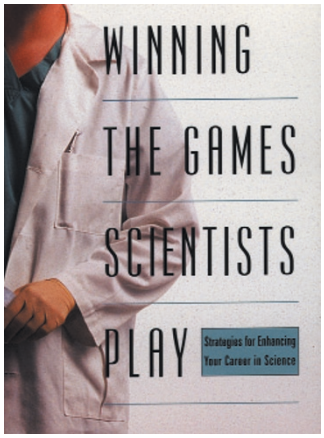
Whatever the game is, play it as a professional



Winning the Games Scientists Play: Strategies for Enhancing Your Career in Science
by Carl J. Sinderman
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Most scientists hold to a basic mythos: that success in science is, well, about the science. To a large extent this is certainly true. Those who practise science at an elite level are often those that reap tangible rewards including top jobs, higher salaries, and respect among peers. But there is another side to becoming a successful scientist, one that involves interacting with people. *Winning the Games Scientists Play* addresses the politics of science. I was excited—and embarrassed for being so—when I received this book, which promised to provide a tell-all about accumulating power in the science sphere. Although business has seen an industry built on just such books, science has been long overdue. Dr Sinderman has written a number of books on the social aspects of science, and the title of his latest book is certainly provocative. Unfortunately, this book misses the mark.

The book is divided into three basic sections. The first section deals with 'the fundamentals' of game playing: writing papers and attending meetings. The author briefly discusses how to determine authorship on a paper and the importance of taking reviews seriously; unfortunately, much of this discussion is tongue-in-cheek, and too little of substance is presented. Conversely, the discussion of game playing at meetings is at times wonderful, and clearly indicates that Sinderman has spent much time attending and running such sessions. He points out the importance of fully preparing for talks (an obvious point but one that can never be overemphasized), not relying on slides, and staying cool when the projector or computer fails. He touches on a central truth about attending meetings: skip the talks and chat with your colleagues out in the lobby. Helpful suggestions are also given on running sessions and meetings. The book's high points are the occasionally hilarious examples that the author gives of problems that people have run into at meetings. Strangely, the games inherent in running a laboratory and dealing with lab members are barely touched on. I would argue that this is the most important and trickiest game that we scientists play, and it is an unfortunate omission.

The second section addresses 'higher orders of game playing', including career advancement, power and ethics. In principle, these three chapters should represent the heart of the book. Unlike the chapters on meetings—actually, an astonishing amount of space is spent discussing meetings—these chapters mainly describe the characteristics of typical scientists, how their careers are likely to progress, and the types of power brokers that they can become. Surprisingly little effort is spent on giving examples of successful power-game players; instead, the discussion often lapses into truisms (an issue discussed below). The discussion of ethics was interesting but vague, and did not make the natural transition from ethics to issues of power.

Finally, the third section explores 'special cases', including dealing with bureaucrats and the media, issues that women face, and industry in science. This final section is the most successful: the chapter on bureaucrats is fun and the chapter on entering industry (from what I have learned from my colleagues) is dead on. Unfortunately, the chapter exploring the role of women in science is frustrating and really does not belong in this book. Instead of providing advice on issues special to women and game playing (note the book's title), it is really a brief and unsatisfying look at the well-documented failure of science to attract women as assistant professors. The optimistic statement that 'we are closer than some would have us believe' to equality (or, as I prefer to think, an academic/social structure that more women would push to join) would ring more true if the data cited in the book actually supported it.

More broadly, the book has two major flaws. First, it is written in an elliptical, third-person style that is appropriate for scientific writing but not for writing *about* scientists. The author relies on bulleted lists of declarative statements that emerging scientists should keep in mind. This style did not give me a sense of which points were most important nor, critically, why they were important. Having jogged through, say, a list of points about attending a meeting—a list without context—I am not likely to remember many of these points at my next excursion. I found myself nodding in agreement with many of the author's points, but only when I could match them to my own experiences.

The discussion is at its best when specific examples are given; these are conveniently denoted by italics and generally break away from the awkward style of the rest of the book. This brings me to my second and more serious difficulty with the book. The author correctly states that emerging game players should pay close attention to successful senior game players (or, as the book states, 'observation of methodologies used by highly successful power players can provide excellent clues and examples'). Why not interview these successful game players and report their secrets for success? Now *that* is a book I would enjoy reading. By reporting on his own experience and opinions for successful game playing, Dr Sinderman limits himself to stating mostly obvious points. After statements such as 'consider *all* reviewers' comments very carefully' or 'one of the most crucial elements in planning a scientific session is selection of the participants', the subsequent discussion is then too broad and non-specific to be helpful. What are the specific strategies that successful scientists have used to persuade an editor to view their manuscript more favourably? What sneaky tricks do they use to convince their busy colleagues to speak at a meeting? We aspiring game players want to know! □

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