

EXERCISE YOUR BRAIN WITH BANANAGRAMS

MATTHEW M. MAURER

Westfield, Indiana

During the last holiday season I stopped by the local game store looking for a few good board games for my teen age sons. The first clerk to help me was a seasonal worker and I was soon convinced that she was not even much of a game player. When I finally got the regular clerk, an obvious game geek, he recommended Bananagrams. Since I love word games, I quickly put in on the pile. On Christmas morning when I watched Ben's reaction to this gift I realized I had made a 7 year-old's decision. This was clearly a game I would like, but not him. Indeed, that was the case. I went crazy for this game. You might even say I went bananas for Bananagrams. And after a couple of games, I was the only family member still interested. I took it to a couple of holiday gatherings and the consensus seemed to be that people either loved it or grew quickly bored with it.

If you like Scrabble or Boggle, you will likely agree with me. This game however is quite different than any word games I have played in the past. Any number can play. It consists of 144 letter tiles including at least two of every letter, and of course a generous number of vowels. You begin play by turning all the tiles down. Each player selects the same number of tiles (more for fewer players, and fewer as the number of players increases). All players play simultaneously, each making a crossword style layout with their tiles. When any player uses all their tiles they say, "peel" and everyone must take another tile. Play continues until there are not enough tiles for everyone to take one. At that point the game is over and the person who completed his or her crossword first wins. Any player can rearrange their tiles any way they wish at any time as long as all resulting words are valid. The only restriction on words is a typical ban on proper nouns. In our house we added no slang, but allowed any other words like archaic or informal. We used our favorite dictionary for challenges. Challenges happen at the end and if the winner is found to have a bad word, then instead of the winner he or she is declared a rotten banana.

Play is quick and the better players are those who have good word knowledge but more importantly those who can be fluid and flexible in their thinking. As play progresses each player constructs a relatively intricate crossword. On each "peel" they must add a letter, then another, and so on. It is relatively easy to simply add letters. For example, if you had an open letter "n" in a word and you drew an "a", you could simply make "an". And of course if you then drew a "d" you could make "and" and so on. Often however, the new letter is more problematic. In that case, if you are mentally flexible enough to abandon parts to accommodate the new letter, it improves your play.

As you might suspect, the uncommon letters are more difficult to include. If you draw a "q", "z", "k", or "v", you often need a complex strategy. Unless there is an obvious solution, my strategy is to remove parts to make a place for the new letter. As I remove letters, I try to take only the easier letters, and as few of them as possible.

To hone your game play it is important to be able to spot the new word that can be created by adding a new letter in the middle of a word, for example to make “band” from “bad”. Also, flipping multiple vowels around, from word to word is often very helpful. For example, maybe you had the word “on” and somewhere else you had the word “far”. If you drew a letter “v”, you could take the “o” from “on”, change “far” to “for”, leaving you with an “a” to make “van” where you had “on”.

The fun I found in this game was in using my word sense in a different way. As I played it seemed that I was exercising my brain. After getting into the game, I found as I turned the letters over I was immediately spotting word possibilities, but also thinking about how words might become other words (e.g., “thin” might become “think”). I believe playing this game could be one of those useful mental exercises that keeps your brain in good working order. It sure felt that way to me anyway!

I enjoyed the game so much I wanted to know more about it. I contacted the creators through their web site (<http://www.bananagrams-intl.com/>). I found their story very interesting. It was a family created game. Three generations of word game lovers created it for their own enjoyment. Friends encouraged them to make it available to the public and in 2006 they did just that. To date they have sold over a quarter million units and the game has won nine awards.

I highly recommend this game. If you love word games like I do, I am sure you will love it. One note of caution however – If it turns out you are very good at this game, don’t gloat and don’t peel too quickly or you might wind up playing nothing but Bananagrams solitaire.