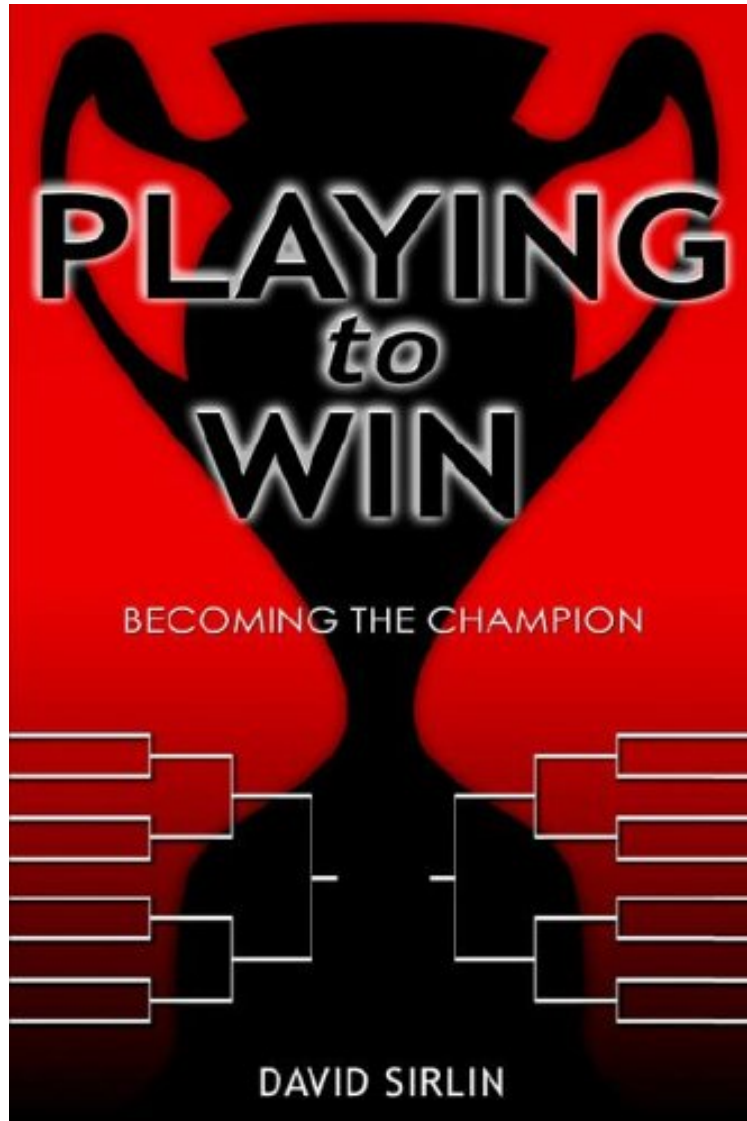


## Playing to Win

David Sirlin

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**David Sirlin : Playing to Win** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Playing to Win:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. FascinatingBy Adam J. NicolaiA lot of the other reviewers sound like they've had experience on the Street Fighter (SF) tournament circuit, or perhaps tournaments for other games. I'd like to offer a different viewpoint: that of someone who never really had the opportunity to play tournament-level SF, but always wanted to.This book didn't talk solely about SF; it also discussed Magic: The Gathering, Chess, and several

