results will be achieved, and that he can attribute recent success to consolidation of previous study due to writing a new word study book that takes some of the information in his previously published works and presents them in a different way.
Bob hopes the book will be a useful resource, but he also gleans benefit from it by using it as part of a revision process.

I’ve published books [containing words of] 3,4,5,6,7,8, 9 [letters]. They’ve had definitions in them. I thought it’d be nice just to have one book that had everything in it…. [W]hat I’ve been doing is taking out the definitions, adding in all the extensions, identifying, splitting them up into familiar and less familiar. [I had] done most of the work when I wrote the 3,4,5,6,7 [books]. now I’m going to consolidate that into one tome…It’s got a lot of information, I’ve spent a lot of time on it, each word has part of speech on it, be it adjective, verb... it’s got all the end hooks, of course, front hooks too somewhere else. It’s going to be 2 to 10 letters, and hopefully a useful publication for the Scrabble world. Working on that, I haven’t been doing much revision, but the amount of work I did was equal to the amount of revision did.

Bob believes his recent study regimen has “put the polish” on his game, allowing him to spend a period at the top of the national rankings, a position he had not held since the late 1990s. Bob stated that he feels he belongs somewhere between 5 and 10 and “wouldn’t be surprised if [he] dropped down [from number one] to 5 or even 10 again to be quite truthful”. Rather than looking at his own game, he identifies players who he perceives as being better than him.
There are… 9 to 4 players who are better than me…. You know, and the rest I think I can hold my own with. So let’s just say, I’m thinking, I think those players are probably better than me, probably know more than me, have better games.

Though Bob, through observation and playing against his rivals, recognises their strengths and weaknesses, he plays his particular style of game the same no matter who his opponent is. Bob knows “when people have got good word knowledge, when they’re quick…and strategically, yeah, there’s some great strategists”, but doesn’t “try to prepare [himself] against them” or think about their various skills when playing.

I just think I’ve got a way of playing for maximum score, probably the way you do a bit, and if it opens up a bingo, a triple triple, so be it, if they take it then so be it. I think I’m usually playing for maximum score.

Discussion

Naween, Bob and Andrew emerged as competitors at a time when the Scrabble community had blossomed considerably from its beginnings. As well as spreading throughout the world, even outside English-speaking countries, the presence of established experts, the ability of computers to generate word lists, and the work of compiling information done by others in the community all brought about changes to
how aspiring experts learned. The degree of haphazardness or uncertainty in what the best method of learning was – typified by Alistair’s multiple unsuccessful attempts to advance and Joan relying on intuition and experience – was replaced by a method of study selection based on previous wisdom, observation and, especially in the case of Bob, comparison of other players.

In addition to this, more frequent tournaments and the growth in number of clubs facilitated more learning opportunities for enterprising players, and the existence of other experts provided role models and mentors, both for word knowledge and strategy. The aforementioned compilation and computerisation made list learning easier, and players were able to build upon the work of their predecessors due to the increase in co-operation and competition during this period of the community's development.
Chapter 6

THE INTERACTIONS OF RECENT EXPERTS

This chapter presents the experiences of three expert players who began playing Scrabble at a time when the game was already being played at a very high level by a significant number of experts. The community as a whole was highly developed and widely spread over the world. The advent of the Internet and electronic communication facilitated dialogue between experts and aspiring experts all over the world, and many books and other publications were available for novices, in effect, the curriculum or body of knowledge that had been mostly passed down orally was now available in a variety of written forms.

These three interviewees all began playing after 1996, and are still improving practitioners. Their stories show what it was like learning in a well-defined community with a variety of potential rivals and experts from which to learn, a large number of clubs and tournaments available at which to hone skills, and ready access to information and practice using computer-generated study material, the Internet, email and online play.

**Michael**

Michael began playing Scrabble keenly with a flatmate in Adelaide in the mid-1990s. Both Michael and his flatmate attended a Scrabble club, but only Michael continued
playing seriously after this occurred, even though both were welcomed and encouraged. Of his first experiences with the competitive Scrabble community, Michael speaks warmly and positively, particularly of the club’s convener, who was one of South Australia’s stronger players:

[She] was very keen to, you know, make me feel welcome and encourage me to play tournaments, you know. She kind of had a bit of an attitude that I might be a good player. Same with my friend who used to play a lot, he was my flatmate, we played a lot of Scrabble and chess and went to the same club. I think [she] thought he was going to be a really good player if he kept it up, but he got a bit discouraged about the tournament scene and he played one or two tournaments but didn’t really like it.

Michael played chess competitively, and achieved success, but gave the game up because he felt that he had reached a ceiling. What attracted him to concentrate more on Scrabble was that he felt he could always continue improving, and that it was more encouraging. He also describes chess as being more “ego-driven” and players were less inclined to help novices and improvers with advice, whereas with Scrabble, he finds “a lot of players are quite willing to share their knowledge...ways of... improving your game”.

Michael describes himself as having been shy when he started playing at the age of 22. Of the two best South Australian players, he felt he “couldn’t approach them much”
when he was a relative novice, and because he perceived them to be “really good” he was shy of and in awe of them, particularly the state’s second best player, who was even younger than Michael. Nonetheless, encouragement and Michael’s ability enabled him to move up through the ranks in Adelaide.

My first tournament I came second in recreation and shortly after that I think I won Intermediate, so I kind of climbed up the ranks a bit in Adelaide, but in Adelaide you could have a fairly low rating and still get into Masters, so it was a bit different when I moved from Adelaide…I wasn’t really desperate to make it any time quickly but I was very hopeful of maybe one day making it to you know a very strong level. It took me a while to get up the ranks. But I always had a fair bit of faith that it would happen one day. I knew that a lot boiled down to was just being able to play against the best.

Michael moved from Adelaide and travelled around Western Australia, backpacking and picking fruit. He continued playing Scrabble and chess socially with fellow backpackers, though not at the same level he had in tournament and club play. Michael describes how he felt his choice of location and lifestyle didn’t allow his game to develop as quickly as it might have in a place with more expert players:

It probably didn’t help my game very much at all. From WA I went to Tasmania, and Launceston of all places, and in Launceston there weren’t many players, so I didn’t really get to have much competition you know with other
players. I went to the club now and then, but there’s only one or two there who were pretty good players or reasonably good players. So, back then I didn’t know how to use the Internet very well, or anything like that, I didn’t know how to play Scrabble on the Internet. So Tassie didn’t help my cause. I still played in a few tournaments in Tasmania, I won Advanced twice, I won advanced with 12/13 once and then they wouldn’t let me into Masters even though I’d won 12/13 so. I thought they had a policy where you could play up but, so, they made me play in advanced again so I won that and 11/13.

Michael felt he was sequestered through location and organisation from playing the best players, which was what he felt was the most important thing – being able to play against the best. Following this disappointment and dissatisfaction with Tasmania, the lure of good players was one factor in deciding where Michael would choose to live.

I went back to Adelaide for about a month, so then I moved to Melbourne ‘cause Melbourne has a lot more opportunities, a lot more job opportunities, and of course, more good players of Scrabble and chess. At that point I still played a fair bit of chess and Melbourne’s really strong for chess as well.

The ability to play more top players was helpful for a number of reasons to Michael. He stated that he enjoyed what he saw as two different sides of playing Scrabble at tournaments and clubs.
Yeah, I like both, really and um. I’m not particularly into doing lots of social things but you know, I like the people of the Scrabble fraternity, and it’s a nice kind of environment to play in, even though I mean it’s competitive as well but it’s got those two sides to it, it’s a pretty caring sort of community and the same time as a very competitive one.

Michael draws a stark parallel with his experiences playing chess competitively, where the combative nature was unappealing, and he observed many players who he believed were arrogant who would “almost judge you as a person just on how good you are at chess, and if you’re not nearly as good as them, they’ll try to put you down”. The competition was also seen as being less friendly and open by Michael:

It’s a lot more fierce in my opinion, people just get so… you know… so intense about it and some, you hear stories, I’ve heard stories of people like grabbing a queen and throwing it at the wall. One guy who was really good and I beat him in this allegro tournament… he just spat the dummy and went off and started kicking this whiteboard and I thought “my god” and.. well… bloody hell, take it seriously but don’t take it that seriously, don’t go overboard…. It’s OK to have an ego but if you go one step further and put others down and are arrogant that really sucks in my opinion.

Despite the bad experiences, Michael was able to use some of the skills he honed during playing chess in Scrabble. He describes himself as having a “reasonably
analytical mind”, and thinks that observation of annotated chess games helped him analyse Scrabble positions as well.

The depth of opposition in Victoria meant that Michael did not immediately begin to play in the Masters section. He played infrequently in both his new home state of Victoria and his old base of South Australia, gradually increasing his rating and getting to play better players more regularly. This enabled him to play in the top section of the 2002 New South Wales Championships, which he noted was “quite a big breakthrough”.

I wasn’t really expecting to do so well, like, I just got on this big roll and everything seemed to fall into place and somehow I won 10 in a row against really good players like Chris May, Bob Jackman, John Holgate and… I didn’t beat Paul Cleary, he beat me 3 times in that tournament, but I did beat a lot of players in a row so… just everything just fell into place, although I stuffed up the end and lost the last 3 games, against such tough players as Paul Cleary and John Holgate, so I couldn’t really complain, and I think 4th was really good. It would have been nice to get a placing but still, I was pretty happy and it gave me you know a bit of an indication that my potential [was that I could] be a really good player.

Michael had known even before the event that he was a “pretty good player” but could still see a lot of room for improvement, and still believes this today. Today, Michael is
likely to speak positively of his ability despite admitting he has weaknesses, and has adopted study patterns designed to increase his knowledge and decrease his errors so that he can continue to be a competitive top-division player, and he speaks of the need to test his skills and learning in practice rather than just doing isolated learning.

One way I learn words is with LeXpert, just testing myself. I used to just learn words and not test myself much but I realised that was flawed as I was missing many regular words so I am now testing myself with the anagrams a lot. I like to look at some nice hooks on long words as well, like on 7s and 8s, like ANTIPOLE and RANTIPOLE.

As well as learning words, Michael has begun to examine the strategic aspects of the game in detail through annotating games. Rather than keeping what he finds to himself, he publishes interesting games on his own personal website, and the website for the Victorian Scrabble association, which he maintains as a volunteer as a way of assisting other players.

It takes a bit of work but it helps with strategy like endgame situations…. From a more strategic point of view… I know that people like David Eldar gave me a bit of feedback and Naween was impressed with the work I’d done, with some of the annotated games. There’s probably a lot of people who look at it, but of course I’ve got no idea. One of the satisfying things about doing the web-pages, is that it’s giving something back. Hopefully you know, it’ll encourage
someone who was like me 5 years ago, you know, still struggling to learn the basic 3- and 4-letter words and um struggling to win games against top calibre players definitely. Hopefully [it will] encourage them [to] think more about the game and realise that there’s a lot more to it than learning words and that.

One of the things Michael discovered was important was identifying the skills and weaknesses of other top players, working out their strategy and altering his tactics to fit the opponent. He describes with admiration one of his early sparring partners from Tasmania and Victoria who was “really good for [his] game”, and how through observing him, he began to understand more about his own practice and where it was deficient.

I used to really like John Foley’s style which was just playing open all the time. He just relied on his massive vocabulary, to capitalise on the openings, but now I figure that it’s not necessarily the smartest way to go. If you play open, the opponent takes their piece of the pie, you’re usually left with a smaller piece of the pie and it hurts when you open up a 3x3 and they get a big score, or worst case scenario, a nine-timer. So I was doing that too much and while I was getting quite a few triple triples over the months, um, I am trying to revise my strategy and play more defensive and trying to capitalise on the openings my opponents make rather than make the first opening.
Michael also is able to clearly explain the differences in style between his most frequently played opponents, by identifying a range of skills that are important to the game, and through analysing his opponents’ behaviour, work out the difference in relative strengths of opponents. Of two opponents in particular, Michael provides a precis of their differences.

Trevor will not have much time in the endgame so there’s more of a chance to win endgames against them. Alistair plays a fair bit quicker than Trevor and … logically Trevor is more beatable as he’s in time pressure and goes over time as well. That’d be one difference. Trevor knows more words I’d say. So, it’s probably advisable to not open the board so much. Alistair knows a lot of words too but I feel that playing Trevor, the kind of words he plays many of them I don’t know but that happens more against Trevor than against Alistair.

Michael now sees himself as one of the top players, though not at the very top. He believes that if he “plays enough big tournaments and keep[s] studying hard and trying” he will have more consistency, and that this goal is achievable enough that it’s “worth working at”. Though he is genial and quiet, his interaction with other players is typified by confidence in his work helping other players, and he readily communicates with other top players through discussion and feedback on his website. In line with this, he has revised his initial modest aspirations and raised them to a level even above his current performance, and begun to be analytical and critical about specific aspects of his game.
I hope to maybe one day make a World Championship. I’m not you know, I don’t sort of think that it’s a definite. Like, nothing like that’s a definite but I think I definitely have potential and if I work hard at it and try to deal with my weaknesses… they are becoming too much.. like being too slow and being too ponderous and playing too many wrong words. I’ve just got to deal with that. I might actually just change tack and just reinvent myself and just play really fast and not care too much about what happens in the games, just see what happens, yeah, maybe I can deal with my problem of being too ponderous. Cause part of the problem is that I just can’t make a f****** decision. Like, I’m just sitting there. There might not even be that many great opportunities on the board but I just freeze and can’t make a decision. I just end up getting nervous about that and of course it clouds your judgment and you can’t think, can’t think of anything.

Michael is the youngest of nine children, and due to his siblings’ successes, has always felt the need to achieve at a high level in something in order to keep up with high achievers in his family. Scrabble is seen as something worthwhile, an activity that has value to him and enough other people that it satisfies him, as well as spurring him on to improve.

I am a classic youngest, yeah. [I have a] little bit of a chip on my shoulder, like, because you know there are quite a few high achievers in my family and I don’t
want to be seen as a non-achiever and I’ve had a bit of an insecurity complex about that in the past. Not so much now, but in the past I have felt insecure about all these other family members doing so well in their various fields and me being a bit of a drifter.

Today, Michael keeps tabs on his performance through a variety of factors. He looks at his performance, both in terms of where he ranks in a tournament and where he is rated nationally, but also how well he does under adverse circumstances, such as having poor luck.

I think if I do well, without having many of the good tiles, I think that’s a fairly accurate indication, that I’m able to win games without that many blanks, Ss, Xs or Zs, particularly if it’s against players over 1600, 1700 kind of thing.

Results are another good indication. If I start to make some more, you know, win some more tournaments or get some more placings, particularly getting in the placing of a major tournament which I haven’t really done yet, that’ll be a pretty good sign that that happens.

Practice is important but difficult to maintain regularly for Michael due to his irregular work commitments, but he sees it as important nonetheless. He visits clubs around Melbourne based on their meeting time rather than their geographical proximity because he sees himself as “still improving”, still enjoying the game and continuing to have the desire to achieve his potential.
I love it. And um I study hard and yeah, I’m very keen…I learn something just about every game whether its words or you know, maybe some sort of strategical thing. I think I need to stay positive though, not get too discouraged if you don’t feel like you’re improving for a time.

Chris

Chris recalls being exposed to Scrabble very early in life, probably due to his parents adopting strategies to get him to read from an early age. Chris played with his parents, keen amateur players for some time, from the age of about 6 until 11. He had shown both an interest in, and skill for wordplay and number patterns, including puzzles meant for people far above his age, and it was through a puzzle book that he came to know about competitive Scrabble.

In the back of one of them I found a link to a British Scrabble magazine, Onwords, which I after a while decided that I would subscribe to and this was when I was 12, and so I sent off there and. through about 3 years of exposure to that magazine, I became sort of, I read all the articles quite carefully and got a bit of a sense of what the tournament competition scene must be like and also became aware that there was one in Australia.
Although Chris didn’t start playing tournament competition until he was 15, he participated in write-in competitions in Onwords, devoting “quite a lot of time” to answering the puzzles. The magazine introduced him to knowledge of, or debates surrounding, things that others learn “only as [they] start playing competitively”. Because of this Chris, felt he had a good grasp of the nuances of competitive play before he even played a tournament. He wrote to the Scrabble Enquiry Centre in 1999 to enquire about Scrabble in Sydney, introducing himself. The unusual nature of the letter – coming from a young person who knew a lot about the game – led it to be handled by the association’s President.

Bob called me in person about 4 days before the first tournament I played and said, “There’s a tournament on this weekend, wanna come?”. I said, “Sure”. At that tournament I met… Bob himself of course. And I believe Paul Cleary was playing that day I think though I didn’t play him and I think Joanne was also playing. Now I knew who Bob was well before Bob ever contacted me because I used to read about him in Onwords and I also knew who Paul was through Onwords and I knew they were two big guns.

