solutions. But because he felt the changes would place undue weight on those areas, and the firm did not want to disclose sponsorship, Eisenack declined.

For a busy scientist, a board game may be more feasible than a digital game. Working with engineers can be slow because many rounds of prototyping and feedback are needed, and developers often juggle multiple projects. Apps are “immensely time-consuming,” says Brown, who collaborated with the game-development firm Future Fossil Studios in Dundee, UK, to produce a digital version of *Bacteria Combat*. Working part-time on the project, the studio took about one year to program the single-player version and another six months for the multiplayer game.

But researchers can whip up digital games quickly and cheaply if they limit the scope. Atmospheric scientist Dargan Frierson and ecologist Josh Lawler at the University of Washington in Seattle recruited computer science, informatics and art students to make simple environmental games, some as volunteers and others for course credit. Most of the games are brief, single-player and 2D; they typically require one week to a few months of work to complete. “Communication of environmental science is urgent,” Frierson says. “So we’ve got to get stuff out the door.”

Scientists can market games through many channels. After Lauretta’s team exhibited a prototype of *Xtronaut* at Toy Fair in New York City, *Good Housekeeping* magazine named it one of the best family board games of 2016. The US National Science Teachers Association reviewed *Go Extinct!* after Marcy submitted it to them. And browser-based games can be posted on the web portals Kongregate.com and Newgrounds.com.

Game development can be a distraction from research, but it can also bring scientists positive attention. Marcy won the Society for the Study of Evolution’s 2016 Thomas Henry Huxley Award for outreach and education for *Go Extinct!* Posters for her game attract many visitors at research conferences, and she hopes that the connections she makes will later help her to secure a job.

Some scientists become full-time game developers, but it’s tough to make a living in indie games. Hall lived off savings while starting his company, and established a sustainable business largely by creating games for clients such as museums. And researchers with coding skills may be able to get jobs at digital educational game companies, Stegman says.

But for scientists who pursue their passion on the side, making games is geek heaven. “Personally, it’s very satisfying to have a box on the shelf that’s a board game that I designed,” Coil says. “I mean, that’s just cool.” ■

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TURNING POINT

Soft-skills sculptor

Maya Schuldiner, a yeast biologist at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, won the 2017 European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) Gold Medal award for discovering the functions of proteins that no one had previously studied. She explains how finding her voice helped her to build a productive career, which has included launching and teaching a highly sought-after graduate-level course in soft skills.

What have you struggled with most during your career?

It didn’t occur to me as a student that one needs to learn more than how to work at the bench — with the possible exception of how to give an interesting talk. It surprised me when I started my lab and realized that most of the technical skills I knew were not that important in this role. The skills I needed were how to recruit the right people, how to pair the right project with the right person, how to write successful grants and how to motivate my students. I worried that if I asked older colleagues about these, they might think less of me.

How did you find the answers?

I was part of a cohort of 17 people when I started as a professor at the Weizmann Institute in 2008. We set up an early-career principal-investigator group to meet every two weeks and talk through one new skill — from how to write a letter of recommendation to how to fire someone. I started thinking that it would be nice to turn these into lessons for graduate students.

How was the class received?

The first year, I advertised the course on the Weizmann website. Around 120 people registered — half of the PhD students at Weizmann. I restricted it to 30 people to facilitate discussion. I’m now in my sixth year of teaching the course. I’ve increased the size to 50 students, but consistently get 120 registrants. It shows how hungry students are for this information. In Israel, because of compulsory military training, students are often older and have families with children. A lot want strategies for work–life balance.

What strategy did you use to launch your lab?

There were two things. I decided to work only with people I really like. I’ve created an environment where there’s a strong feeling of friendship and camaraderie. Second, I took time to find my own scientific voice — my own special way of doing things. The first

three years were scary because it took a bit more time than average to start publishing and be productive, but I wanted to find out what made me excited and could be uniquely mine.

What do you mean by ‘find your own voice’?

It’s my way of doing science — what questions I ask, how I ask them and what tools I use to answer them.

What worked well and what didn’t?

I made a point of putting my students’ and postdocs’ needs ahead of mine, to be the kind of person they can trust to promote their well-being and agendas. Seeing that work made me happy and proud. I made some mistakes hiring people who weren’t right for me or the lab. So I’ve learned to trust my intuition.

Do people call you ‘Wonder Woman’ for having three children and a career?

I hate it when people phrase it like that. It means that they think only a few people can do it. I don’t think that’s the case. The only reason I can do this is because of my husband, who is an associate professor also at Weizmann. We share every aspect of our lives. It’s not as much about how I am, but how we are as a team.

Does the EMBO award validate your strategy?

It gives me a sense that the scientific path I’ve chosen is one that people find valuable, which is really moving for me. It comes also after a decade in the lab, when I want to enjoy what I’ve achieved and reflect on what went well and what didn’t. If I want to continue doing interesting things, it’s important to take a breather and really reflect on what to do in the next 10 years. ■

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.
INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN