

# and the mind of Joel Wapnick

S<sub>1</sub>  
C<sub>3</sub>  
R<sub>1</sub>  
A<sub>1</sub>  
B<sub>3</sub>  
B<sub>3</sub>  
L<sub>1</sub>  
E<sub>1</sub>



PHOTOS: MICHAEL PEAKE

by david hayes



It's tempting to describe the mind of Joel Wapnick as a Swiss watch, a Rolls-Royce engine, a precisely calibrated, finely tuned machine. But it is not. The mind of Joel Wapnick, like that of most world-class Scrabble players, is human — an awesome but fussy organ capable of extraordinary feats and equally remarkable inconsistencies, influenced by the temperament of its owner.

At 8:35 on a Monday morning last October, shortly before the final match of the three-day Canadian Scrabble Championship is scheduled to begin, the mind and its owner arrive at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club. The main auditorium, which had been filled with Canada's 50 top-ranked players all weekend, is now bare except for a long table in the centre of the room. Wapnick is wired, as is customary before important games. He paces, looking neither left nor right. A TV crew, eager for sound bites, back off once they encounter his force field. At the table, he sits in his chair, rocking back and forth, testing it, replacing it with another more to his liking, preoccupied with rituals as a way of clearing away distractions. Finally, he buries his face in his hands, annoyed that the start time has been delayed by 15 minutes and disconcerted that the TV crew plans to videotape the game. "It's like someone staring over my shoulder," he remarks tersely to a nearby official. "I don't like it."

Today Wapnick, a professor of music theory at Montreal's McGill University and a Scrabble grandmaster, faces Albert Hahn, a dark horse opponent. An unusual number of top Scrabble players work in the fields of mathematics, engineering, computer sciences, even music (a mathematically ordered discipline). That's because tournament Scrabble is not really about words, any more than bridge is about the numbers on the cards — which explains why champions come from vocations requiring a talent for abstract reasoning, probability analysis, geometry, the juggling of multiple variables.

Hahn, a tall, heavy-set Calgary truck driver, sometime stand-up comedian and former professional

*Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (OSPD)* and declare the word acceptable. Hahn loses his turn.

Wapnick studies his rack. It contains the letters **BIILVWY**. One option is to play **WRILY** off the **R** in **REOVIRUS**. Worth a mere 27 points, it would clear his rack of unwanted letters, offering the hope of drawing better ones for the next turn. There is, however, the small matter than **WRILY** is not a word. In Scrabble, a word that does not appear in the *OSPD* is called a phoney. Phonies are played both accidentally and as a tactic. Were he playing Adam Logan, the 23-year-old Harvard PhD student from Ottawa who was ranked first in Canada coming into the tournament, or Montrealer David Boys, the 1996 World Scrabble champion,

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poker player, is therefore an anomaly. A shy, affable man dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and a red baseball cap, he ranked 14th going into the tournament but has emerged in second place. He has never won a major tournament.

Wapnick, the 1983 North American champion and runner-up in both the 1992 North American event and the 1993 World championship, is a name generally included when anyone mentions the five or six North Americans who may be called grandmasters. Dressed in a pearl grey jacket and black trousers, he is the clubhouse favourite.

Once Wapnick and Hahn shake hands, they select their tiles and the game begins. Early on, Wapnick plays **REOVIRUS**, which Hahn challenges. Officials consult the

who was ranked second, Wapnick wouldn't risk a move like this. But he senses that Hahn, who knows considerably fewer than the roughly 80,000 to 100,000 words that the top players have memorized, won't have the confidence to challenge Wapnick's legendary "word knowledge" and risk losing a second turn. Wapnick plays **WRILY** unchallenged and collects fresh tiles.

### **BIG-TIME BINGOS**

If you're like me, you probably play Scrabble with enthusiasm but little genius a few times a year, filling the board with relatively simple words and relying to an enormous extent on luck and the amount your opponent has had to drink. My scores end up in the 200 to 250 range, and I can count on one



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hand the number of times I remember playing a “bingo”— a play that uses all seven tiles, earning a 50-point bonus. At the Wapnick level, players average more than 400 points per game, commonly scoring two or three, or even more, bingos.

Scrabble was invented in the early 1930s by an out-of-work New York architect named Alfred Mosher Butts, who wanted to create a game that combined elements of crossword puzzles and anagrams with strategic games like chess and checkers. Today, coming out of Scrabble’s 50th anniversary year, more than 100 million games have been sold worldwide in 30 languages. The National Scrabble Association, which sanctions 150 North American tournaments a year (including the Canadian event, with prize money totalling more than \$12,000), estimates that there are 33 million leisure players in North America alone.

Before attending the Canadian nationals, I couldn’t name a single word using the letter Q without a U following. In one game on the weekend, Wapnick played two of them only four moves apart (Q A I D and Q A N A T S) and he knows the other 13

listed in the *OSPD*. Most people couldn’t name a single word containing no vowels. Wapnick would come up with a handful, and then rhyme off a list of words, like A A (a type of lava), that contain only vowels.

Ask him about a key to his obsession, and Wapnick is elusive. He merely says, “I always loved fooling around with words.” It’s the “fooling around” part that is probably most telling. As a child growing up in Long Island, New York, he showed a penchant for grouping and codifying, methodically recording the licence plates of passing cars while on family outings and logging the call letters and frequencies of radio stations. Ask his colleagues in the Scrabble world whether there’s a connection between Wapnick’s career in music theory and the harmonic precision of his approach to Scrabble, and they’ll nod in agreement, although Wapnick himself dismisses the notion.