Chris had considerable experience playing by himself against a computer, but the program he played used a different dictionary, so he wasn’t sure how well he would do at his first event. He had some expectation he would do well, and remembers being disappointed at his debut:
I wasn’t really sure what my level would be, but I remember being quite disappointed with my result on the first day which was 3 games out of 8 in an open tournament including a win against a player who would normally play in the 2nd or 3rd division out of 4…Nevertheless I remember being reasonably unhappy with my play which included a number of close losses, so immediately was setting myself standards and thinking about improvement from the very first time I’d played.

Chris felt that he was a better player than he had demonstrated at his first event, a “better player than the people who had beaten [him] for the most part”, and that with more experience, he would be the superior player in comparison to them. Of expert players, who he had taken an interest in, Chris was “curious to know if [he] could reach that level”, while admitting he “always had an ideal of [himself] as a potential expert, from day 1”. Chris observed better players and associated with them during breaks at tournaments.

I do remember always going to the top tables to look at the games after mine was finished, because I was curious to know what a good, a game between two good players looked like and to watch them play…In my first and second tournaments I was always talking to, looking at the games of the top players whenever I could and by my fifth tournament I was playing with them already so there was only a limited time in which that was possible but yes, absolutely.
These early experiences were enjoyable and rewarding enough for Chris to feel determined to go back and see what he could achieve with regard to tournament play. Despite his disappointment at his performance, he had performed well enough that at subsequent tournaments, he would not have to play in the lowest division, so would be matched against more skilful opposition than most new players.

My second event was the NSW Championship in 1999, where I played in the 3rd division, in Intermediate, which was a 14 game event, and I managed to win that… [I] gained 200 points and then the next tournament I clean-swept, so confidence was growing then, gained another 200 and then… by that point, I was simply on the rise. And didn’t really know where I was going to end up, I don’t think anyone did.

Chris felt that he had been a better player than he had demonstrated at his first tournament, and his next three tournaments proved to be more successful. By the end of the fourth, Chris was rated inside the top 100 players in the country, just a few short months after starting, and attributed this not to making alarming rises in skill, but learning how to play the game as he knew it in a new environment.

I think the reason I was able to improve so fast so early was not actually because I was learning that much, it was because I was learning how to apply the skills I was aware of from being aware of the scene through reading about it…It’s easy to get flustered by something like a Scrabble tournament when
you’re not experienced and when you’re not used to all the procedures that you have to go through. Because it is a very different game to the game that you play at home and you’re expected to observe a lot of extra conditions that are imposed by the tournament rules. And it’s easy to let those things get on top of your play early on as a tournament player, I think.

Chris reflects that additional pressures such as remembering to hit your clock after each turn, computing the score correctly after each turn, keeping track of how much time is left, worrying about his own word knowledge and “making a fool of yourself” weigh in the mind of new players, especially ones who are aware of the different tiers of expertise among their opponents. Improvement in those basic playing skills enabled Chris to concentrate more on the advanced skills that separate good players from average ones, and the improvement began at this point. Chris’s fourth tournament is one that he believes was a turning point, at which he felt that he was able to go through the physical motions of the game with some automaticity and accuracy and use his higher skills.

I think by about then I was genuinely able to focus on the game and it turned out that of course my skills were fairly unusually high for someone in their fourth tournament so I was able to beat some very good players in that event. And I absolutely don’t think I could ever have done that during my first tournament outing even though I don’t think my actual Scrabble playing skills had matured or improved in the time between my first and fourth tournament.
Chris identifies his rise as being unusual in that he came into tournaments with more skill in the harder aspects of the game such as anagramming, visuo-spatial recognition and strategic play than he did in the mechanical aspects of the game, essentially understanding the game strongly at a theoretical level without having practised them. Chris feels that the improvement was “learning to apply the skills in a tournament context”. That Chris had a great affinity for the anagramming and mathematical skills made the game appealing once he began to practise it.

I think wordplay is a tricky concept and a lot of people see it in different ways because a lot of people don’t realise how mathematical it is and the juxtaposition of letters and the forming of patterns into words is, as I think most people would now agree if they stop and think about it, a fundamental mathematical skill. That said, and I know, I was a very good young mathematician, I was one of the best in the state for a while for my age, so obviously I was very at home there.

The transition to regular practice and learning in a club environment occurred after Chris had played a few tournaments and had attained a respectable rating, high enough that he was one of the club’s best players as soon he started playing. He adopted the club’s then-best player as a kind of mentor. He knew of her skill by reputation even before he began playing, describing her as “one of the original top players” that he knew of, and keenly observed her play, both through trying to play against her whenever possible, or by seating himself at an adjacent table so he could watch her
games during breaks in his own. He remembers the assistance being informal and coming in a few forms:

...[t]alking to me about aspects of the game. And by playing me a lot and beating me a lot...I have this feeling that I owe a lot to her but I can’t work out why. She’s certainly always been very encouraging and I think she did oversee my development as a player through 2000, 2001 and 2002. But never really sat me down and talked to me about how to improve or anything like that that I can really remember. Nothing comes to mind.

From here, with a regular competitive environment and a mentor whose knowledge he admired, Chris continued to improve through playing, studying around his school work and engaging with the community, “exploring the wisdom that exists before my arrival on the scene, that other expert players have contributed”. This occurred through both personal interactions and through reading, both on the Internet and email lists, and books and articles that had been published in books and journals. Chris was able to pick up new concepts and understand the finer theoretical points discussed therein readily, including the specific language that expert players use to define concepts.

I remember having a discussion with Paul Cleary about equity in my fifth tournament at which point I’d read a couple of issues of WORDGAME which I was only exposed to after I joined the CASPA at that stage, CASPA email, as WORDGAME started to be published at the start of 2000, which is just after
my tournament debut, and I sort of devoured it, it exposed me to a whole new plane of strategy and I got the concepts into my head with no trouble.

Chris owns or owned “virtually every book on Scrabble strategy, tactics and improving” that he was aware of, and had read them keenly since even before he began to play competitively, and is still open to reading new ones, if they are written by someone whose abilities he respects. He sought out back issues of magazines to get a sense of the history of the game and to learn as much as possible about playing. Online resources, once he became aware of them, were also a big part of Chris’s learning. Despite this, Chris claimed to have never had a set goal of achievement in mind, and his playing of the game at this point was primarily “as a nice break” from the stress of other commitments, and he never made specific plans to work towards experthood. Chris professed to having “absolutely no regular study habits for Scrabble” even at the time of the interview. His dedication to other aspects of his life as being of more importance than Scrabble culminated in taking a break from the game while he was still improving to concentrate on his final year of schooling.

I certainly never made specific plans to work towards it. In fact, I put Scrabble on hold for an entire year in 2001 at a point where I was sort of being, sort of a borderline expert really at the end of 2000, a mid 1600s player. But this is partly a product of how I was brought up but, I was always encouraged to put my education and schooling before Scrabble and I did so, and have continued to do so ever since in that I work extremely hard for university and I do not work
hard for Scrabble ever unless I have nothing to do for university. I still regard Scrabble largely as a really nice break to take, like, I relish the opportunity to travel interstate for tournaments and see a bit of where I’m going, it’s not just about Scrabble, travelling too, travelling interstate.

Chris returned to tournaments when he finished school, and he draws a parallel between his first game after the break with his first few tournaments, in that he was playing at a lower standard than he was capable of due to simple mistakes that would be uncommon in someone of his ability in the higher-end tasks that make up Scrabble.

I remember the tournament extremely well. I turned up and lost the first game by 203 points to a worse player…And I think I also played some phoneys and things. And thought, hang on, this isn’t me, won the next 5, it was a one-day event, won the next 5 fairly convincingly I think, and ended up playing off for the tournament in the final round…I think it was quite clearly a case of getting back into it and for one game getting back into it was something I had to reacclimatise myself to and I think my first few tournaments were effectively reduced to that game when I was f****** around.

Both before and after his break, though he was achieving at a high level, Chris still felt like something of a “punching bag” for the New South Welsh expert players. He was beating non-experts regularly but was continually losing to better players, even though luck usually swings some matches toward the less skilled players. The inability to beat
some experts was frustrating for Chris, and his first wins over other experts were milestones of achievement, which “began to make [expertise] reality”.

Each time I beat a top NSW for the first time I was absolutely thrilled. Took me about 7 goes to beat Rod and 8 goes to beat Bob I think. And I remember how excited I was the first time I beat Joan, she was one of the first people I beat. The first time I beat John Holgate…I was so nervous that I was about to beat him that I played CHOIR with the O and the I transposed and nearly lost the game but managed to hang on for a narrow win….Being able to beat the player was a big thing.

Other than such milestones, Chris has never specifically looked at his improvement over time, other than when he has nothing else to do between other commitments. Eventually, he began to beat experts more regularly until the point at which he became one of them. Chris’s reflection and evaluation of his own practice is extremely detailed. Asked how he knows that he is a good player, his response is very specific, and he clearly places himself in a class above others.

In a way I now know when I’m making a good move or doing well in an area because I’m a good player and I know what a good move is, so that’s partly the answer now, but as to how I came to learn what a good move is, I’d say it has something to do with peer evaluation, people watching the game, and observing when you make a good move, when you make a bad move. There are run of the
mill moves and non-run of the mill moves, and most people with expertise, but also down to a mid-ranked player level can easily identify a non-run of the mill, skilful move.

His examination of experts has continued and become more complex as he has become a peer to them. He observes the games of other experts when the opportunity arises and makes observations about errors made, particular strategic or word knowledge skills being demonstrated and identifying and learning from mistakes that he sees in other people’s games, not just for the purpose of avoiding making them himself, but building up knowledge about his rivals. Hearsay and discussions with other players also inform this mental picture of competitors’ strengths and weaknesses. Chris tries to remember everything that he’s exposed to, because there are situations where he believes you have to play the person, not the board.

I take a pretty high interest in how other people who are of an equivalent level who I play a lot play their game. Um, I learn from other players’ mistakes a lot. I remember unusual things that they do that are both good and bad, both uncharacteristically good and uncharacteristically bad plays of experts. And I learn from hearsay as well, games that I haven’t been directly involved in. And I can try and construct a picture of a player’s game as it relates to mine.

Chris evaluates other players for skills in word knowledge, both general and specific, strategy such as endgame ability and proneness to making errors. In addition to
watching, Chris also gleans this information from playing them is invaluable as well, and this knowledge allows him to vary his tactics so that he can maximise his chance of winning against different opponents through identifying both strong and weak points in his opponents’ games.

I mean it is a matter of exploiting weakness…It’d be so that I can then beat them by taking advantage of that weakness next time. But I also find lots to admire in a player and that can also affect how I play them. If I know that a player has an extremely sound word knowledge and doesn’t play many phoneys, then I am less likely to challenge a word in penalty challenge. Or if I know that a player has specialised knowledge that I don’t have, I’ll give them credit for that when I play them…You don’t want to play to their strengths if you know what they are.

Chris thinks that this kind of learning and knowledge, understanding the players as well as the game itself, is something that would be unlikely to be done by players other than experts, but is one that he makes use of for the purpose of performing at a high level and trying to win tournaments against varying opposition.

I have no doubt that lesser ranked players don’t value that skill as much, or that knowledge as much. But for me if I’m playing a big tournament and I want to win it and there are other very good players playing in that tournament that want to win it, of course I want to know any advantage that could accrue to me
through knowing my opponent’s foibles…The possibility of winning means enough to me that I’d be willing to take advantage of those things and learn about them, go out of my way to learn about them if possible.

Chris makes fine distinctions on what constitutes experthood in his opponents, and differentiates opponents into categories based on his experiences playing and observing them. This impression is shaped both by the opponents’ skill as well as their demeanour and attitude towards the game as shown by their gestures and habits.

During his early, rapid improvement, Chris was playing in a different division at each tournament, and found it very easy to tell the difference in calibre.

It’s very very obvious when you’re sitting down so play an expert rather than a non-expert. And I think an air of professionalism in playing the game is something that almost all experts share. They’re less inclined to talk about things other than the game during the game. They’re less inclined to do things like play a word out and retract it or shuffle letters around on the board or commit scoring errors…[I realised] that outward professionalism was symptomatic of an inward mental state that was conducive to expertise, i.e. taking the game seriously, shutting out annoying external things, prioritising the game, making it easy on yourself to be the best player that you can be.

Experts are more likely to engage in discussion about strategy, talk about errors or other possibilities after games, and take note of suggestions from peers. Chris believes
that experts are “closer to perfectibility and therefore I think more inclined to strive for it”, and that other players are less likely to see the importance of knowing small details in the face of other improvements they may feel they need to make.

If you tell a non-expert about an interesting thing they could have done or a possible endgame strategy they could have employed to win a game usually they’ll be interested for a little bit and then they won’t be anymore. Especially if you start pulling out words they don’t know, they’ll see the exercise as a waste of time.

Experts, according to Chris, see mistakes as identified weaknesses, and “take it to heart if they find out they’ve made one”, but also as a potential way to improve, and some experts take this to very formal levels, such as analysing all their games in detail or trying to quantify areas of strength or weakness based on results.

Chris’s definition of an expert is imprecise but definite in his head. Experts, according to Chris have “complete understanding of the game”, and show the “willingness to prioritise the playing of the game in a serious situation”. He groups players into echelons in his head consciously based on his experiences. “It takes quite a lot for me to change that view”, he says, though asked where exactly the line between experts and non-experts is drawn, Chris instead explains how he knows which side of the line a player lies by talking about another player who he feels is not yet an expert despite some recent strong performances.
I don’t respect his skills enough to consider him a true expert. I don’t respect his word knowledge skills or his strategic skills enough to consider him a true expert in the way I do other players. I respect someone like Joan more than [this player]. And I… probably has something to do with my… Joan’s status as an expert from beyond anyone’s comprehension and the fact that she’s from my state, but even so, I think I’d be more inclined to give her… award her experthood than [this player]. However neither of those players is in my genuinely elite group of players in Australia which are not hard for me to identify.

Chris has come to think of himself as being part of the top tier of experthood, stating he confidently thinks the top echelon of Australian experts numbers six. He considers himself the weakest of the six, but distinctly stronger than anyone outside that group, again citing word knowledge as the reason.

I wouldn’t want to say that I really considered myself one of the best players in Australia, one of the top group until a year ago. Maybe a bit less. Until that point, I probably would have said that I was in a B group. A very small B group but still a B group, and now I think I’m in the A group. I think a major turning point was at the start of 2004 when I did about a month of study on bingos and got my rating up to about 1860, and although it wasn’t an amazing year for
results for me, winning the Trans Tasman at the end of it… From that moment on, I don’t think there was any argument that I’d have to be in the discussion.

Though Chris was confident of his place in the top echelon of experts, he admits a degree of self-doubt about his ability in relation to its other members. Chris perceived himself as weaker than other experts on the basis of a belief that his word knowledge was not as strong as theirs. In the face of continuing consistency and a high rating, Chris began to ascribe his performance to “excellent strategic [skills], ability to play to [his] strengths and win games [he] maybe shouldn’t win sometimes”, though he admits he “[doesn’t] really believe in that myself”, stating he has always felt his results exceeded his knowledge and confessed feeling paranoid about being accused of cheating.

I’m always thinking that people are going to say I must be cheating because they’ll realise that my word knowledge isn’t that good, so I must be setting up words for myself or something like that somehow. That’s been quite a strong over the years and it hasn’t gone away. It was bigger when I was a bit younger and I thought people might be more suspicious of my motives.

Of his rivals, he shows sincere admiration for their skills and knowledge. Chris would “love to have the word knowledge that I think most of the other players [of his] calibre have”, and explicitly compares his perceived skills to that of other players, identifying it clearly as the area he wishes he could improve upon.
Andrew and Naween have both been on the international scene for 15 years at least and they’ve also, Andrew particularly has studied encyclopaedically.

David has an eidetic memory – he sees a word once and remembers it…As I say, I do now consider myself part of the top echelon. However, even so I think there’s a bit of a hierarchy, and I’m at the bottom of it. A new arrival in it with plenty of work to do to justify my place in it.

Though certain of what he needs to do to improve, Chris questioned whether he ever would advance his position within the top echelon, citing time and a wide variety of interests as reasons he hasn’t been able to do as much work as he feels he should have.

My main enemy is myself because I don’t have the motivation to reach my full potential in Scrabble because I don’t prioritise it, I don’t prioritise study time, I don’t prioritise practice time. I put other things before tournaments routinely and I fill up my leisure time because I have a very wide range of extracurricular interests. And I always seem to put that before Scrabble. Scrabble is always last in terms of what I get around to doing. Although it matters to me and it’s a very big part of my life and the fact that I always put it last means I’m not motivated to achieve my full level of expertise which makes me sad on occasion.
Though highly competitive despite his doubts and stated refusal to put Scrabble ahead of his other interests and commitments, Chris readily takes part in the social aspects of Scrabble as well.

