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Ian and his mum Aileen, pictured together in 2004

More than fifty years after coming up with the idea with his mother on a bus travelling across America, East Suffolk u3a member Ian has made a word game to rival the smash hit Wordle. 'Aileen's Game' challenges members to create as many words as possible within a five- by-five grid. The twist is that every other letter is automated for you.

Made available to play online this year through the u3a website, it has already been played thousands of times. The origins of the game stretch back more than half a century to when Ian was a teenager spending his summer holidays in America.

Ian explains, "The game came about back in 1965. Mum and I had been visiting her sister in Canada and were taking a greyhound bus from Thunder Bay to Cleveland, Ohio to see her uncle. "My mum loved word games, loved them – even in her 90s, she was a mastermind at scrabble. We were just on the bus, playing with word games and a piece of paper. Somehow we came up with this game – we had a grid of 5x5, and we each came up with alternate letters. And we liked it."

Over the years, the game has become a regular source of entertainment for family and friends but Ian always assumed that, without technical developer skills, that was the furthest he could take it.

Ian continues, "I thought it would make a good app. But I didn't know how to make an app." And then another word game sensation came along; Wordle. On discovering that it was written in Javascript, Ian realised that he might be able to use a similar basis for his game, creating it as a webpage. It re-sparked his dream of making the game available for anyone to play.

Ian says, "It became last winter's project. I don't know how long it took me – between 400 and 500 hours. Most of that was me on Google was saying, how do I...? Then finding a bit of code and trying to figure out how to make it do what I wanted it to do.

“It’s quite simple but I didn’t know how to do anything so that’s why it took me so long.”

Ian Clarke is a member of East Suffolk u3a, an organisation for people who have time to spare and want to learn new skills while making new friends. Within u3a, he attends the East Suffolk Traditional Song and Music Sessions.

Since launching the game online, it has been shared with the wider u3a movement as one of the national learning initiatives that any u3a member can get involved in.

Thousands of members have played the game and the positive response has made it all worthwhile for Ian.

He says, “This is the reward. I’ve created this thing and it just feels so great that people are enjoying playing it. That feels really fantastic. For months until I was confident it worked, it has just been family and friends testing the online game and sharing their scores with each other. It’s a very exciting time.”

The game is free and available to anyone. To find out more and play, visit the learning pages on the u3a website - <https://www.u3a.org.uk/learning/national-programmes/aileens-game>

u3a is a place for people to connect with others, learn new things and make friends. Find your local u3a and join now - <https://www.u3a.org.uk/get-involved/join>