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Many readers of this column probably have an interest in language and so may well have been bitten by the *Wordle* bug.

For those who have not, *Wordle* involves solving a five-letter word via a series of up to six guesses. Each letter in a guess is subsequently highlighted either in green if it is a correct letter in the correct place in the word, or in yellow if the letter is in the word but in a different place. It remains uncoloured if it is not in the word at all.

I am not going to go into strategies for solving this word puzzle, since many others have done that in various publications, using information such as the frequencies with which certain letters and letter combinations occur in five-letter words.

Wordle is one of those remarkably simple but effective games, and its popularity is unsurprising. Nor is it surprising that the *New York Times* was prepared to offer its inventor a substantial sum for the rights to the game. What is also remarkably simple but effective is the name of the game. At first blush it looks like a blend of *word* and



Wordle schmerdle

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puzzle, or perhaps a contraction of *word puzzle*.

But *Wordle* is also a play on the name of the game's inventor, Josh Wardle. Clever.

Something that is linguistically interesting is how parts of the name have been repurposed in the many variations of the original puzzle that have emerged at a rapid pace. The *-ordle* part appears in *Quordle* (four puzzles have to be solved at once – so a quad *Wordle*) and

Octordle (eight such puzzles).

The *-le* part reappears in *Semantle* (a semantic, or meaning-based, version of *Wordle*), *Absurdle* (an absurd and challenging variant with a set of possible correct answers but where the algorithm behind the game changes the eventual answer depending on your guesses), *Reversle* (in which the player starts knowing the answer and the number and position of green and yellow answers in the preceding “guesses” but not all the letters of those preceding guesses), and *Lewdle* (*Wordle* with rude words), amongst many others.

The *Wordle* spin-offs with *-le* are particularly interesting. Readers may not be aware that historically there have been a number of *-le* suffixes in English with a range of sources and meanings.

In *castle* and *bramble* it expresses a diminutive meaning (linked to Latin *castrum* or fort and to Germanic *bram* or thorny shrub respectively), in *thimble* or *handle* it shows an appliance or tool (used on the thumb or in the hand), in *brittle* it denotes the property of being “liable to” (linked to a now obsolete English verb *britte*, meaning break or destroy), in *nestle* or *twinkle* it can show a repetitive kind of action.

While in these historical cases the process of adding *-le* might no longer be very transparent, the use of *-le* in the *Wordle* derivative shows some productive of what we might think of as a pseudo-affix. This is reminiscent of the use of *-gate* to denote a scandal. Initially occurring in the context of *Watergate* (following the 1972 Republican-sanctioned burglary of the Democratic Party offices in the Watergate building in Washington DC), this pseudo-affix spread to a range of other scandals (such as *winegate*, *Irangate* and *Volgagate* to name a few).

British comedians Mitchell and Webb exploited this productive use of *-gate* in a sketch in which Webb refers to *Watergategate*, arguing that the scandal did not involve water, but the Watergate building. If *-le* has come to mean “game”, would they now have me attempt a *Wordlele*?

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THE IRISH TIMES

Hoping for the best is not a policy

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Covid-19 is circulating at very high levels across Irish society – higher, conceivably, than at any point in the pandemic to date, though the reduction in PCR testing and patchy reporting of antigen test results makes it difficult to establish reliable numbers. Several hundred thousand infections are estimated to be occurring every week, and the number of people in hospital could yet reach 2200 which would put the hospital system under intolerable pressure.

As a result, pressure is building for the reimposition of some public health restrictions. Government is reluctant to reintroduce restrictions. It points out that about half of those in

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hospital with Covid were admitted for something else, and notes intensive care admissions as a result of the virus are stable. The argument for the status quo is that the state cannot keep lifting and reimposing restrictions and must instead trust people to take responsible steps to protect themselves and others.

In principle that makes sense. But it would be more convincing if the public was provided with more information. It is not clear what modelling underpins the Government's thinking; knowing how authorities expect the current wave to progress would enable people to make better decisions. It is a lesson the pandemic has taught us: hoping for the best is not a viable policy.