During tournaments I also relish the social scene. It matters a lot to me and it’s one of the most attractive things about tournament play now is associating with primarily the other expert players but other people who aren’t experts as well, and the sort of lively company and interesting conversation and diverse interests they have that they provide.

He describes the community of players to which he belongs as being a good one, citing competition and socialising as both being important. Asked if he would consider moving to somewhere with a less developed Scrabble scene, he admitted that it would be a disincentive.

I would say that the lack of a decent Scrabble community would mitigate strongly against my moving [from Sydney]… if the opportunity arose, or the something happened that said, maybe I’ll move to Tasmania one of the first things I would say is “but the Scrabble is so crap down there, I probably won’t”.

Though he concedes he would win more titles if he had fewer top players in direct competition with him, Chris claims he wouldn’t enjoy playing as much without strong
rivals. The greatest pleasure for Chris is “always playing someone who’s good enough to beat you”.

Richard

Richard, like most of the other subjects, began playing at home with his family, particularly his grandmother. Richard “dabbled in chess and wasn’t very good at it” in his early teens and also played Monopoly and a variety of other games at home, but these were not a major interest of his until later in his life, not even Scrabble:

I seemed to be reasonably good at English and spelling. I was very good at spelling when I was a kid and that probably just went on to Scrabble… It wasn’t a focus. It was just one of many games I played. I mainly played sport. Scrabble was for when it was raining, or nights.

When in his late 20s and early 30s, Richard had friends who enjoyed playing the game socially, and came to know a competitive player through a common acquaintance. This player introduced Richard to playing the game at a slightly higher level, to the point of which he was aware of not yet being of the same standard, and eventually spurred him to play at a club level.

I actually went and played, he was very open to me going and playing against him, even though as a social player I was pretty inept. And it was only the US
dictionary, so obviously I had a lot to learn. I played him a fair bit for many months and then finally I went along to the club and you know played along with the six other stalwarts who played there.

Despite being aware that the players he was now facing were more skilful than those he played socially, Richard still enjoyed the mechanics of the game and saw having to learn new skills and words to be a positive aspect of increased competition. In addition, he had expected to find it to be different and more difficult and had mentally prepared for this accordingly. Of the first few club meetings he attended, he recalls:

Um, it was more difficult and the players were much better and more serious but I liked the game because of its structure of rules and so, I didn’t mind learning more stuff so I didn’t find it too daunting. I thought I was going to be daunted the first time I used a clock. But then found that my standard of play tended to finish well inside the time anyway so that wasn’t a drama.

Exposure to different players playing with a dictionary to which Richard was unaccustomed both necessitated and facilitated learning. The two-letter words, the building blocks of the game, were the first words Richard studied from a list. For words longer than this, Richard tried to acquire them through playing regularly, hoping to pick them up as they were played by opponents.
I kept playing tournament players socially. When I say socially, I mean outside of club as if they were tournament games. And so just through that I picked up more words so my learning was just through playing. Yeah, just observing new words and then maybe occasionally checking only using a dictionary because at that time I didn’t even have a computer.

Richard augmented the knowledge he picked up through practice with some limited study. His sparring partner outside the club gave him access to specific word lists that he had studied of words that were particularly useful for Scrabble study. Richard recalls the first list copy he received was the well-known “RETAIN” list, a list of all the seven-letter words that can be made from the six high-frequency letters of RETAIN plus one additional letter.

He was more than happy to guide me in terms of his high probability lists, you know, he had another book that was lists of letters or a word list book rather than a list of words so he was happy to let me look in there at high probability stuff. Slowly but surely I did [learn the list]. I’m not a very good studier. I didn’t sit down and master it in a weekend. I just kept, I slowly looked at it, I guess it was fairly daunting initially, just slowly looked at it over time. Eventually, I guess I was aware of them all and wasn’t too bad at them.

At this stage, Richard found learning lists like the RETAIN list to be less interesting than words with meanings, and though he had been made aware of the importance of
some words over others, was particularly interested in words that were interesting or related to areas of knowledge that interested him. Richard combined studying what he felt he needed to know to improve his practice – filling in what he knew to be gaps in his knowledge - with what he felt would be interesting or enjoyable.

My background is, I know lots of animals and stuff, and so yeah, I just look up interesting words, words that look interesting I look up their meanings but I don’t look up the meaning of everything... It’s like, I wonder.. there’s common prefixes or suffixes, but maybe I’ll look at one that often turns up that I don’t know anything about. [The prefix] ISO- for instance… Certainly, I find high probability lists… I know they’re good for the getting better at the game and winning more games but the lists in themselves, after a while I find them a bit boring.

Despite this preference for interesting words, when asked what he liked most about the game, he nominated the rules and structure of the game, and exercising skill in finding particular words, rather than knowledge of the words themselves. Richard stated that the pleasure of competition comes from “the battle between me, my rack and the board”, and winning and losing were also secondary concerns.

I possibly was winning a few more games but to me at the time it wasn’t really... winning and losing didn’t really mean a lot to me, it wasn’t the major driving force. So, especially when I played socially, I probably lost 80% or
90% of the games. But I kept playing every week, it wasn’t like I bailed out
because I was sick of losing. I got flogged and I was more interested in the
words other people played and then learned from that.

Tournaments run less frequently in Canberra than they do in other major cities, so
Richard didn’t attend a tournament until he had been playing for some time, longer
than most novices wait before playing tournaments. He went into his first tournament
with no knowledge of how they ran, or expectations of what it would be like.

I didn’t know anything about the tournament structure and a couple of the
people said there was a tournament happening so I just went along to it…I think
the players I played against thought I was like an average player and I’d do
alright and in fact I won half my games and I beat a couple of people who were
sort of middle-rated so I started with a reasonable rating, not that I knew about
ratings at that time anyway. I felt good that I’d been able to win half my games
which was better than winning no games…I was just more interested in the
whole tournament process really, to see what it was like, to see, to meet all
these other people who played heaps of Scrabble which I did all the time
anyway.

Significantly, because Richard’s first tournament was an open, he became exposed to
some very highly-ranked players who had come to the event, though at this time
Richard didn’t know the difference between open and divisional events. Richard’s
early tournament experiences were enough to show him the difference between the top players and the rest of the field:

I think in general they were probably more serious. More focused. And so they didn’t have as many external distractions. They were much less likely to chat to you over the board. So that was the main difference. Having said that, there probably were a few focused people in the lower groups but that was my main impression.

In addition to demeanour, Richard noticed that the level of knowledge of other participants seemed higher than his, because he came across many words played that he had never before come across. He recalls thinking at the time that he made more challenges than any other player at the tournament.

Richard continued playing regularly both at the club and socially, and acquired a computer which enabled him to practise by himself. Due to the distance from regular tournament play, he wasn’t able to play tournaments that often, but showed improvement at each one he attended, and this culminated in him eventually making his debut in the top section of a New South Wales tournament in 2004. Of his initial experiences playing amongst exclusively top-rated players, he recalls:

[The m]ost immediate difference was the number of mistakes that were made in the lower divisions. There were much fewer mistakes in the Masters division
and I was probably still making some of those mistakes. That was the main thing and of course, the level, there was a real jump in the level of player, of players, who just like…whose word knowledge was just way beyond, way beyond the people in the lower groups but with the vagaries of Scrabble, didn’t necessarily mean you were going to lose to those people.

The increase in the quality of opposition introduced Richard to an increase in the number and type of different words played, beyond common words he knew into the realm of words commonly played by experts and the benefit of specific, regimented study became more obvious.

[W]hen I shot up into Masters, I still didn’t really know all that much about all those words and so I was…started studying quite a number of them, starting with the top 250 8-letter words or something. As I was told, I would get to play them and sure enough, I did start to get to play them. All those people at that level were far beyond what I played before so if I was going to have any hope of maintaining my rating or playing at the same level as those people I was going to have to start somewhere.

He was also exposed to game-playing practices he had not previously been aware of, such as tile tracking, the skill of working out what tiles were in the bag or on your opponent’s rack by using a process of elimination aided by crossing off tiles already
played on the board. This was something he had not observed at club or against players of his own ability.

I think at that time I wasn’t as big on the strategy. In fact, I saw, you know one of the first games I played was against Trevor and I saw his, that he tile tracked, and I thought, My god, who tile tracks? Of course, now being in the Masters, everyone tile tracks. It was a bit of an eye-opener.

Richard’s improvement during this time came to prominence when he unexpectedly managed to win a two-day tournament in 2005 against much higher rated opposition, winning 12 games out of 14 and gaining a large number of rating points, enough to make him the highest rated player in the ACT for the first time. He felt lucky to have won the tournament, but also attributed the success to changes in his game he had deliberately made through observing his own practice.

I do remember one thing I did. I made a lot less mistakes. One thing I have tried to nut out, I found that I was, I wasn’t that conscious of it, but I was roughly aware that I was losing games or losing plays because I was making mistakes, playing false words so I started cutting that out a lot. So I played a lot less false words. And there was an interesting change because playing a lot of players I found they still played a lot of false plays themselves and I was starting… trying to weed that out… And also being a bit more diligent about what you put on the board, not playing NI and silly things like that.
Despite this result, Richard said that he felt his rating increase might be temporary, and expected “just to drop a large amount of points back to whence I’d came” when he played subsequent events, aware that he could lose the points as easily as they had been gained. Today, Richard is “slightly more confident” about his rating, but during this phase of improvement, had a negative opinion of his ability in comparison to his achievement as measured by tournament results.

[T]he people that I noticed in the ratings level, who were at that level, were like legends of the game who I knew were, who I knew certainly had far superior word knowledge to what I did so I felt like I was a bit of a small fish in a big ocean…Yeah, I knew that they’d been rated highly for the entire time I’ve been playing because I’ve only been playing for roughly 4 years I think, and some of these people have been playing for 10, 20 years so I was a bit of a newcomer.

Rather than just accepting that these players were better than him and that he could not hope to best them, Richard began to model some of his behaviour on what he describes as “best practice” as expounded and demonstrated by other top players.

I’ve taken on board some comments like that people have said in the past and like also having read Andrew’s book, but other things like he says like best practice, is talk to the people who are the best, learn off people who are the best and all that sort of stuff and I guess I’ve got that back in my mind, so I’ve
noticed a lot of advanced players when they talk to masters players, when the masters players talk to them they just see them as arrogant, they don’t wanna know what they’re talking about, they think they know it all.

Richard describes the other top-rated players he faces as being approachable, going so far as to say that the extent of the willingness to help other players among them is surprising, with regard to word knowledge and strategy and other advice.

If someone says to me, I missed so and so, I don’t take it as an offense, I take it as a real learning process and think oh beauty, I’m gonna remember that for next time and I just do that all the time.

Richard himself is now occasionally asked by less-experienced players for advice, which he is happy to give, though he finds it surprising they ask. He describes himself as “fairly open”, and the knowledge he has as being “not exactly a secret”. Helping improving players makes Richard happy, and he feels frustrated by other players’ unwillingness to take on board his advice when they have sought it out either directly or indirectly.

[I]t’s frustrating when you try to help people out but they’re just not interested in what you’re talking out, and you think well, how come you don’t really want to improve? I’m just happy to yeah, see improvement in other players and if I can help that, but for some reason, most of the lower rated players, I don’t force
myself on them, it comes about because they’re whingeing and complaining about their terrible racks and their terrible boards and their terrible bingos they can’t play, and I’m just saying, put in these logical processes in place and you’ll help yourself.

Despite his relative geographical isolation, Richard keeps in practice through the same process he undertook to improve, frequently playing the game, and he now uses playing on the Internet as a way of getting access to other high rated players and facilitating risk-free practice of new skills and words:

By this stage, I had a computer and so I was playing a massive amount of games on ISC probably compared to most people and I felt that the advantage I had was in strategy. And also, I took a lot of notice of some of the Masters players who talked a lot about rack balance, and so my rack balance, so obviously it’s not perfect but my rack balance and perhaps my strategy are probably pretty good. I played a lot of games on ISC where I tested things like, I tested a lot of risk stuff. It helped my own game.

Although his competition at club is not of the same standard as those he plays at tournaments or on the Internet, Richard takes these social games seriously, playing “with the same focus of anagramming and strategy as [he is] in a tournament”. He also analyses his games to find out what possible plays he could have made but missed, to ensure he learns from his mistakes or misses.
I’m not the sort of person that will jump up and down and say “Oh god, I missed such and such.” Maybe on occasion if it was that easy. Yeah, I just really learn from it. And you know the main mistakes I make, well, apart from dodgy words are just in endgame strategy and just like with the words when I started, I’m getting better at it having analysed endgames more and just thinking more about what I’m doing and the different things you can do to win a game right at the end.

Of his current position in the hierarchy, Richard doesn’t feel “really positive” and admits that he thinks he is “perhaps not where [he] should be” in relation to some of his competitors. Despite that, he admits it’s possible he knows more than he thinks he knows, and when asked whether he expects to lose when playing high-rated competitors, shows a change over time of his self-concept as related to his ability:

When I first sit down to play them I certainly did. Now I don’t think about it. I was very daunted about playing them at first, even in the first Masters tournaments, but surprisingly from winning half of my games, beating half of those legends, I’m not so daunted, and feel as if I have some chance of beating them.

Richard doesn’t track his improvement using statistics, and hasn’t set any specific goals for future improvement, though he thinks he will always be improving and is
happy to keep “plugging away, and if it doesn’t happen, it’s not the be all and end all”. He is most concerned with trying to play to his ability. He acknowledges that beating other top players, particularly the first time, is “really good” but he doesn’t focus as much on winning as “playing the best game [he] can”. When winning a game he hasn’t expected to win, he is pleasantly surprised, but attributes it to his own work.

Well, I’m surprised. But I’m also glad that perhaps some of my word knowledge and my strategy has helped me win it...You can have a lucky game and you can have an unlucky game but also I think you can manufacture your own luck, as it were.

Discussion

Michael, Chris and Richard describe a much more sophisticated community than the other interviewees at the equivalent stages of their own play. Opportunities to compete, practise and improve are more frequent and there is more choice; these developing experts had access to more information, more competition and more opportunity. The existence prior to the three experts interviewed here of many other experts is noteworthy in that each of these interviewees progressed in relatively short time from being the learner to the expert from whom others learn, be it by example, observation, instruction or dialogue.
The same dynamics by which learning occurs for the middle-period experts are present, but new ones have accompanied them – play and dissemination of information have new mediums for sharing and transmission. New methods of practice, study or competition have not supplanted those experienced by previous experts; they work alongside them.

The Scrabble community described by these interviewees is not just a nebulous cloud of players. Instead, there is evidence here of a clear shift towards not just a singular community but a multi-partite community distributed not just by level of achievement, but also geography. Michael’s and Richard’s experiences of improvement are heavily shaped by the cohort of players they worked in, and Chris notes the difference between the Scrabble scenes in various places.
Chapter 7

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The research carried out has sought to find commonalities between the development of top Scrabble experts as a way of finding out how this expertise arises, and how social interactions play a part in these processes. The interview data presented depict nine individuals whose progress towards the top echelon have a remarkable degree of similarity when examined as broad narratives, considering that each player has a different philosophical outlook, playing style, record of achievement and even different reasons for enjoying competitive Scrabble.

The discussion of changing roles and involvement as ability and experience increase shares many characteristics with Lave and Wenger’s case studies of successful, nurturing communities of practice. An informal, but highly evolved, curriculum, presented and disseminated in a variety of ways and determined by practice, was described by the respondents, and distinctly different rates and kinds of participation that occurred on the way to experthood were evident in the data.

Expertise, or the quality of being considered an expert by one’s peers, is identified similarly by each participant, even as different standards and criteria are applied, but even with varying degrees of success, there are sufficient levels of overlap in each story to observe a number of biographical patterns within.
This chapter will examine the similarities between the nine players’ experiences, and with Lave and Wenger’s model by discussing the findings in relation to the research questions stated in Chapter 1.

1. What skills are developed by expert Scrabble players?

Broadly, this question asks what players who progress from novice to expert actually learn how to do that they were not able to do before this process. The skills developed by experts can be divided into categories in a number of ways, but the most logical is to separate them into either knowledge or application, as each player identified a distinction between understanding of Scrabble skills, and being able to apply those in a competitive setting. All players come to the game with an understanding of the basic mechanics of the game, but there is a specific set of skills that needs to be learned to transfer these into tournaments; basic skills must be honed and combined with skills unique to the adaptations made to the basic game to adapt it for tournament conditions. The author feels that this is the simplest division.