In the mid-1970s, shortly before moving to Canada, Wapnick became serious about Scrabble. He began memorizing the 13,000 two-to-five-letter words in the *OSPD*,

having learned that players increase their odds of playing a bingo if they know four-letter verbs to which **ING** can be added, and three-letter adjectives that will take **IEST**. Eventually he devised his own system, which elevated him from a serious hobbyist to one of the game's supreme theoreticians.

He created a massive word list, the thickness of a big-city telephone book, arranged alphabetically and subdivided into combinations and permutations of vowels, consonants and high- and low-point letters. Then he memorized it, which meant he could look at the letters in his rack during a game and crunch them through his mind until he found a playable

moves ahead, employing elaborate strategies to exploit the board's triple-letter and double-word squares and to block their opponent's expected plays.

"Poker has the same dynamic," Williams continues. "You manage a Scrabble rack as you would a poker hand. You're looking for certain letters to make a bingo or for an opportunity to use a high-scoring letter."

Digital technology has revolutionized Scrabble. Serious players, like Wapnick, now challenge the computer by playing the CD-ROM version of Scrabble or study with anagram software programs and programs that flash difficult words on the screen — similar to math flash cards, and better

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word. It was an effective but brain-busting exercise, roughly analogous to the brute force of a 1950s-era ENIAC computer. "I remember I had **AAEEGNS** in my rack," he says, recalling an early tournament, "and there was an **R** on the board." Wapnick's mind ran through his list of words containing four vowels, no high-point letters. "I came up with the word, **SANGAREE**. It was such a thrill — the first time I'd successfully used my system."

"At the highest level it's a given that you know all the words," says John Williams, executive director of the New York-based National Scrabble Association. "Then it comes down to calculating probability." Although there is an element of luck in Scrabble, top players think multiple

than his word list, says Wapnick, because they approximate the randomness of the game itself. Until recently, top-ranked players were lucky to play other equally skilled opponents just a few times a year at major tournaments; today they can challenge each other to on-line matches (in real time) whenever they wish, and aficionados debate strategies and share tips on various e-mail forums and chat rooms.

At 52, Wapnick is no longer a young Turk. "There's a new wave of young players in their 20s and early 30s who are taking over the game," says Williams. "Joel is one of just a handful of old-time experts, guys who came up in the days when there were no computer aids, who are still at the top of their game."

When asked whether age matters, Wapnick says, "Yes.

The last person to win the nationals was 28. The one before that was 21. The last world champion was 34. When Canada's Dave Boys won it, he was 31 or 32. Twenty years ago I didn't have to go over my word list as often. It stayed in my head. I used to routinely memorize 16,000 seven- and eight-letter bingos, but I've had to cut back to 12,000 because I can't hold 16,000 words in my mind any more. Is it because I have other responsibilities, like a young family and a more demanding career, or because my memory is losing power with age? I don't think I want to know."

### ZEN-LIKE FATALISM

By noon, Wapnick and Hahn have split the best-of-five finals two games apiece. There are some who quietly acknowledge that Wapnick's weakness may be the extent to which he gets wound up during important tournaments, with his play occasionally becoming inconsistent just when the stakes are highest. They point to his second-place finishes in the North American and World championships in the early 90s, both matches he could have won. He will later acknowledge that he wanted to win this Canadian championship so badly that he played too quickly in the early games, losing two matches that he felt should have been his.

As the two men sit down at the table for the deciding round, several news photographers and a camera crew enter the auditorium. "The game will not begin until the cameras have left the room," says tournament director John Chew sternly. "Come back in 45 minutes. We will have some real news then."

Gifted Scrabble players often reveal a Zen-like fatalism that mirrors the character of the game. Unlike chess, which is based entirely on strategy, Scrabble has a random

quality like life itself. Every time Wapnick sticks his hand into the tile bag, he stands the same chance that I do of drawing game-winning letters or garbage. A grandmaster's resourcefulness is tested if luck isn't on his side, and today Wapnick has been plagued with poor tiles and has failed throughout the finals to draw a single blank — considered the most valuable tile in Scrabble, since it stands for any letter. Yet by mid-game many onlookers feel that Wapnick is dominating the play. "That Joel is winning this championship is a sign of a truly masterful competitor," one highly ranked player whispers. "His word knowledge is incredible."

As if to prove the point, Wapnick, with a vowel-heavy rack of **AAADENR**, stares at an open triple-triple opportunity down the left-hand alley in which rests an existing letter **C** from the word **CRAG**. Once again, Wapnick's mind begins the breathtaking mathematical feat of crunching through his word list system, processing the available possibilities for words made up of four vowels plus one high-point tile: **ATALAYA**, **CARAYANA**, **ANASARCA**, **ALAMEDA**, **APARAYA**, **ALTHAEA**, **AZALEAS**, **ANABASES... DRACAENA!**

A triple-triple bingo for 141 points. Both players hear an unrestrained cheer from the outer room as the assembled pros celebrate genius. In desperation Hahn challenges, unsuccessfully, and forfeits his turn. The score is 304 to 95, guaranteeing Wapnick's victory and the \$7,000 top prize. For the first time today Joel Wapnick visibly relaxes, allowing himself a small smile. ■

David Hayes is a Toronto-based book and magazine author who cherishes words and combinations of words as much as any Scrabble grandmaster.