other games. The book itself is focused on the idea of "playing to win" and what it means for your mindset and how you approach the game (any game). But it was clear from the reading that SF was Sirlin's first love. I'd like to give a little personal background to explain why it resonated for me so much. I'm 35 now, but I've been playing SF in all its various iterations since I was 15 if not earlier. I think since my first Shoryuken, I've been in love with this game. I had friends to play it with, but I was WAY more into it than all of them and most of them grew tired of it long before I did. I had a couple local arcades, but for whatever reason, there were never many people at the SF machines. Certainly, as far as I know, there were no local tournaments. In fact, when I was in my teens I don't think I even knew SF tournaments could happen. When I did happen to see someone at the local machines, I'd always be chomping at the bit to play them. But since all my experience with the game was on my SNES or Playstation, they'd usually beat me. I was too unfamiliar with the stick. When online gaming started to become a thing, I remember basically hoping and praying that it would one day become reliable enough to play SF online. I'd been wanting to play other people (instead of the computer) for as long as I could remember - and not just any other people, but people who were INTO it, who would know stuff I'd never figured out, who'd knock me flat on my butt and force me to improve. When SF4 finally came out, I got my chance. Even though I had two kids and a full time job by then, I drilled a hole in my wall to get my XBox wired, and finally (FINALLY) started getting whupped by some real players. I know it's not the same as the old arcade scene or the tournament scene, but for me it's been a long-awaited dream come true. So why does this mean I loved Sirlin's book? Well, two reasons. First - My game has improved about a thousand-fold since I started playing online. I'm still no master, but I'm far, far better than I was. Occasionally I'll run into someone who actually fears me a bit, which is fantastic, and I've started having these insights. These little whispers in my brain. Like, "He's playing the game where he has to block the cross-up. I'm going to play a game where I just jump without a cross-up, and then throw." Because we're playing different games, and my opponent doesn't know the rules of my game, I win. Sirlin captures a similar concept here, and when I read it I was ecstatic. I'm not a pro SF gamer and never will be, but I DO want to be better at it. I always have. When I read that the good players develop a similar mindset to the one I was starting to feel out, it thrilled me. It made me feel like I was on the right track. There were some great nuggets in this book: a fantastic definition of "scrub," a great summary of the correct attitude toward losing (again, one I've been adopting prior to reading), an analysis of the "fear aura," and all kinds of other things my wife always looks at me like I'm nuts for talking about when I try to explain them to her. Just reading that I wasn't the only person on the planet who'd thought about all this stuff was incredibly vindicating. Second - Sirlin relates some stories from his time in tournaments that allowed me to live vicariously through him. I did passing well in some M: TG tournaments back in the 90s, and used to do policy debate in high school, so I'm familiar with the tension and excitement of the tournament format. It was pretty easy to slide that layer of tension over the stories he was telling and imagine what it must've been like. Odds are I'm never getting to an SF tournament now, no matter how much I'd love to give it a try, because I just don't have the time any more. But the few stories that were in here allowed me a precious glimpse into a life I would've loved to have taken a shot at, given the opportunity. Bottom line: the book was a blast. I plowed through it in a couple days. It let me imagine a world, not too much different from this one, where I was allowed to let my SF neurosis run completely rampant and become the champion I always wanted to be. Thanks, Mr. Sirlin. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Very good read  
By Jeremy I thought this book was a very good read, for a book on competitive gaming to say the least. There is a lot that could be learned from this book, if given the time and enough thought. I can say that by reading this book it not only changed my view on certain things but also helped me recognize things I was unaware of and made me see bigger possibilities in the things I was aware of. So with that said I would recommend this book to anybody interested in the fighting game genre or any competitive game, weither novice or veteran.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. What is the proper mental approach to a competitive game?  
By Smitty The value of Sirlin's book comes from the reality check it provides about one's preconceived notions surrounding competitive gaming. To clarify, a competitive game is one where the rules of the game are designed to generate at least one winner and loser, but it applies to team versus team games as well. Competitive games being contrasted with collaborative story telling systems like Dungeons Dragons or the White Wolf storytelling games. It is written for the player who plays a competitive game and becomes increasingly frustrated with the tactics used by other players. Campers got you down in your favorite First Person Shooter? Did your Street Fighter opponent throw you for the third consecutive time? Did you get Zerg-rushed in Starcraft? Did your buddy just counter your spell for the third time in a row? Is your blood pressure rising just thinking about any of the previous scenarios? If yes, then this is the book for you. If the people you play against are using cheap tactics in your games, then "Playing to Win" will help you resolve that problem and help with the proper development of "house rules" for any competitive game. Whether it's Doom, Call of Duty, Battlefield, Street Fighter, Magic the Gathering, or chess, your issues with other people's play-styles will be resolved once you've read and understand the material presented within.