Elements of the curriculum (knowledge)

- **Rules and mechanics**

Rules are seen as boundaries within which to practise craft; boundaries that define what is possible, not just what is legal. Experts have a fine knowledge of the official rules and understanding of the ethics and what is acceptable conduct during competition.
There is a marked difference between an expert’s understanding and a novice’s understanding of the possibilities during a game of Scrabble, even if they share the same understanding of what is legal.

Expert players develop an understanding and appreciation of the rules and mechanics of Scrabble, and speak of their level of play and understanding of how the game works in a way that differs from non-experts. These distinctions have their bases in what they understand to be possible; Andrew describes a moment of epiphany in which he came to understand the possibilities of the game, an S being added to the beginning of MILE to form SMILE opening up a new set of possibilities for transforming words from the front as well as the back, and Chris notes the distinction between moves described as “run-of-the-mill”, and more advanced moves that are legal within the game’s mechanics but found only by its best players. What this suggests is that while everyone knows how the game works, few players are adept at finding the broadest array of moves which are possible within the framework of the game’s structure.

Apart from knowing which words are legal and what can be done to them, each expert spoke of some degree of affinity with the concepts of wordplay and the particular pattern of cognitive skills that make up Scrabble, even if they are unable to specifically pinpoint why playing the game competitively appeals. Esther describes part of her attraction as being that the skills exercised by the game give her enjoyment, but also that every game is different making it unpredictable and challenging, Chris sums up the nature of the game and its mechanics as simply “finding a word, and placing a word”,

-153-
suggesting that apart from pattern matching and linguistics, the game very much makes use of visuo-spatial skills.

The combination of linguistic, spatial and computational factors required to play the game at even its most basic level gives the game a number of dimensions. The challenges of competitive play, along with the game's flexibility, make learning the game more complex than simply rote learning of words and rules. It is a strategy game seen as having inherent beauty like chess, but with the difference of being able to transform games with results that appear foregone conclusions with skilful play and luck. Another part of its appeal stems from its use of language as a building block of the game, especially for the experts who value wordplay and understanding of English, even if these factors are seen as being reduced in importance at the game's upper echelons.

For a number of players, competition in other games and sports is part of the appreciation of playing a one-on-one game. To use Richard's description, the “structure and finite set of rules that govern [Scrabble]” are compelling. Except for the case of Bob, the experts all came to Scrabble with attendant interests in other word games — chess for some, crosswords for others — and Scrabble came to supplant these interests in many cases. But Bob also brought enjoyment of competition in sports and recreation, which he shared with Joan and Richard. Several interviewees used a metaphor of a battle; Richard described it as a “battle between [him], [his] rack and the board” while Andrew spoke of deploying words as if they were weapons.
The data suggest that in becoming familiar with the way the game is played, expert players take skills from other areas, or build upon enjoyment gleaned from similar tasks, and the combination of this basic level of competence with the game's building blocks and propensity to enjoy its challenges leads to the desire to learn and improve.

Further, it seems that each player brought some degree of intuition or early success, skill or enjoyment of the game that led to further effort and desire for future experimentation and development. Naween reported beating his parents from the age of “six or seven”, Joan was aware of being the superior player of a friend ten years her senior who had been her first opponent, and Alistair described a level of focus and determination even in the child-friendly variant of Junior Scrabble that he admits bordered on seeming “obsessive”. Chris described his grasp of aspects of the game as making “intuitive sense” to him. Enjoyment of or affinity for the mechanics of the game seem to be an important pre-condition for further progress and improvement.

- **Word knowledge and strategy**

Though Scrabble has simple rules about what can and cannot be done in terms of positioning of letters, the word list is the largest part of the curriculum when it comes to determining what is and is not legal in play. The mechanics of the game may be grasped intuitively, and indeed had been by some experts, but deliberate word learning is a constant theme in the development of all experts, even those with a more literary and linguistic background.
The size of the word list, both as printed in the book, and as demonstrated in use by an expert player, means that developing players seek to cut it down to its most essential parts to make more effective use of studying time, in effect, breaking it down into something like an academic syllabus. Experts agree that the shortest words, of two and three letters, are the game's most important building blocks, and that seven- and eight-letter words, which give a player a 50-point bonus, are crucial. There are differences between each expert, both in the extent to which the latter have been mastered, and what other kinds of words are studied. In effect, there are two levels of knowledge here: knowledge of legal words and knowledge of which words should be known, with the former affecting the latter to some degree, though a natural vocabulary contains both useful and less useful words, and experts diverge from purely expedient study at times because of interest in other areas (cryptic crosswords being an example), or simply for the pleasure of doing so for its own sake.

Joan knew, even without the benefit of anyone having told her, that knowing the two-letter words in the dictionary used to conduct the first competitions in Australia would be helpful to know. She trawled through the dictionary to find them for her own use. Her immediate successors would have the benefit of other people having done this work, opening up access to lists of three- and four-letter words. Alistair recalls trying deliberately to learn the two-letter words and some of the threes to improve his game, while Bob came to the understanding that four-letter words were useful by identifying the deficit in other players’ word knowledge and noting that he had achieved some
success after doing study in that area. Earlier players generally were less able to be
discriminating in the lists of words they studied; Andrew, Esther and Alistair all report
having been thorough and meticulous in their dictionary searches, but this still
necessitated the need to examine all possibilities to find the most useful words.

More recent expert behaviour, in the sense of applying to both newer experts and later
habits of earlier ones, involves sustained, directed study on particular kinds of words,
ordered by usefulness. High probability words are words which are likely to appear on
a rack because their constituent letters appear frequently in a bag of Scrabble tiles.
Though Andrew and Alistair describe lists of stems designed to yield likely words, it
was the availability of computer-generated lists of these likely words that enabled
directed, accurate study. Joan describes this development as a revelation, because it
brought words she had never come across before to her attention. Likewise, when Bob
began compiling a word book, he noted that many of the seven-letter words were
unfamiliar to him, and in taking the formless lists and putting them in order on paper,
he was exposed to words that many others would not know as well.

Expert players all learn these words because of their usefulness, though the monotony
leads some players to study in other ways. Richard's interest in prefixes and suffixes
led him to augment his study of bonuses with words with common and unusual stems
like the prefix ISO-, as well as collecting words with an animal theme, and Esther
gleaned words from crosswords, which used the same dictionary as tournament
Scrabble for a period. But their value is unquestioned; Michael describes learning them
as a “sure way to improve your game”, and Richard notes the satisfaction of getting to play the laboriously-studied words after studying them, which was more exciting than studying off “just a list”.

Beyond the universally-studied words, experts take different foci when deciding on their own course of study. Naween concentrates aggressively on seven- and eight-letter words. Bob, through compilation of books on four-, five- and six-letter words, learned many unfamiliar words to get high scores without having to play a seven-letter word, words he describes as being “out there for anyone” but which are less studied. Michael talks about the importance of words which are formed by adding another letter to an existing word like ANTIPOLE and RANTIPOLE, and words whose part of speech is not obvious and as a result may be a trap for an opponent adding an S to pluralise it, especially unusual ones. Knowledge that is rare can have a twofold advantage; the player gains points from it, and may force an error from an opponent without that word in their vocabulary.

In any case, experts seem to agree that while sorting the words and finding out what is most important to study – the metaknowledge – has become easier, that does not mean that it is necessarily easier to learn all the words. Esther believes that newer players who aspire to experthood still have to do “all the legwork” themselves even if the lists are pre-made, and noted that words played during games tend to stick in memory more because they are within the context of the game rather than on a list divorced from it. And while the number of words is enormous, so much so that even experts cannot get
through the whole list with complete certainty – indeed, Naween confesses being uncertain of three-letter words – Chris feels that top players have an affinity with words that make them suited to learning and applying the knowledge of words in a game situation.

Experts develop specific word study regimens based around words they believe are the most important to know. Early experts observed the probability of a word coming up through understanding the mechanics of the game and also playing many games themselves. The experience of formative experts, plus computer simulations, have enabled newer players to focus more finely on word study, based on the experience of those who have gone before, enabling them to learn more, and more quickly.

Scrabble players must also master a number of strategic skills which are applied in different circumstances, though these skills tend to be explained more abstractly than word knowledge is. Essentially, strategy consists of taking into account a variety of things when selecting between words that have been found and a place located for them on the board. The score, the letters left on the rack, the number of tiles played and considerations of how the board is affected by a play are all considered. Alistair notes that strategy shifted when tournament play shifted from high-score Scrabble to matchplay in the 80s. Players had to play more tiles to gain an advantage, whereas before the wisdom was “conserve your tiles... play a short game”. Received wisdom from previous games informs strategy for future games. Andrew notes that few
Australian players are interested in post-game analysis, and this culture is more ingrained in other countries’ playing cohorts.

Chris rebuts an assertion by 1997 World Champion Joel Sherman that strategy is contingent upon pre-existing excellent word knowledge, believing that part of good play is tailoring one’s strategy to fit with one's own strength, and Esther makes the same observation when noting how her strengths come out more in tournaments than her weaknesses because of how she plays, even if she doesn’t know exactly why this is. For a player without a big vocabulary, playing as if one knew the entire dictionary would be a mistake, and Chris knows that against some players with comparable word knowledge, he must give opponents credit for their word knowledge when making decisions. Richard says in hindsight that he never felt he was interested in strategy early on, even going so far as to not track tiles, and was even taken aback when first observing this behaviour before adopting it himself as he came to see its use in practice. And despite his expertise, Andrew downplays the importance of strategy, stressing the primary importance is on move generation and evaluation, though other experts place the latter firmly in the strategy column. But other experts talk about strategy and evaluation as the same decision-making process, so this distinction seems more semantic than substantial.

Chris believes that experts take more notice of strategic concerns and are more interested in having strategic discussions. These can take place within the context of specific feedback regarding achievement in a particular game or setting. Bandura
(1977) calls this sort of information ‘performance feedback’, and explains that such feedback speaks to personal capabilities and also deficiencies. Chris’s experience suggests that experts make more use of these opportunities than non-experts. Richard also had similar experiences when seeking to assist players, suggesting a difference between experts and non-experts. Experts use advice as a learning opportunity to improve their game, but non-experts are less likely to retain and incorporate the information beyond the context in which it is given.

A specific range of terminology and jargon has been created, some of it taken from generic game playing theory, some from other competitive games and some of it native to Scrabble. These terms relate to fine points of strategy and knowledge that expert players accrue, which enable high-level discussion and discourse during game analysis, be it individual or mediated.

If strategy sometimes seems hard to define, observation and comparison provide ways for experts to learn and describe their experience. Andrew contrasted the habits of two players with wildly different games – one who played to maximise his score with seven-letter plays, and one who scored consistently. Michael admits admiring the game of a regular opponent in Tasmania who adopted the strategy of keeping the board open to take advantage of his word knowledge, and Alistair describes a former top player who seemed to know every word in the dictionary and due to that advantage seemed to take no notice of keeping the same number of vowels and consonants when possible, a tactic which seems automatic to most experts.
Strategy, then, seems to be less a definitive suite of skills with boundaries agreed on by all players, and more the ability to analyse the specific situation and make decisions. While Chris describes the process as intuitive to him, and Joan describes many non-experts as understanding explanations of good strategy, experts draw a distinction between their command of strategy and the more haphazard decisions made by non-experts. Joan attempts to teach these tactics, indicating that for some experts, the general principles can be taught, even if it is important to test them in competition.

Application in practice

- **Adjusting to playing conditions and standard of play**

  Tournament Scrabble has the same basic rules of play as the game does when played to rules inside the box, but playing in tournaments comes with a number of modifications to procedure that increase the cognitive load of the game. The game is played to a clock which the player must not only remember to hit at the end of a turn, but also keep within its limits or face a points penalty. Games follow each other in quick succession often without a substantial break, meaning that the better part of a day can be spent playing with minimal chance to rest or recover.

  Chris describes adjusting to these skills as a new tournament player, even one who plays the game very well, as being difficult. A novice player may have to concentrate more on basic skills such as using the clock, scoring moves correctly and being aware of time limits under the pressure of “worrying about which words [they] do and don't
know... and about making a fool of [themselves]”, and all of these cannot always be mastered at the first tournament.

The standard of players faced being higher than previously encountered in non-tournament can be a source of anxiety. Michael and Richard spoke of being slightly in awe of expert players at first, and Chris described a moment where, having all but defeated a player ranked much higher than him early on in his playing career, he nearly transposed two letters in his final play to lose the game. But these are learning opportunities as well. Richard found the experience not so much a daunting one, but a way of learning new skills. This suggests that performative skills learned within practice can be as significant for improvement as the development of cognitive skill sets which can be learned solo.

Some players play their first event with more experience than the average tournament novice and most come through clubs before playing formal tournaments. Some clubs prepare experts for tournament play better than others; Bob recalls having felt very well-prepared for the higher quality of play and additional demands of competition by experiencing high-level club games under the tutelage of a mentor, and Michael had received extensive practice and encouragement from a club organiser who helped instil in him the belief that he would perform well. Richard, due to the lack of tournaments in his area, had been playing socially and at a club for a much longer time than the other experts who began playing in the midst of an active playing scene. There seems to be a strong correlation between preparedness and initial results. Chris described himself as
having felt mentally prepared for the challenge of the game at his first event, but admitted to feeling disappointed when he was not able to live up to his expectations due to having to adjust and apply skills for the first time in practice that he had theretofore only known about in theory. It was necessary to develop tournament-playing skills rather than only Scrabble-playing skills to succeed, and Chris found that better results started being achieved once the former were attained, and these had a bigger effect than any other factors.

Rising through the ranks entails mastery of the basic mechanics, improving aspects of one’s own game and becoming accustomed to better and better opponents. Richard notes that higher-rated players seem to make fewer mistakes, and that he felt he was making too many when he began playing better players. Chris compares experts to non-experts in demeanour and finds experts are less likely to give away inadvertent information and better able to block out distractions and concentrate on the game, and that these differences are readily noticeable to observers.

These are skills that are difficult to test in an experimental environment. Tuffiash, Roring and Ericsson’s (2007) study looked at performance on tasks approximating Scrabble positions, but the experience of the experts in the sample suggest that there is something qualitatively different about a puzzle when it is done “over the board”, and that there are other factors of cognitive weight that must be considered when solving a problem. This suggests that the ability to solve a hypothetical or adapted problem in a test environment does not necessarily translate perfectly into a real game setting.
Scrabble players, even elite ones, miss plays they are capable of finding, play false words and make mistakes of vision and strategy.

- **Metacognition, reflection and analysis**

Skills that are elements of tournament play rather than the actual rules of Scrabble are also important for expert performance, and these are likewise absent from Tuffiash et al’s (2007) study, as well as Cansino et al’s (1998) research into what the brain does while playing Scrabble. Expert players are able to identify their state of mind, prepare mentally for important occasions, as well as make use of metacognitive strategies to control temperament, mental exertion and prepare for competitive play by creating personalised study plans tailored to their own styles of learning. In addition, experts engage in various kinds of self-analysis and reflection to determine their strengths, weaknesses and plan their study and preparation based on their findings.

Expert players exhibit a far more professional approach when playing the game and are less likely to be psychologically fazed by poor results or luck. Esther takes losses in her stride because she feels like the next game against that person will present a challenge to defeat them. Naween was able to get quality opposition regularly and improve his winning rate against better opponents until he surpassed them. Alistair enjoyed the game even though early on he found that he was losing a lot of games in tournaments, as did Richard at his early visits to his local club. Alistair used specific goals as ways of keeping him motivated and focusing on his improvement even as he was losing more games than he would have liked. Expert players learn how to play
tournaments, rather than just discrete games, and make specific plans to keep motivated and facilitate their own improvement.

Experts seem to attribute success to effort and skill, though upcoming experts have a tendency to emphasise their perceived weaknesses, even though they have confidence in their abilities. While Naween admits to being uncertain about words he feels he should know, he expresses confidence that his strategy is “pretty good compared to other players”. Michael drew confidence from successes even as he felt geography and lack of access to best players hindered his development. Esther thinks her grasp of the game is strong enough that she is still able to play an advanced game despite relying on word study done 20 years ago. Joan attributes larger than usual rates of success or failure to often being a function of the “fluctuations of fortune” rather than of herself.

The attributions of developing experts are less constant, and often strange; Richard admitted to “not having a huge self esteem” and sometimes thinking he is “not perhaps where [he] should be” in relation to players he feels are stronger, describing these other players with terms like “legends”. Chris revealed that because he felt his results outstripped his ability, he feared being accused of cheating and that for a long time into his career, this feeling had not gone away. This doubt even occurred at the same time as Chris attempted to attribute his success to other factors within his control. Michael felt he was too indecisive, often unable to work out the correct move to be selected in a timely fashion. In the face of good results, these critical views suggest what Chris describes as an expert player being closer to perfection and more inclined to strive for
it. Non-experts tend to “shrug it off”, whereas experts “take it to heart” when they make an avoidable mistake and Richard feels non-experts are often not receptive to advice on how they can improve.

