

WORD PERFECT

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During my son's high school years, I lectured him constantly about spending too much time playing video games. I didn't make any progress. Maybe I should have waited until he took his headset off.

I remember telling him what a waste of time video games are and how little you benefit intellectually. Plus, the activity provides absolutely no exercise.

I would have lectured him more extensively, but the golf course near me had gotten new electric carts, so getting in 36 holes a day left little time for anything else.

My real concern was that my son would become addicted. Addiction is a scary thing. I should know. I have one.

Not to golf.

Not to nicotine.

Not to prescription drugs.

Not to Mike's Hard Lemonade.

I am addicted to SCRABBLE.

I don't mean the board game that is up in your hall closet wedged between your winter galoshes and the Monopoly game. And I don't mean the Scrabble game that you flung in your basement crawl space because you're missing a J and a V.

I'm addicted to the Scrabble that I downloaded on my computer. Oh, it's the same concept, only instead of playing your etymologically challenged brother or your linguistically deficient neighbor, you are playing Noah Webster and someone I assume is his obsessive-compulsive sister, Merriam.

Good luck.

In this computer game, you can control the level of difficulty, but with a degree in English, I'll be darned if I'll compete as a Novice or Beginner. Instead, I check off Expert, at which point the computer runs a program that has beaten all but 200 Scrabble players in America. They don't give me any names, so I'm wondering who these people are and if they also have wives and children who would like them to come up from the basement every once in a while and take a shower.

Every time I play, I realize I'm in over my head. Just before writing this column, I was trounced by the computer. Here were some of the words that beat me:

PROMIAL
ZOOTIER
HEWABLE
ZLOTE
SCHALENE

I have never heard of these words. Even my spell-check had a hissy fit. No such words, it told me by underlining them all in red. But apparently these 200 people use words like this as part of their everyday speech. This is just a guess, but these wordophiles must all live together in a commune, the perfect place for people who know the names of all 4,000 varieties of tree fungus, use them in conversation... and can spell them.

The reason computer Scrabble is so addictive is that every time I make a word that's worth more than 30 points, a nerdy little figure pops up on the screen and seduces me with adulation: GREAT JOB! EXCELLENT MOVE! I'm a sucker for this because I've only heard GREAT JOB maybe six times during my 25+ years of marriage. I can't remember ever hearing EXCELLENT MOVE! And I'm even counting our honeymoon.

My son is growing more and more concerned about my obsession. So much so, in fact, that he promised me the other day that if I gave up SCRABBLE, he'd give up video games.

"Just say the word, Dad," he told me. "Just say the word and video games are history."

The question is: What is the word? And how many points will I get?