



Word Wars

Director: Eric Chaikin

Genre: Documentary

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Released: 2004

MPAA Rating: Unrated

Cast: Joe Edley, Matt Graham, Marlon Hill, G.I. Joel Sherman

Word Up

A Review by [Dainon Moody](#)

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In the beginning minutes of *Word Wars*, the comment is made that “you can beat God at this game if you have the right talent.” The game in question is Scrabble and, just as *Spellbound* documented word-wise children battling it out at the national spelling competition in Washington, D.C., this one follows four hopefuls on their way to the national Scrabble championships in San Diego.

Nobody ends up going toe-to-toe with any deities throughout the course of the film but, yes, most have talent to spare. They also have possibly every word game and dictionary known in existence crammed into an overstuffed closet, along with a few hardly anybody knows (the Dictionary of Verbal Aggression, anyone?). They have all the time in the world to play Scrabble. And theirs is only a glimmer of the version most are accustomed to; these are timed high-stakes “games”, usually ending only when the points reach the 400-500 range or when a competitor claims burn-out. What they don't have is jobs. With the exception of defending champ Joe Edley, who does have one, the others live and die by working to perfect their passion – G.I. Joel battles with a lifelong gastrointestinal ailment, Marlon Hill nurses his marijuana habit between speaking at public schools and Matt Graham gets by on the odd stand-up comedy gig, often anagramming for money in bars. The absence of any real professions makes the \$25,000 prize at the end of the rainbow not just desirable, but completely necessary.

“I've done very little to contribute to society,” Joel, a college dropout, admits. “Playing Scrabble is the only thing my body will allow me to sit still and do without major interruptions.”

And so goes the story of four very watchable losers (by societal norms, anyway) whose only form of risking it all is doing the only real thing they know how to do. If they lose, they lose nothing because they don't have much to begin with. And, truth be told, it's fascinating. It means studying flashcards during your morning commute and popping brain enhancers and practicing Tai Chi between rounds. While they may fail at being part of the commonality, they make up for it in their drive to win. If they don't, they still retain a vocabulary most can't hope to gain in an entire lifetime.

It's easier to pick out what *Word Wars'* filmmakers do right than to scrutinize the other side of the coin. The occasional Beck song serves to help score the film. The hard-to-define words pop up in stop-time fashion between and during Scrabble games to show just what kind of vocabularies these players have (for example, “poltroon”, defined as “a base coward”). And Stefan Fastis, author of *Word Freak*, drops in now and again as a sometime narrator and competitor, offering up gems like describing the tournament as “700+ people filing into a football field-sized room like extras in *Night of the Living Dead*.”

As is usually the case with documentaries as engaging as this one proves to be, the journey is more worthwhile than the payoff. We're allowed to spend time with four individuals so completely obsessed with the English language that they appear to see little else outside of the kind of tunnel vision they've honed. Perhaps that's what it takes to memorize the dictionary several times over. It's only too ironic when the winner sits at a piano singing “Nothing's gonna change my world,” the refrain of the Beatles' “Across The Universe”. Because then, and only then, do we see exactly how his world begins to change.