Experts are highly reflective practitioners who go through processes of self-assessment to identify strengths and weaknesses and to build on them. Identifying weaknesses, even minor ones, presents opportunities for improvement. Often identifying areas for improvement is difficult. Naween thinks that when learning has happened over a period of time, it can be “hard to pinpoint deficiencies”, and some players have habits that have become ingrained. Joan is able to identify a number of areas where she does not feel as sharp as she was during the prime of her playing, such as her defence and her play toward the end of a game. Richard observes that compared to other players he was playing a large number of false words and made a determined effort to decrease this. Naween feels that for an expert, practice brings about errors that send a player back to “the book” for study, and the question becomes mostly one of time and motivation. Most players reported engaging in post-game analysis to look for mistakes and weaknesses in their games during their development.

Andrew perhaps takes this the furthest, having asked early mentors for assistance in identifying weak spots, conducting detailed analyses of his games and working to eliminate them, such as his tendency to play without consideration of defensive tactics at times. He believes that without going through one’s games, this is not possible. Esther admits to a bad habit of assuming that all words can be pluralised, which
sometimes causes her to play recklessly. Michael mused about trying to reinvent himself as a fast player as a way of working through his difficulties keeping inside the time limit for games. Alistair made wholesale changes to his strategy mid-tournament when he found that his tactics weren't working.

Experts make extensive use of a variety of other metacognitive strategies to increase performance. Esther scribbles and writes for the duration of the game, to see which spelling of a word looks natural, or to see if she can identify the word in written form – turning a recall process into a recognition one. Andrew, having learned from experience that players “who get flustered tend to make mistakes”, adopts strategies to calm himself and control his emotions. Joan realises that as in learning another language, overlearning – doing more than is necessary – is helpful to keeping words in the head. And Bob finds that exposure to words through checking and typing them out, as he did when compiling his books, as well as making audio recordings and listening to them, both fit with his style of learning. Richard, who believes himself to be less able to pick up words quickly, uses a combination of persistence, and mixing up study he finds unexciting with interesting study on topics of interest to him. During a tournament, players take stock of their state of mind. Chris finds himself able to work out when his thinking is unproductive and his intuition as to whether a word is correct or not may be slightly out on a given day. Esther deliberately composes herself after losses because she has seen other players go on losing streaks she feels could be avoided with better mental control.
In seeking to improve, experts set high, but reasonable and realistic goals for themselves. Performance is regularly measured against these goals, and as development or stagnation occurs, these are moved accordingly. Some of this monitoring is as simple as looking at ratings or number of wins, but there are more complex methods used by players who want to look at more detailed data.

Richard went into his first tournament hoping to win half his games, which he did. Despite his doubt and the feeling that his performances were a little ahead of his own perceived ability, he began learning more deliberately to try to match the level he had attained in the ratings system, albeit not in his own mind. Chris, despite being disappointed in his first event, knew that he would return to tournaments to see where it would lead him and had already decided a rating in his head about where he perceived he would belong, which he reached very quickly. Alistair set himself a goal of getting into the top section at a tournament, and steadily improved his game until he was winning tournaments in the top section, measuring simple metrics like his average score and number of seven letter words played. Joan planned her early learning for the purpose of winning Australia's first tournament, identifying what she would need to know to succeed and working with another player to achieve these. Joan and Alistair, having been playing the longest, also admit that a level of decline in their performances have made them reassess themselves, conceding that they have been supplanted at the top, and their expectations have gone down. Both, however, still derive pleasure from achieving their slightly lowered aims.
Direct competition with peers informs players' opinions of themselves, and trends rather than snapshots are used by most experts – a flash in the pan outlier tends to be ignored. Each expert has some idea of where they stand compared to others, and improving experts have ideas on how they can further improve – their assessments of themselves directly are occasionally withering even as they display confidence in the quality of their game.

Esther thinks her ranking is “about right”, whereas Richard and Chris expressed ongoing concerns that for periods of time they felt they were too high. Joan expresses some scepticism at the accuracy of ratings due to playing populations around the country being isolated, and admits she sees a decline in her ability to be competitive. Alistair conceded that he was no longer willing to put the effort in to remain near the top of the game. Bob, despite having recently won a major title against the country's top players, said that he felt he belonged in the top 10, but specifically in the bottom half of the top 10. Michael describes himself as a “pretty good player” with “room for improvement”.

Michael has a goal to attend a World Championships, while Naween and Andrew seek to improve placings at major events. Alistair and Joan feel that being selected to play in elite events may be in the past, and, like Esther, look to play their personal best as a way of fulfilling their needs to succeed.
• Understanding other players

Beyond understanding the fundamentals of the game and the intricacies of its lexicon, Scrabble players come to realise that other players have distinctive styles and abilities, and expert players take knowledge of their opponent into account when playing them to varying extents.

At its most basic level, this skill manifests itself in the ability to size up players’ strengths. Bob, though admitting to not adjusting his game on a strategic level, notes that an experienced player can readily identify an opponent who has a good word knowledge, plays quickly and has a good grasp of strategy, and where weaknesses may lie. Bob attributes some of his early success to identifying deficits in other players’ word knowledge and specialising in words that the majority of his opponents would be less likely to know. He was able to use four- and five-letter words to open up possibilities that were not available to other players.

Andrew knows there are players he has to “be more wary of”, and those against whom he will take chances. He reasons that a player who has not demonstrated a wide word knowledge cannot “capitalise on [an] opening [he has] created, as they won’t know the hook”. Chris agrees, stating that if he wishes to win a tournament against strong opposition, he wants to “know any advantage that could accrue to [him] through knowing [his] opponents' foibles”, such as being weak strategically in an endgame situation. This is seen by Chris specifically as an expert point of view not observed in
other players. Michael believes that the opponent can influence the choice of play as much as his mood might, varying his strategy depending on who he is playing.

Knowledge of opponents comes from playing them directly, as well as observing their games. Chris describes personal experience as being invaluable, but observation can also be revealing. This can inform the observer's strategy, and be used to identify strengths and weaknesses, but may also be done out of enjoyment of examining a game after one's own is finished. Experts are able to compare different players and styles of play. Andrew's early observations of his two strongest early opponents showed striking contrasts between the two – one preferring to score consistently, the other playing low-scoring moves in an attempt to set his rack up for seven-letter bonus words – and Andrew modelled himself on the former strategy, as he found it more effective against players exhibiting the latter strategy. Michael recalls a player whose strategy he admired for its boldness, but he found it less effective for himself and realises that other methods may be a better fit for his skills and knowledge, and against the opposition he faces.

Alistair also remembers noting the difference between expert players he observed, and that this started for him well before he attained experthood. One expert appeared to show such wide knowledge of the dictionary that he played seemingly without regard to strategic concerns, and the other made strategic choices that Alistair himself tried to adopt, and after some failure, Alistair was forced to concede that this player may have
been a bad influence on him as he tried to improve, and he later made a conscious choice to abandon the strategy.

For Chris, this search for knowledge of the opponent is an important part of being competitive. Striving to win and improve means being willing “to take advantage of those things and learn about them”, even going out of one's way to do so if it is required. The knowledge can come not just from personal experience, but hearsay and looking at records of games played at other tournaments as well.

Looking at other players can be instructive in identifying weaknesses in one's own game. Naween, though an accomplished player in his own family and club at first, was determined to improve to be competitive on a world scale. He knew from experience and observation that he “wasn't that good compared to the rest of the world” and was motivated to increase his effort and improve. Likewise, Richard noted that he made more mistakes compared to other top players as he was rising through the ranks and made a concerted effort to reduce the number of false words he played and to adopt a more cautious approach.

Finally, players are able to compare themselves to their competition in a realistic fashion. The highest-rated in the research were able to cite what they felt their skills were, occasionally apologising for arrogance, and were quick to give credit to players whose knowledge they respected. Experts also seemed to demonstrate a fair degree of
familiarity with their competition as people, rather than just opponents – such descriptions were unanimously respectful and many were fond and affectionate.

Each player was able to give a good assessment of where they stood in relation to their competition. Sometimes this is informed by the rating of another player, but a number of experts will upgrade or downgrade their self-assessments (and assessments of others) based on past performance not captured in current ratings, past history of that player in head-to-head games and sometimes intangible and subjective factors such as differences in ratings between different populations of players such as disparity among the Australian state organisations. Each felt that ratings systems generally fairly represented where they were compared to their rivals, and also accurately portrayed their trajectory. Joan, for instance, sees herself as being at the top of the game compared to most, but no longer at the very top compared to other experts. Bob varies his self-assessment depending on the freshness of his study, believing himself to be “between 6th and 10th” in the country, whereas Michael sees himself as a “consistent top 20 player”, but with the ability to improve, which makes study “worth looking at”. Esther admits she feels her word knowledge may lag behind other players’ but has confidence that she is able to compensate for this to justify her placing rather than doubt herself.

The idea of an opponent’s style or level affecting choices made is not new or unique to Scrabble. Sabermetrics, the objective study of baseball statistics, is perhaps the best-known example in competitive sport. Of course, the potential in Scrabble is greater –
Michael hints at this when he mentions that in chess you may help other players, but you don’t reveal your trap strategies – any potential word played has the potential to be a trap or a one-way setup depending on not just an opponent’s knowledge, but a player’s beliefs about an opponent’s knowledge. This aspect to the game owes little to theoretical ideas about expertise and best performance, and much to the idea of communities of practice. As Wenger (1998) intimates, personal knowledge flows in interaction at the same time as professional knowledge does during co-operative processes. The same would appear to be true about competitive processes; for example, while playing a game of Scrabble you may learn several new words (knowledge about the game itself), and simultaneously learn that your opponent has knowledge of words you do not (knowledge about the opponent). Top players, then, use both of these in tandem to store knowledge about their opponents and use it to inform their decision making, be it during playing the game, or making metacognitive decisions.

2. How are these skills learned and taught?

This question examines the processes that take place while the developing expert acquires his or her craft, how the knowledge is acquired, how motivation takes place, and what is entailed in these processes that are unique to a certain standard of play. Experts describe a number of different phases of skill development. First, skills become understood through deliberate study. Secondly, players have the opportunity to practise, be it at a Scrabble club, in social games, or playing on the Internet under a variety of conditions and levels of formality. Finally, tournaments and competitions
represent the highest level of the art of Scrabble play, at which experts’ superior command of strategy, word knowledge and other skills pit them against tougher competition in a controlled environment with rigid rules and expectations. It is noteworthy that the formative stages tend to be solitary in nature, involving dedicated effort without outside assistance, but these skills are consolidated and assessed, for the most part, through social interactions, such as observation, discussion or competition.

Table 7.1 shows a list of interactions and personal behaviours that recurred in the interview data, and the basic ideas contained therein are discussed immediately following.

**Table 7.1: The learning process of Scrabble players**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation/Initiation (novice)</th>
<th>Improvement/honing</th>
<th>Expertise and beyond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Player’s experience and practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyed challenge of game</td>
<td>Enjoying the “battle”</td>
<td>Regular serious (albeit friendly) competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked strategy, rules and structure</td>
<td>Gauging improvement</td>
<td>Reflection on practice through examination of strengths and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related interest (i.e. other games)</td>
<td>Low-risk “play” in practice i.e. Internet</td>
<td>Consolidation of position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyed fascination of words Analytical mind</td>
<td>Copying study habits</td>
<td>Revise strategy based on results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional social play/club play</td>
<td>Identifying unsuccessful strategy and adapting it</td>
<td>Variety of clubs and opponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent club play Competitive nature</td>
<td>Study when opportunity allows</td>
<td>Practice important to consistent good play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family link Tournaments as “fix” Theoretical grasp develops Unplanned, limited study</td>
<td>Frequent club attendance Compiling study lists Applying already gleaned skills to practical applications</td>
<td>Specific purpose-driven study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Realistic attribution and staying positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Practice as way of identifying errors or weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Competitors and rivals as information to be learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting “closer to perfection”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Classifying and rating other players</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Player’s role in the community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observing Assisting to develop knowledge with peers and “allies” Student of theory</th>
<th>Interacting with high-rated players – “best practice” from “talk[ing] to the people who are the best” Observing</th>
<th>Aiding and helping lower-rated players Game annotation and discussion of theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friendly collaborative scene Organisational involvement or responsibility</td>
<td>Being a mentor or role model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-176-
| Socialising with other players | Regular playing partner  
Fostering co-operative links between players | Formalising knowledge and leading discussion  
Student of practice | Identifying promising new players  
Emulating betters | Peer evaluation  
Writing and engaging with peers |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Orientation/Initiation (novice)</strong></th>
<th><strong>Improvement/honing</strong></th>
<th><strong>Expertise and beyond</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Community effect on the player** | Gave information about potential and ability  
Feedback and advice  
Provided information of important “curriculum” details and learning/study aids  
Games and results give an idea of ability compared to peers  
Provided more challenging peers | New words learned through interactions with better players  
Helps find potential  
Mentors role-models  
Learning techniques – how, what?  
Players to observe whose games were admired  
Provided goals to aspire to  
Impetus to improve | Reflection on practice through comparison  
Interactions with other experts  
Other experts serve as exemplars or role models  
Feedback on quality of play and advice  
Tournaments function as goals and social foci  
Comparison of skills and weaknesses and styles  
Community is part of roots in location or place |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Player’s needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reflection and Monitoring</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Experience practice  
Modest initial achievement  
To be welcomed and encouraged  
Challenge  
Fun  
Ease of practice and help  
To perform at a level consistent with expectations  
To not feel embarrassed | To enjoy competition  
Exposure to better quality of players – more skilful and focused  
To be allowed to play experts if deserved  
To feel able to become an expert  
To have access to information  
Achievement | Desire to see improvement in the wider community  
Continued gains in knowledge from practice and study  
To play the best game within ability  
To feel as if further improvement is possible  
To feel recognised and appreciated  
To be competitive at the top level  
Continuing variety of challenge  
To be ethical  
To be challenged |

| Learning and absorbing curriculum  
For achievement to match expectations  
Milestones – first bonus, first win, score milestones  
Initial rating or number of wins | Being more confident with tournament structure and play  
Get into Masters section  
Ratings: ability to get a sense of where one stands compared to peers  
Tracking scores averages and bonuses  
Winning tournaments  
Identifying balance of luck/skill | Moderating practice to minimise error  
Becoming more confident against other experts  
Specific goals – to make World Champs  
Performance in major events  
Examining games won  
Examining games won with less of “good letters’  
Ratings  
Analysis of games |

- **Through deliberate study**

Having demonstrated an aptitude for the game and potential for improvement, expert players set out a course of study that allows them to improve their game. This comes
mostly through studying words in a systematic fashion, though players also examine games, including their own, their opponents', and those heard or read about at other places. Alistair outlined the justification for study succinctly: “[I]f I learn words, I can be a competitive player in the Masters section [of tournaments]”.

Each expert took a different approach to study, some devouring the list as quickly as they could, and others digesting it over a period of time as work, study or family commitments and personal circumstances dictated. Dedicated, systematic study is seen as something that while not pleasurable in and of itself – Richard describes the high-probability bonus lists, one of the building blocks of the expert game, as “boring” – it can be rewarding when put into practice. Other players describe this study as legwork, and claim that whether a player works out their own pattern or strategy, or adopts practice recommended by others, the amount needed to succeed in Scrabble constitutes a considerable amount of work, and that for the most part, results track effort. Study, while a solitary activity, is determined by what is felt to be most important, and while early experts like Joan were able to determine this based on their knowledge of the game, later experts are able to build on previous work and spend more time learning than planning.

The rate of study not only varies from expert to expert, but also varies with the stage of a player's career. Once the most important words are identified, study tends to be done to increase one's knowledge, and following this it is revised and consolidated. Alistair notes that he doesn't feel he is at the very top of the game any more and is less inclined
to study, and Joan, though studying every day, does so to hold her position rather than improve it, believing that without any study, you will fall behind. Andrew, by contrast, has an extremely detailed and extensive study regimen intended to maintain and improve his knowledge. He maintains that effective study comprises both learning and self-testing. Michael recalls that even though he had done a considerable amount of study, he was missing opportunities and words he felt he should not be, or being unsure of them in the heat of a game. He was able to overcome this by engaging in more self-testing during study. Richard describes a second benefit to study, which is that greater knowledge of the word list gives an expert a better idea of what may be a legitimate play and what might not be.

Michael, like some other top players, also enjoys reading and writing annotated games. When published, an annotated game - a record of the moves played in a Scrabble game, usually containing commentary - can be a powerful learning tool demonstrating theoretical concepts in real game situations, and giving these concepts a degree of practicality without the need for first-hand experience. Both reading and writing these are thought of as being useful; Michael believes writing them allows him to learn more about strategic considerations. Chris sees them as sources of information, and Andrew finds analysing games to be instructive on identifying gaps in his knowledge and illuminating strategic weak points.

Solitary study represents something of a silence in Lave and Wenger’s original model in that it is implied to be, rather than explicitly described, as a crucial part of social
learning processes such as apprenticeship. There is no need to assume that a craft learned through practice and aided by apprenticeship or other social supports would not require solitary study in addition to these to flourish. It would be foolish, for instance, to assume that the Alcoholics Anonymous participants in Lave and Wenger’s study cease making choices about alcoholism when they are not at a meeting or engaging in interactions with other AA members. The social experience of AA provides support which participants take back to their outside lives. As Lave and Wenger (1991) describe, however, the origins of these support experiences come from stories imparted orally at meetings, and these come from participants’ own lives.

Part of the process of a practitioner in that community, and certainly in Scrabble players, seems to be contingent on the idea that the boundary between individual and collective practice is porous; the two are interrelated. In Scrabble, for instance, players use their practice at clubs and tournaments to identify weak spots for study, which they then put into practice themselves at subsequent events, and this can become a piece of knowledge that can be transferred to others informally via a number of mechanisms – direct instruction or observation, for instance.

- **Through practice**

Practice has benefits for Scrabble players in a number of different ways. Chris outlines practice as a way of learning how to apply theory or strategy learned outside the confines of the board into real-life games. Practice is necessary to consolidate and improve theoretical understandings needed for experthood. A variety of means of
practice exist: playing by oneself, playing on the Internet, attending clubs and playing social games – though the latter term is generally a catch-all to describe any games played outside a structured environment, and such games may be highly competitive. Practice can also be relatively low-level engagement taken on to gain experience, take chances that it would not be prudent to take in formal tournament play, or be undertaken for the purposes of enjoying the game.

Joan, Michael, Richard and Alistair are regular club attendees, though Richard plays on the Internet and Joan plays a game against herself every day. The quality of opposition is not always as high at a club as would be desired, so Joan's club uses a handicap system (which she admits is sometimes contentious) as a way of increasing the level of challenge for her and levelling the playing field for other players, and Esther plays regularly with a non-expert but accomplished player with whom she is friendly.

Attendance at clubs ranges from sporadic to non-existent for other players, particularly the ones who are more highly-rated, suggesting that practice, particularly at a club level, has different advantages and levels of enjoyment from player to player. The Internet is seen as being a good way of having access to strong competition that mitigates against comparative geographic isolation, or having limited time constraints. Michael found he was isolated physically from other top players, and Esther found that her young family often precluded her from attending a club. It seems that convenience, as well as the level of competition able to be found, both have an impact on attendance – Esther played more often when she was younger, and when she was a member of a club which boasted many elite players among its ranks. Bob, too, admits his club
attendance has dropped off as the quality of opposition at his former home club (now defunct as of this writing) shed members.

The method of practice, then, is determined by what is available. Where face-to-face contact and games are of a low quality or inconvenient, a focus on what is easily attainable or available may determine the preferred source of practice. It seems that in the Scrabble community, good practice and good interaction is one where wins and losses are both possible outcomes – Joan's use of handicaps at her club and Esther's selection of opponents both have the same effect of reducing their winning chances, because these interactions have the capacity to produce pleasure, learning or honing of previously attained skills. Games which are foregone conclusions are analogous to Marshall’s apprentice butchers reduced to performing menial tasks that serve a purpose to others but not the learner himself (1972, in Lave & Wenger, 1991).

- **Through competition**

Tournament play is where skills learned through study and practised are not only formally implemented, but assessed. Knowledge that has been gained in informal settings is transferable to competition, but not directly due to different conditions between study, analysis and play with different cognitive demands. This process often requires getting used to the conditions of tournament play, and also being able to apply learned skills in the presence of a level of pressure not found at other times. Essentially, tournament competition involves putting into action theoretical understandings of the game, but also comes with its own suite of skills that need to be
mastered before a player can be successful, and as such, it has a dimension that takes it beyond mere practice.

Chris believes his rapid improvement after beginning tournaments was due to “learning how to apply the skills [he] was [already] aware of” during tournament play, which entailed learning behaviours that he could not learn in either practice or study.

Whereas club and personal games have no official standing, tournament games are rated. Players have a numerical rating, generally between 500 and 2200, which describes their performance in tournament play, and this enables them to compare themselves to their peers, track their improvement and test themselves against their aspirations. This kind of enquiry can be productive, but not always. Bandura (1993) states that self-comparison of progress is a positive factor in the promotion of achievement, but competitive social comparison is not, suggesting that expert learning can be informed by superiors, but unflattering comparisons can be unhelpful. Those who aspire to higher levels achieve more, and more rapidly. Alistair and Michael attained experthood, but quite slowly, and spoke of their journey as having always been looking at one level above themselves. By contrast, Andrew, Chris and Naween saw themselves as experts from the start, almost describing it as destiny, and attained it quicker. At the same time, Chris and Richard explained that they felt their rating actually was a few steps ahead of their play, and that they were weaker than measured. In both cases, seeing other players make mistakes in tournaments enabled them to re-evaluate themselves and other players.
Tournaments can be a source of study and learning as well: about the game, and about opponents' weaknesses and strengths, and most of all about one's own. It is when pitted against the best that the game, according to Esther, is most pleasurable, and it is through playing and analysis that one finds one's flaws – Michael notes his indecisiveness, Andrew his lack of consideration of defence strategy, Richard his lack of word knowledge compared to players he regarded as “legends” and Alistair his inability and unwillingness to play at the same level as experts who have surpassed him. Figure 7.1 shows a list of response to various playing conditions when comparing the player’s level of attainment to various levels of opposition.

*Figure 7.1  Player responses to varying levels of challenge*
Figure 7.1 demonstrates that for Scrabble players, it is possible to break down Czikszentmihalyi’s (1990) broad categories of the effects of certain levels of challenge—flow when ability and challenge are matched, anxiety when challenge exceeds ability, and boredom when ability exceeds challenge into other categories based on slightly finer criteria. Czikszentmihalyi (1990) used the term “flow” to describe a state in which participation in an activity is intrinsically rewarding, meaningful and pleasurable, and suggested it was largely a function of skill and challenge—when they are appropriately matched, flow occurs. Aside from flow, there are negative experiences of anxiety and boredom where there is a mismatch—anxiety when challenge is too high, and boredom when it is too low. Here, “flow” has been represented by the idea of “best practice” at the highest level—where the game is most enjoyable—where a player is, according to Chris, “good enough to beat you”, where the ability to play one’s best and raise one’s game is paramount, and where there is the opportunity to learn something. But the experience of an evenly matched—or indeed, slightly mismatched—challenge is still the most energising for developing Scrabble players, regardless of level. Slightly lower levels of challenge, rather than being boring, are seen as low-risk ways of practising real-game situations and consolidating skills away from the pressure of competition, such as playing socially or on the Internet.

Low levels of challenge for a new activity are not always seen as boring; the experts describe the process of initiation as an opening of possibilities. The boundary between a newer player being intimidated by an expert, and seeing it as a learning possibility or
challenge appears to be one of experience; Michael and Richard in particular speak of awe and intimidation using words like “amazing” and “legend” to describe players they would eventually become peers of, but like the other interviewees would couch these epithets in terms of opportunity rather than anxiety. A very low level of challenge is seen as bringing about boredom, or the game not seen as being worth playing, hence experts may avoid these encounters or seek to balance them with handicaps, as Joan does.

As such, in Scrabble, the pathways to flow may be wider than Csikszentmihalyi found due to the presence of a significant luck factor in Scrabble making the game more volatile and allowing weaker players to beat stronger players more regularly and earlier than in a different discipline. Playing the game at this level where anything is possible “drives individuals to creativity and outstanding achievement” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and towards their potential level of achievement (Vygotsky, 1978). Chris and Richard’s beliefs that their rating and experiences were ahead of their ability are consistent with this idea; given the opportunity (because of ratings they felt were too high), they rose to the occasion and became worthy of their accelerated ascent.

In addition to providing the means by which players can learn, practise, play and test themselves, the community and its attendant social interactions are responsible for creating, honing and disseminating what constitutes the game's curriculum. The game's rules and inherent reliance on a dictionary as a further source of what is legal act as the basis for what is thought of as good practice, but this has evolved through a recursive
process of players examining current practice, modifying their learning and playing techniques, and then in turn, sharing (both explicitly and through being objects of observation) their methods.

3. What is the role of social interactions in acquiring these skills and knowledge?

The final research question deals with what interactions take place between developing experts and their friends and peers within the community, and how they influence the development at each stage of the development from novice to expert.

•  The community structure strongly supports aspiring experts through providing opportunities for learning and practice.

The community provides a number of different ways for its participants to interact, and these have broadened and increased in frequency and scale over the 30 years in which Scrabble has been played competitively in Australia. The initial contact between experts, indeed, between all players, began with infrequent in-person meetings at tournaments and by slow postal correspondence. Since then, opportunities to meet, play and discuss have become far more common. Tournaments are run every few weeks across the country, many clubs meet weekly and there are several from which to choose in the major urban centres.

Most of all, communication between players has been decentralised in a sense; though it still happens within the context of Scrabble, players have the freedom of email and
online play to seek out contact and competition with other players outside, but peripheral to, location of clubs and tournaments. That said, these are still important for the purposes of practice and competition. The evolution of the community, and the achievements of those within it over time, allow the community’s contribution to its members’ expertise to be examined.

In terms of learning, there has been a gradual and significant change from each player/practitioner being a constructor of their own knowledge, to a group of like-minded, albeit competitive experts who have co-constructed a body of knowledge analogous to a curriculum. With time, mechanisms for developing and studying this knowledge have become simpler and more time-efficient through the co-operation of various community members who worked together to streamline the processes of gathering the knowledge and disseminating it.

Joan recalls having to go through the dictionary by hand to learn words, no matter what their length, and she had to create her own study regimen without a clear starting point other than what she had noted as important through her play. Some years later, Alistair was able to use some pre-compiled lists, and draw on the study habits of peers and betters in developing his word knowledge. Finally, the most recent experts, Chris and Richard, both have noted the ability to use computer programs to develop lists that have been agreed upon by experts as the most beneficial to study. They also had a large pool of expertise around them from which they gleaned pointers and advice. The earlier
experts indicated they did this to some extent, but the core of their knowledge was based on self-compiled lists.

Today’s community is able to answer specific and general questions about learning that the developing one would not have, such as “Which words should I study if I want to be an expert?”, or even “Is it better to keep a Z or an X on my rack if I have the choice?”. With the advent of computer simulation, noted by Chris, Michael and Andrew in particular, correct answers to problems have been distilled to a precise science of arithmetic and statistics that a player can study and use to make informed decisions. Books, email lists and personal correspondence are all community-specific or community-created media which are used to distribute this information.

The frequency of practice is an important facet of the expanding (in size and complexity) community. As noted above in the answer to the first research question, there is, in a number of players’ minds, a clear demarcation between understanding in theory and being able to put the understanding into practice. Metacognitive strategies in Scrabble are thought of as being nearly as important as the ability to anagram, calculate scores and perform the basic mechanics of the game (such as placing tiles on the board or pressing a clock). Practice, too, as stated earlier, informs a player’s own learning, and competition can as well. Richard reflected on his play and performance compared to other players, noting that “there were much (sic) fewer mistakes in the Masters division and [he] was probably still making some of those mistakes”, leading to a resolution to be “more diligent about what [he] put on the board” and play “a lot
less (sic) false words”. Esther, while a proponent of learning from lists, has observed that she retains words more readily if they are played against her, believing that when an unusual word appears on a board she will “remember [the word] forever”.

The proliferation of clubs and tournaments enables a higher frequency and variety of involvement, and the increasing number of players, and number of experts, provides a larger and better range of playing partners for the aspiring expert, even to the extent of allowing the better players to select their opponents for geography, convenience or skill, as Esther does.

Finally, social interactions are seen as a key factor in the pleasure of participation by all the interviewees, though to different extents. There seemed to be a geographical difference in the responses, which suggests that separate parts of the community have evolved in different ways to encourage different kinds of interaction – from the social to the instructive bordering on pedagogical. Rather than there being an ideal level of interaction or mix between the professional/social in order to bring about experthood in a participant, success seems to be predicated on support for new players and aspiring experts. The experiences of the interviewees were almost universally positive as developing players with regard to assistance received, and each interviewee has described either a history of, or willingness to participate in, the development of upcoming players.
The community provides access to information analogous to an informal curriculum, and the means by which to understand it

Even though it amounts to helping one’s competitors, Scrabble experts are open with their knowledge. Richard explains that he is “happy to help them out just as people have helped me out…. It’s not exactly a secret, I mean, anyone can find out this information anywhere”. Michael notes that this level of assistance is not found in chess, finding it “was a lot more ego-driven” and players were reluctant to “share [their] secrets with other players”.

Some parts of experts’ trade adheres to a curriculum comparison even more closely. If we define a Scrabble curriculum as being a way in which the body of knowledge is packaged and shaped for easy delivery or self-study, then a number of the interviewees have made significant contributions to the development of such a curriculum, and all have drawn from it in their experience. Bob describes one part of the process simply: “putting [a list of words] in some logical sequence to help people learn”. The intended recipient of the knowledge contained within this is not always other players, as sorting and collating is a task that has its own rewards for the worker.

The development of the game from a series of completely unconnected practitioners to a fully-integrated community happened as a result of a number of complementary processes involving community influence on players, and player influences on both the community at large, and smaller sections within it. Figure 7.2 shows a representation of the influences between the various actors within a community.
The human actors in this model are the expert players, whose coming together created ways of determining and measuring what high-level performance was. From these interactions, the social capital, including the body of knowledge about the game was derived, and this in turn influences other practitioners. People learn from each other directly, but also by examining or observing their community, or products it creates, such as writings, word lists or computer programs.

Esther and Alistair recount going through a proper dictionary looking for useful Scrabble words and extracting the most useful parts of the dictionary for their study: the most likely or easily-remembered words without their definitions, which are superfluous to ascertaining a word’s validity – indeed, Esther admits to considering everything to be a noun unless shown otherwise. This difficult, time-consuming process has largely been made redundant with the advent of computer programs – as
Joan notes, “it’s all there, ready for you” – but the programs themselves were created by similar enthusiasts, members of the global community who took the idea of packaging words in a certain way based on previous experience, and used technology to disseminate this across the global community. The ease of access to the information does not remove the need for a high level of study, however. Esther believes players still have to do “all the legwork”, rather than passively absorbing through other’s efforts.

Bob’s word books take information that is freely or cheaply available elsewhere, and present it in an ordered fashion to facilitate learning, restoring the meanings and parts of speech to the most useful words. The end products of Bob’s list-making endeavours have been widely purchased and used as study aids across Australia, and Bob believes it has raised the standard of play through making people more aware of what words should be studied. The rewards, according to Bob, are twofold for him – there is a minor financial incentive, and study proves to be effective, because the process for compiling the books involved seeing “each word…5 or 6 times before it goes to print”. It can be seen that the process of making these books available from research to publishing streamlines Bob’s own study process, making him concentrate on the most useful words through study and revision happening peripherally to the book-writing process. What one does for oneself often seems to have an effect within the community, and vice versa.
But the curriculum of Scrabble is not bound up in books or word lists, it is described by practitioners as existing in the oral tradition as much as the written one. Richard’s experience of learning came through practice and verbal pointers. He recalls taking on board advice and specifically seeking out best practice, and much of this came from talking “to the people who are the best, learn[ing] off people who are the best” and notes that non-expert players often see experts as arrogant, not wishing to understand the advice or information given. Richard welcomed, and still welcomes, feedback on his play and sees it as an opportunity for learning.

The written part of the curriculum comes not just through books designed to further knowledge of the game of its words, but includes all written communication, emails, internet discussions and annotated games. Some of these are done for the player’s own benefits – Andrew and Chris analyse games in detail, but Michael annotates and publishes games for others to examine, and has valued the feedback from other experts on this project. Experts see annotated games as examples of good practice, as well as providing practical demonstrations of game theory, showing how to put the ideas into a real game situation.

- **Experts disseminate information tailored to the situation and audience**

Each interviewee goes some way towards describing this process, usually from the perspective of both giver and receiver of knowledge, except for Joan, for whom a case could be stated that she had the knowledge before anyone she had playing interactions with.
Experts are able to give advice in specific situations using their bank of knowledge and experience, as well as using problem-solving techniques and heuristics over the board to apply general strategies to new problems. Experts are additionally able to explain the rationales behind their advice and suggestion with deference to expert strategy, though, as typified by Richard’s experiences, often casual players are unwilling or unable to appreciate the help. Joan identifies improving players as ones who are willing to “[lap] everything up” that is taught to them, or who try to understand “what was behind any strategic decision”, and improve their game using those as pointers. Bob had early help from players who identified his early potential who were able to guide his learning, setting him up for his own intense effort, and this has carried on through Bob’s own attempts to increase the game’s standard of play.

In some ways, the principle of learning being applied here is not one of old-fashioned one-way teaching, but learning within Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. Joan uses informal but highly structured training sessions to get players of a variety of skill levels to talk about strategic decisions, using her skill to explain complex things in a simple way and illustrating concepts of intelligent play using real-life board positions to demonstrate the pros and cons of various potential moves. Joan feels the teaching technique works because “the group is much better than any single person within it”, and uses handicaps to gradually decrease the level of assistance improving players get during club play. Naween uses principles of the ZPD when he says that he would only help someone with advice if he “ha[d] a feel for where exactly they’re at, at [that]
moment”, meaning that he would only be able to assist them if he had some idea of their current level ability so he could proffer advice slightly beyond it. In addition, most of the experts feel they can effectively assess a player's ability and potential – variously, these judgments can be based on a player's demonstrated performance or word knowledge, interest in discussion or interaction (Richard describes this as adopting “best practice”) or simply being able to evaluate and find moves that go beyond what Chris calls “run of the mill” moves.

Attempting to teach skills or ideas well beyond a person’s ability or ambition can lead to frustration, as Richard found out when trying to give advice to players at his club. As he was helped by others, Richard sought to help players whom he felt needed or wanted assistance, but often found that they were not receptive. “It’s frustrating when you try to help people out but they’re just not interested in what you’re talking out, and you think well, how come you don’t really want to improve?”, he recalls. Chris agrees, saying that some players may be interested in knowing something that might have helped them win a game, but after this “they won't be interested anymore”, and that these players seem to treat instruction and advice as “a waste of time”.

Earlier experts to some extent had to rely on imitation, but drew different learning experiences from it as they progressed. Alistair and Andrew both acknowledge early mentors in their journeys, and rather than learning incrementally, each took different things from their peers at different times. Andrew learned from a more capable player, but was able to distinguish between successful and unsuccessful styles of play through
interactions with another early expert – going from wanting to emulate one player's knowledge as observed to finding weaknesses – different kinds of learning for different stages of the process. Alistair's improvement was somewhat more incremental, but involved combining quantitatively higher levels of knowledge with qualitatively different strategies gleaned from observations of, and while playing against, better players, effectively challenging himself and working in his ZPD.

• **Exposure to better players facilitates improvement by providing examples of what is possible, thus providing the potential for “flow”**

A recurring theme in the interview data is that competition against peers and those of a similar level is just as important as, if not more so, than winning. According to Chris, the greatest pleasure of competitive Scrabble comes from playing someone “who is good enough to beat you”, and Esther admits that she prefers to play opponents of a certain standard because she doesn’t get much satisfaction “beating up on old grannies”. The preference for certain kinds of opponents is one that makes some experts feel as if they are perceived as arrogant, but some experts admit friendships with players of differing calibres while having a strong preference to play only peers.

Playing experts is desirable for both other experts and those who wish to become them. Michael and Richard recall an early non-expert mindset of being intimidated by the experience and skill of top-rated players, suggesting that early mismatches may not be ideal, but once the developing experts get their bearings in tournaments, they seek competition that will challenge them. Initial feelings of intimidation give way to
aspiration once the would-be expert has more experience. Bandura (1993) explains that social comparisons provide the means by which learners judge their own competence, and “how much satisfaction they derive from their accomplishments” (p.123).

The benefits of strong competition are manifold. Games whose results are a foregone conclusion are not enjoyable. To this end, Joan's club plays a handicap system to give weaker players more of a chance against more experienced ones. Esther self-selected her group of playing partners in Bristol to increase the challenge, preferring to lose occasionally – and when she did, saw it as something to improve in the future. Chris found near-misses against expert players early in his career valuable learning experiences and saw his first victories against other experts as milestones in his development. Michael's admiration of one of his early role models gave way to respect tempered by the belief that he could compete with them if he improved his game. Naween's experience with other experts gave him the knowledge that while accomplished, he had a long way to go, and drove him to improve his game and seek better competition on the world stage. Esther and Chris both admit they would feel hesitant about moving to a city which had a poorer Scrabble scene. Esther would not “move anywhere [she] can't play”, and Chris states that the lack of a competitive scene would cause him to be less likely to consider any relocation.

For the expert, a player of the same calibre may have different knowledge – Joan's workshops are partly based on the idea that in any group someone will know something or work out something that nobody else does. Learning comes from
exposure to better players, whereas significantly weaker opposition can be seen as less fulfilling. Despite this, some experts enjoy the social aspects, and sometimes relish helping other players learn or use the opportunity to practise and/or consolidate their own pre-existing skills.

- **Competition and collaboration both have a role in the development of expertise**

Many of the earliest interactions in Scrabble were indisputably collaborative, and much of the progressively built-up knowledge about the game available today is the result of people co-operating, building upon previous effort and having a specific desire to help raise the standard of play in rivals and up-and-comers. This is not to suggest that all interactions have these goals in mind; the community is inherently competitive but as Scrabble is an activity that by its very nature involves interaction, both competition and collaboration are required to fulfil the needs of expert Scrabble players.

As discussed above, competition is an opportunity to demonstrate best practice in a formal environment, as well as being a learning exercise; the very act of competing exposes a Scrabble player to the knowledge of their opponent, which may differ or exceed their own.

And although a game is a competitive exercise, there is the capacity for collaboration even during a tournament; Andrew notes that while this is not widespread in Australia, overseas experts have a tendency towards immediate post-game analysis, where
players and sometimes observers work together to find the optimal outcome of a game, or suggest alternative moves that could have changed the result.

Expert players' respect and esteem for their peers suggest that the relationships forged between competitors is fruitful for both increasing the level of play through heated competition, and friendly (sometimes even informal) discussions. Joan believes that “the group is much better than any single person within it”, and the idea that better players should (or do) withhold information to protect their status is seen as preposterous – Bob strongly believes raising the standard is good for his own game, and the experts in the study do not fear improvers, indeed, they welcome them.

**Scrabble players as an example of a competitive community of practice**

The preceding sections have dealt with how individual players developed their skills, both within and independent from the social context of the community of players. From their experience, it is possible to look at the community itself, what it is like, how it supports learners, how it has evolved, and what kinds of interactions take place therein, and to examine the similarities between Scrabble players and other communities of practice. As Lave and Wenger put it, “learning is an integral part of generative practice in the lived-in world” (1991, p.35), and the Scrabble community provides a number of different contexts and opportunities for learning that are consistent with the idea of legitimate peripheral participation.
Lave and Wenger’s definition of a community of practice is broad, enabling a variety of social and organisational groups to fall under its umbrella. As such, the observations of what makes the community of Scrabble players qualitatively different from those described in the literature do not contradict the theory itself, but suggest a different range of potential interactions that take place in this community from other kinds of communities.

The community itself is something that is described differently by participants; indeed, there are a number of different focal points, depending on the level of participation. Naween explicitly describes it as a global entity that can be separated into divisions of country, as that is how he came to know it; Joan sees a national body that grew out of earlier collaborations; Bob sees it as a collection of players at clubs and tournaments. None of these ideas suggest anything other than a united, if dispersed body, but they describe different aspects or different loci of participation – Wenger (1998, p50) describes the community as being “defined globally but experienced locally”, so it is not surprising that each expert will describe their experience of the community from a different perspective.

A well-established model of how communities with different geographical loci form, evolve and interact can be seen in Figure 7.3. It shows how a community of practice can develop with no single focus point, instead developing around similar co-located cores around which individuals congregate, interact and practise together.
This model applies to Scrabble players to a large extent. Geographical boundaries apply to some parts of practice (i.e. club play), but many players cross these boundaries to play tournaments, and the Internet has enabled discussion to take place unencumbered by any physical barriers. The only significant difference is that within any given national boundary, there are going to be many different and different kinds of co-located cores. These cores are not just geographical; they are defined by different kinds of interaction that accommodate the different needs of participants. An expert may move in different circles to a novice, but they may meet on common ground at the same club, for instance, even as they are unlikely to be matched together to play at a tournament. And, as previously discussed, some aspects of participation within the
community need not require any other people – solitary study is a legitimate part of this process as well.

What can be seen is that the community breaks along lines of location, social interaction and skill, but there is significant potential for crossover as players’ needs and wants with regard to participation will vary. Players shape their practice and involvement around geographical availability or convenience at some times, their interaction around those they like and respect at others, those from whom they can get the best competition or learning at others still, and in tournaments, when they are pitted against their peers on the day by rating and performance.

These different patterns based on a community member’s participation can be thought of as trajectories, and expert players follow what Wenger (1998) describes as an *inbound trajectory*. A new player who desires to become an expert seeks to engage in expert-level participation and takes steps towards this goal: “their identities are invested in their future participation, even though their present participation may be peripheral” (Wenger, 1998, p.154). The Scrabble community provides an abundance of opportunities for those players who see themselves as potential experts to develop and prove themselves. Observation of better players is an obvious example of peripheral practice that leads to learning; and through club play, or certain tournaments, players can prove their worth by performing at levels higher than expected, and eventually play the strongest players in their section, or advance to higher sections. Where more of a challenge is required, the community provides mechanisms to supply it, and the
win/loss nature of each game constantly supplies feedback. Not all players have an inbound trajectory, and not all players with one go on to become experts. A distinction can be drawn between the players described by Joan as good learners who pick up information readily but who are nonetheless not experts, and those described by Chris as non-experts who “have not become experts” since his observation of them.

These differing trajectories and contexts of participation give rise to different relationships and different interactions founded in competitive collaboration. Esther is perhaps the clearest in her discrimination, opting to play in an elite club in her early playing days, and selecting a regular practice player in her area who gives her a reasonably strong game. But this is a theme that recurs in a number of players' recollections and thoughts – competing, be it predominantly in a competitive or social setting, needs to be a fulfilling, challenging engagement whatever the role or context or it is of lesser worth.

**Competitive collaboration**

Inherent in the ideas of communities of practice, when looking at the social aspects, is the presence of relationships which benefit the parties involved in them, and therefore the wider community – any interaction is a positive for all involved. This squares uneasily with what might be expected of Scrabble players' interactions, founded around the playing of a game in which, except for the unlikely event of a draw, there will only be one winner. The competition of playing the game, though, brings about such a
variety of practice and evaluative opportunities that assist with budding experts’ development that each game doubles as a competitive battle of wits and a profound series of learning experiences. Working against an opponent for the enjoyment of winning (or even just playing) also amounts to working with an opponent to increase knowledge and experience of the game, and the performance aspects that, eventually, separate experts from non-experts. This stands slightly apart from some of the communities in the literature, which, more or less, use social frameworks to impart skills intended to be practised individually and discretely.

Further, not only are these two processes and goals complementary to each other, but Scrabble play and evolution cannot occur without both: competitive collaboration. In as much as learning Scrabble skills can be undertaken individually, collaboration is vital in two ways: firstly, what is to be learned is defined and mediated by those who have become experts previously, and secondly, meaningful in-context testing and honing of skills is necessary to reconcile pure knowledge with the strategies – both cognitive and metacognitive – required to apply the knowledge in the game itself. This is a dynamic that, while almost certainly not exclusive to Scrabble or any other game of its type, is qualitatively different from the interactions that normally typify communities of practice, and yet, the ideas of legitimate peripheral practice, community involvement and identity and the kinds of relationships therein are common to both. Learning in the community has a few features that are listed below.
1. The learner's needs determine the relationships and interactions, and both are ever-changing

A point of difference between the community of Scrabble players and Lave and Wenger's informal communities, and Wenger's later work on organisations such as workplaces, is that relationships are secondary to, and influenced by, learning needs as determined by the learner's move within the stratification of the game. Lave and Wenger's presented case studies look upon the relationship as the locus of participation; mentors, or more advanced or experienced participants give opportunities for practice and learning. And unlike Wenger's model, in which identity within the community is a social construct (1998, p151), in Scrabble, the aspiring experts see themselves as such because of cognitive factors, both in trajectory and goals, and seek out learning experiences to suit. Expert players come to see themselves as potential experts before they become so, exercising deliberate effort so they can demonstrate their skills within a competitive framework.

Scrabble players achieve the same goals as those in other communities by a different method; their learning needs change over time, and the aspiring expert seeks out a variety of different relationships for practice, support and learning. Rather than have a set goal and a process by which it is achieved through mediated social practice, the learner has the ability to seek the help of the community or members thereof for specific needs or desires they have at that point in their development; a Scrabble expert's position and needs are often in flux and those who meet the need will change
over time. The desire or need may be for a mentor, a peer, a protégé – and it may be for a variety of reasons: to increase knowledge through participation or observation, to get meaningful competition or practice, to derive pleasure from learning or teaching, or perhaps to find satisfaction in increasing the potential of themselves and others. Certainly, it seems that the developing expert requires more interaction with their betters, whereas established experts are able to use interactions with non-peers to hone and refine their skills.

2. **Scrabble practice and learning are intertwined but separate processes**

The data suggest that expert players spend significant amounts of time honing their game, which can be categorised as solo study and competitive play. Tuffiash, Roring and Ericsson (2007) use these two categories as well, finding a positive correlation between high levels of both and performance on metrics designed to measure Scrabble skill. Their paper is inconclusive (nor does it seek to answer) as to what the optimal combination of the two might be. What their data did suggest was that in terms of affinity for language, experts and average players are relatively close in ability on generic tasks, but through some combination of cognitive development through learning and practice, performance on Scrabble-specific tasks diverge (2007, p130). The experiences of the interviewees suggest that both processes work in tandem to bring about this performance, and that high levels of knowledge do not automatically transfer across without deliberate practice to accommodate the deliberate study. Particular weaknesses or strengths are judged by performance in competition with
others, rather than in individual assessment, even if that assessment takes place away from the event itself.

Lave's (1988) idea of situated cognition is particularly pertinent here. When Esther claims to remember a word more readily if she sees it on a board (in a real game situation), and when Joan simulates a real game by playing a game against herself, or when Chris reflects on his good cognitive understanding of the game only reaping benefits when he learned the aspects of tournament play and how to apply them, we can see that practice, or collaboration alone does not usually bring about expert behaviour in Scrabble players. Expert players evaluate their own performance primarily using metrics derived from competitive play; Andrew's titles won, Alistair's monitoring of scoring or Michael's self-analysis after a tournament are all examples of this, and each uses the feedback generated as a way of informing future practice.

3. Scrabble games are experiential learning experiences for participants, and opportunities for learning by observation for others

Richard's experiences trying to help clubmates suggest that learning experiences go unnoticed by incurious or unwilling players, but attentive players are able to learn from a combination of their own practice, and observation of the practice of others. Chris gave a detailed description of what he considers to be expert behaviour and practice, and Andrew, Naween and Michael also outlined individual players and what they specifically learned from observation and competition with them, suggesting a
willingness to look for sources of information outside merely studying words or strategy in isolation, and this is information that without broad, meaningful engagement with the community would be impossible. Essentially, the knowledge of the community becomes part of the curriculum.

4. Previous practitioners influence (until superseded by) new practice

The Scrabble curriculum is potentially always under development, as the rules of what is legal (the word list) change, and our understanding of study and strategy also change. Successes of experts past are emulated for two reasons: firstly, because their success makes them attractive models upon which to base learning or practice, and secondly, because they often leave tools for learning in their wake. The former is typified by Andrew’s experience of having two high-level exemplars, and how he based his plan for improvement on one of them. The latter reason can be seen in a number of places, such as Bob’s books, where he used the compilation of them as a study aid, and then made them available to others so that words useful to learn to enable skilful play could be accessed in a regimented fashion, thus facilitating others’ learning as he had done his own. These tools have become more sophisticated; starting with simple word lists, moving on to computer-compiled ones, and eventually AI programs that describe and influence practice.

Successful experts can be identified by a number of methods, and can be targets for observation and discussion. Chris notes that when he began playing tournaments, the
reputation of players preceded them, and observed a distinct difference from that of non-experts in their manner and method of play. Richard and Michael conceded feelings of awe because of the level of play demonstrated by opponents during their development. The aspiring expert, rather than being intimidated to the point of paralysis, sees the performance of experts as examples of what is possible, as well as sources of information for improvement.

5. Personal excellence begets group development, and vice versa, regardless of whether or not this is the aim of the participants themselves

Although there are certainly descriptions in the data of mentor/protégé relationships, the presence of such a social relationship, no matter how informal, is one of myriad ways learners have the capacity to derive information from their peers and betters. Joan's observation that the group is more knowledgeable than any one person within it gets to the heart of the matter; learning within the community is ongoing and anyone can learn from anyone given the right circumstances. Experts can be seen as exemplars, and observed without their express permission or even knowledge that such observation is taking place – it happens at tournaments, as well as when players read annotations or reports of tournaments they did not personally attend. Each game played has the potential to become part of the game's lore and curriculum if it becomes noteworthy or potentially teaches a useful word or heuristic – if people are willing to use them as such. Experts state the importance of being around a strong population of peers – Esther and Chris especially, and Michael makes reference to his origins in
Tasmania hindering his early progress – so we would expect that the population centres that, for whichever reason (development or attraction), have the most experts at a point in time, would have the most chance of developing future experts. These hubs of expert behaviour provide more opportunities to have high-level interactions, and more opportunities to test expert skills in a meaningful way. As noted previously, games with a high degree of challenge are preferred to certain wins by expert players, with Chris noting that a win in a tough field means more than one in a weaker one.

**Conclusion**

As an inherently competitive (and thus social) activity, it is perhaps natural to expect that competitive interaction would be a large part of the effort expended in becoming an expert. But previous writings on expertise and communities of practice do not always illustrate the same confluence; Lave and Wenger's (1991) description of Alcoholics Anonymous members is an example of a personal, individual goal or idealised set of behaviours (not drinking) being assisted by a communal support framework. Much traditional literature on expertise has seen it as a solitary journey with even demonstration of expertise within a social context being pushed aside.

What it does suggest is that beyond merely learning a competitive activity, a journey with many potential paths, *mastery* of a competitive discipline involves a balance of the individual and social, with individual practice working best if it is informed by social experience, and social experience being best if it is tailored to the individual's
needs. The development of expertise, though, is never discrete. Not only does it take place within a social framework, the very social nature of its expression (tournament play) enables it to become self-replicating through experts becoming exemplars, role models and participants (both active and passive) in the development of their peers. A community of practice in which players’ varying trajectories can be accommodated provides one way, but not the only way, of providing a number of conditions that are conducive to good learning; the provision of a body of knowledge, the presence of players to learn from, challenge, intellectual and personal support and the means by which to monitor, assess and reflect upon performance.
Chapter 8

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has presented a case study showing the evolution of expertise within the careers of nine Scrabble players, and by extension, their perspectives on the community around them during this evolution. Though none of the players expressly states a belief in a causal relationship between either of these elements, the evidence is convincing that these two elements – the personal and the social – are strongly interwoven. The community provides structure for players, but the tendency and necessity of Scrabble players have for coming together to play is what creates the community. While not necessarily a chicken-and-egg situation – Joan's recollection is very much that the expert players developed a level of experience and ability independently before pooling their efforts – the two appear inextricably linked in today's community, though there is nothing to suggest that the process could not happen in reverse.

It seems clear that, consistent with the findings of Ross (2006) on a similar phenomenon in chess, those who enter the community in its fully-formed state, with its organised knowledge and culture of informal oral teaching, attain expertise more quickly than those who came before them did. The community, aside from nurturing players with the potential to compete and the access to knowledge, uses its players to build and replenish itself, increasing its breadth and depth of available knowledge, widening its pool of competitors and creating new potentials for social relationships.
What has come through in the research is a strong “proof” of a working, effective community of practice that has evolved organically over 30 years, driven as much by changes in personnel as in understanding. In effect, the narrative is one of both a community and a curriculum at various points in their growth. Unlike, for instance, chess, which has a story of game development that has largely been pieced together in hindsight and whose earliest experts have been dead for hundreds of years, the case study here very much depicts a body of knowledge that is both still being crafted, and one whose origin is still in recent memory.

Essentially, the case study presented seems to be consistent with a number of mechanisms that are well-established in literature on learning and expertise. If the main themes are that Scrabble players constitute a community of practice, that expertise is progressively easier to develop as a community grows and develops ways of distributing knowledge, and that optimum performance is both an outcome and a motivator, then the community itself can be thought of as the “where”, “how” and “what” in how learning occurs for expert Scrabble players. The community provides places for learning to occur, the means for it to happen through oral tradition, publications, discussion and observation, and lastly, it models behaviour and learning for participants who become part of a sub-culture replete with its own customs, expectations and language and gradually learn its ways as they become active participants. However, there are some differences that suggest the community examined, and its individual members, are not entirely typical when compared with the extant literature.
Recommendations for the theory of Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger's theory defines itself with sufficient flexibility that a large number of groupings, organisations and even educational settings can all fall under its banner as long as a number of factors are present. A community is a community of practice, albeit less likely to be conducive to disseminating the information and experience that leads to the development of expertise, even if it fills no other condition than bringing individuals together in some formation to do either the same thing or parts of the same task.

Certainly, this minimum condition is met by the community of Scrabble players. That having been said, one particular type of community little-discussed in the extant literature is that of competitive recreational groups. There seems to be an unspoken binary opposition in the literature, where recreation and sport are seen through the prism of individual performance and preparation, standing opposed to socially-mediated learning and the idea of a collegiate body providing support. In businesses and organisations, which account for the majority of Wenger's recent work, and also in the case studies in the Situated Learning series, the groups described have all featured actors working together towards the same goal – be it commercial or supportive. The Scrabble community seems to straddle both these ideas, even as it diverges in a number of ways from case studies heretofore presented in the body of literature on communities of practice, suggesting a different classification of community within the general banner of communities of practice.
Although like a workplace, Scrabble players may take on different roles at different times and increase in ability and experience, there is not always the same unity of purpose amongst its players. Contributions to the community can be deliberate – and were frequently described as such by the participants in this case study – but they can be inadvertent contributions, and in the sense of providing examples and inspirations, experts can provide something to the community even when acting solely for their own benefit. Players who attain expertise do not just improve themselves; they provide a target for other players, quality opposition for other experts, or exemplars who may be observed during tournament play. Community building, then, does not only happen by participants in such a community, it can often happen around them without their active, deliberate engagement.

Further, large parts of the building of the community, such as the experience that has led to the knowledge, is derived not from direct co-operation between participants, but from explicitly competitive behaviour, somewhat more reminiscent of a caricature of corporate behaviour rather than a workplace or classroom. In some ways, out of the case studies presented by Lave and Wenger (1993), the Scrabble community has as many similarities with the least successful (butchers) as it does with those declared to be successful examples of legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice. For instance, there is some degree of stratification, even perhaps mild sequestration, in that experts often self-select their opposition for tournaments and social games (often for arbitrary reasons) even when the community's mathematical
ratings system does not do it for them. New players are welcomed and expert players tend to report having been both giver and receiver of information, but particular knowledge may not always be accessible to the newcomer because of the relatively small number of people who have it or know where it may be found, or the reluctance to give information perceived to be beyond the seeker's ability to understand it. This point seems strangely at odds with the desire of developing players to always have access to players better than them, though perhaps the element of luck inherent in the game enabling weaker players to win against stronger ones from time to time explains the discrepancy.

The data suggest that a competitive community of practice is qualitatively different from other kinds of communities; both learning and social interactions within them can be of a very different type while still fulfilling Lave and Wenger's original (and by necessity rather loose and free-fitting) criteria for classification as a community. In a competitive community, what one builds for oneself may be appropriated, built around and shared, where that knowledge is not an expendable commodity. Participants become part of the community's knowledge, as their tactics, tendencies and pattern of strengths will be studied by other experts. Relationships can be forged not just through similarity of purpose or friendship, but because of similarities or differences in ability (rivalries or mentor/protégée relationships). That these things occur around an activity deeply steeped in a kind of combat make them very different from other kinds of communities of practice that dominate the extant literature, which could be labelled co-operative ones as opposed to competitive ones.
The author would classify a community as being either co-operative or competitive, based not on what the interactions between participants are like, but rather on the nature of the activity that brings them together. Lave and Wenger's case studies, as well as Wenger's later work, all speak of co-operative functioning, even if there may be competition there or jockeying for available resources or positions within an organisation. But this is qualitatively different from a community where the primary mode of contact is inherently competitive even as it arrays around it a fascinating social world that can be conducive to co-operation and collaboration.

**Recommendations for theories of expertise**

By looking at the community itself as the unit being researched, building the picture from its participants, this research has sidestepped the task of looking at exactly what causes someone to become expert – or to want to become expert. Rather than speculating as to what conditions must exist within the individual to bring this about, this research has primarily highlighted some of the conditions experts operate under, and how these have changed over time, and how these factors outside of the individual themselves provide opportunities, challenges and inspiration.

As such, the data are silent on whether the ability to develop expertise is the product of natural potential, environmental factors or some combination of these. What the data do suggest is that a community can create conditions that seem to be favourable towards expertise – indeed, this seems to be supported by the observation that as the
community becomes larger and more complex, expertise seems to be attained more quickly by its participants, though they do not suggest that this is the only way expertise can be achieved, or that other sets of conditions would not have similar effects.

Rather than looking at success resting upon certain pre-conditions, much like a plant that may need certain temperatures or soil type to grow, expertise can be seen as the end product of a recipe that may have no compulsory ingredients, but can be created in a number of different ways. Much as Czikszentmihalyi asked of creativity – ‘where’, rather than ‘what’ or ‘how’ – the case study presented has looked at the dynamics of one community during its development and shown how expertise has developed within it. It does not present it as the sole way that expertise can be achieved, but the enjoyment of the game within the community, the success in producing experts and its constantly-changing corpus of knowledge suggest that if not an exemplar, it is a highly successful example of an environment conducive to supporting aspiring experts.

Despite this, the research agrees with some of the prevailing wisdom on research into expertise while being less supportive of other previous findings. The largest area of agreement concerns the idea of deliberate practice. Ericsson (2006b) suggests that the best experts in their fields do not necessarily spend the most time practising or studying; rather, experts select activities specifically designed to improve performance. This is seen clearly in Scrabble players’ activities, which vary in the extent to which they fit this category. Studying the words of the highest probability is seen as
paramount, because they have the potential to improve performance on a wider range of Scrabble positions. It is difficult to say whether activities that are seen as pleasurable, but which are less obviously linked to directly increasing performance (such as playing primarily for fun, or studying words which are aesthetically pleasing) have benefits. Though Ericsson’s criteria for what is considered deliberate, effortful practice does not specifically discuss this possibility, the fact that some of these elements persist in experts’ habits suggest that a variety of experiences could have positive effects such as breaking up monotony, increasing the standard of competition and making play more enjoyable. In essence, there may be a number of different kinds of practice and learning that are beneficial to experts and the community.

Ericsson’s research into expertise presents a further two-edged sword; he notes (2006b) that people are only able to “reach world-class levels in fewer than ten years in activities that lack a history of organized international competition”. However, this is problematic: the development of an organisation around practice of some kind simultaneously makes achieving top-level status harder when measured absolutely, because there is more competition, but also provides scaffolding, support, tradition and learning opportunities that enable practitioners to develop at a faster rate – the implication is that ceilings of performance get higher and higher and experts rise to these new benchmarks. Alistair’s belief, based on years of observation and experience, that his achievements and ability have largely been bested by his successors is an example of this phenomenon within the Scrabble community; Ross (2006) notes the
same in chess players – even as we know more about the game than ever, and the history is richer and longer, experts are being trained at a faster rate than ever.

A potential interpretation of this is that the experiences of previous experts, as well as deliberate training and teaching, could make aspiring experts more able to identify the most profitable uses of their time, and act accordingly. In Scrabble, this might mean that even though there are more words and better opponents to compete against, the higher absolute hurdles are conquered at relatively faster rates because of greater access to received wisdom, whether it be absorbed through instruction, observation or one’s own practice.

The data suggest that looking more closely at characteristics of the community in which expertise is witnessed might provide more clues as to how these processes occur. Within such a framework, meaningful comparisons between participants could be made on the basis of quantitative measurements, or perhaps quasi-experimental designs could look at expertise at the site of the individual – examining what specific practical activities are undertaken, broken down more finely than Tuffiash, Roring and Ericsson (2007) did when they used a study/practice dichotomy, and seeing which are the most effective. Certainly, identifying the kinds of people who attain expertise is something that future research may look into, though this should be tempered with the understanding that expertise requires a community to assess it, if not necessarily create it.
Recommendations for future research

Having criss-crossed a number of areas, this research could be built upon in three ways: firstly, a deeper examination of the intricacies of Scrabble expertise; secondly, a look at similar competitive communities of practice to see if elements of what has been discussed here and in the previous chapters are found in other communities; and thirdly, a different set of questions for similar experts within the same community to move the focus onto the individual rather than the community, identifying their habits and patterns at an individual level distinct (if not discrete) from competitors and the developing environment they are practised in.

Despite the rich narratives of the nine subjects, very little about the game of Scrabble itself that is enlightening, or has not been discussed before in an academic context, has been brought to light. Cansino et al's paper from 2001 on the cognitive processes involved in Scrabble play is intriguing, but a definitive paper on the neurological and psychological phenomena inherent in top-flight play informed by a solid understanding of what constitutes real Scrabble expertise remains to be written. The recollections and beliefs of the players, much of which to the author's regret fell outside the research questions, suggest that some of these factors could be of interest.

Certainly the suite of skills discussed by the players is comparable to chess, and an examination of neurological activity in the brain during play or game-like tasks such as solving anagrams or evaluating board positions could prove enlightening, as could
profiling expert players according to their performance on some discrete areas of functioning and seeing if there is perhaps a particular pattern of intelligences that are conducive to playing well. The range of skills required for skilful play in Scrabble can involve computation, linguistic skill, self-evaluation, the ability to control emotions and the capacity to understand the meaning of others' moves and even gestures, suggesting that there are psychometric, psychological, metacognitive and even EI-related factors at play in expert performance.

If a profile of what a potential expert is like can be formed, exceptions and counterintuitive data could provide a look at how environmental factors have the capacity to affect development as well. A rich amount of information about how expertise can occur could be uncovered by such a study.

During the course of not only interviewing subjects but sharing ideas and experiences with colleagues, friends and acquaintances operating within other communities, the idea of a competitive community of practice distinct from other kinds became clearer. Simultaneously, the author learned about communities as diverse as speech pathologists, poets, parkour enthusiasts, politicians, computer game designers and discovered that some of his conclusions seemed a good fit with other people's experience in other fields, particularly those with a competitive aspect. While the dynamics observed are particular to Scrabble players, some of what has been extrapolated from these dynamics by comparing them to the theory of communities of practice should be observed in other groups, with equivalent methodology.
Examining other competitive communities would give stronger footing to some of the aforementioned conclusions and give a more concrete answer to the question of what these groups are like, rather than what this particular one is like. It would strengthen the author's belief that within the broader heading of communities of practice there are a number of different types of community, and that grouping them based on the type of activity undertaken would enable them to be looked at singly so that a deeper understanding of the ways and means of learning and teaching therein would be achieved. Taking a similar look at the social communities underpinning board, strategy or card games would seem the most logical next step, but just as useful could be looking at sports. The author's earlier point about expertise having often been seen as a solitary journey is one that can be observed as having permeated much of the literature written about it in competitive sport.

Finally, future research could consider Scrabble players as another source of data in an attempt to look for the elusive formula for optimum performance and achievement. The author believes that disciplines that marry a number of different skills are probably too complex to speak to anything universal, such as resolving the question of whether study or practice is more effective, whether inborn potential or access to information or training is a bigger factor in achievement or many other questions that have been raised in the attempt to look at expertise as a single discrete idea. Indeed, one aspect of expertise may be inborn, whereas another may be primarily influenced by environment, much as an athlete may be genetically blessed with long legs and environmentally
cursed with poor lungs due to exposure to pollutants or smoke during childhood.

Nonetheless, looking at individual experiences rather than individuals' experiences of a community could give an insight into what sort of people become experts by looking at commonalities in their traits, abilities and habits in concert with their performance.

This research sought to examine how expert Scrabble players develop their skills, examining both what they learned and how they set about doing this. The results suggest that there is a combination of individual and social factors involved in the process. Scrabble experts combine self-directed, deliberate study and practice with the ability to learn from peers during competitive and informal interactions, and have made use of the work and received wisdom of predecessors alongside their own experience to hone and refine their study and learning techniques. The presence of a strong, competitive community is seen as important to experts, who seek challenge and opportunities to improve, and many experts contribute to the community by helping other players and taking on leadership roles within playing organisations.
REFERENCES


CASPA (2010). *National Ratings*. Available URL:


Association for Educational Communications and Technology. (24th, Atlanta, GA, November 8-12, 2001)


Wubbels, T. (2007). Do we know a community of practice when we see one? *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 16(2), pp.225-233