This book grew out of a series of articles I wrote for my website, [www.sirlin.net](http://www.sirlin.net). I wrote those articles in order to share the lessons of competition I learned from tournaments in fighting games like Street Fighter. Although I used

examples from fighting games, I wrote the articles to be applicable to all gamers with examples from many different kinds of games. Even within the realm of fighting games, each game has its own community. There are distinct communities for old-school Street Fighter, Marvel vs. Capcom 2, Capcom vs. SNK 2, Guilty Gear XX, Tekken, Soul Calibur, Virtua Fighter, and Super Smash Brothers Melee. Furthermore, I've peeked into communities of many other games such as Magic: The Gathering, chess, Counter-Strike, Puzzle Fighter, poker, Scrabble, and more. Each community tends to value its own game above all others and tends to ignore and be generally ignorant of the other communities. And yet I saw that all these communities were so similar at their core: they were all wrestling with the concepts of what "playing to win" really means. They all struggled over deciding which moves to ban from play and how to ban them. They struggled with concepts of "cheapness" and "honor." The same arguments raged across the forums and online chats for every game, and even the same personalities were repeated in each community. These arguments stemmed from the basic problem that there are a few different worldviews about how to play competitive games, and no one was clearly voicing the worldview of the most powerful type of player: he who wields the power to win. Those who try to win are wildly misunderstood by the masses, and all sorts of negative things are ascribed to them. In fact, the journey of continual self-improvement that a winner must walk is good, and right, and true, but it's not for everyone, nor should it be. The response to these articles was amazing. I've been contacted by hundreds of players of all sorts of games I've barely heard of. Links to the articles are posted all over the internet, often in forums of various gaming websites. Although the ideas always spark debate, almost every e-mail I've ever received on the subject has been of the form, "You've changed the way I think about games, thank you Sirlin." After the constant barrage of thanks I've gotten for years now, I finally decided to extend the material, flesh it out more fully, and organize it into one guide for all competitive gamers. I start with the very basics of choosing a game and how to get familiar with it. I stress the importance of getting connected to the player community and building an environment for yourself that sets you up to succeed. I then give some advice on how to build up basic proficiency in a game. Next is the tough section that's hard for people to swallow. The #1 thing holding back most players is purely mental. You must shed all the rules and limitations that exist in your head about how to play, and instead start using all legal moves available to you to win. You must also give up the ridiculous notion that other players should abide by the made-up rules in your head. I then give my complete retelling of Sun Tzu's book, *Art of War*. I shifted his chapters around, omitted some, added a couple, and boiled it down to a few key concepts that apply to most competitive games. It's difficult to give actual strategy and tactics advice that would apply to almost any game, but there are valuable fundamentals here. The next section is about formal competition and tournaments. Finally, I close with a discussion of the ethical issues that the very best players face. The power to win is fleeting, but when you have it you can do a fair amount with it. I can't tell you how exactly to handle the power, but I can lay out your options. I've also noticed some massive misunderstandings about how

From the Publisher I wrote those articles in order to share the lessons of competition I learned from tournaments in fighting games like Street Fighter. Although I used examples from fighting games, I wrote the articles to be applicable to all gamers with examples from many different kinds of games. Even within the realm of fighting games, each game has its own community. There are distinct communities for old-school Street Fighter, Marvel vs. Capcom 2, Capcom vs. SNK 2, Guilty Gear XX, Tekken, Soul Calibur, Virtua Fighter, and Super Smash Brothers Melee. Furthermore, I've peeked into communities of many other games such as Magic: The Gathering, chess, Counter-Strike, Puzzle Fighter, poker, Scrabble, and more. Each community tends to value its own game above all others and tends to ignore and be generally ignorant of the other communities. And yet I saw that all these communities were so similar at their core: they were all wrestling with the concepts of what "playing to win" really means. They all struggled over deciding which moves to ban from play and how to ban them. They struggled with concepts of "cheapness" and "honor." The same arguments raged across the forums and online chats for every game, and even the same personalities were repeated in each community. These arguments stemmed from the basic problem that there are a few different worldviews about how to play competitive games, and no one was clearly voicing the worldview of the most powerful type of player: he who wields the power to win. Those who try to win are wildly misunderstood by the masses, and all sorts of negative things are ascribed to them. In fact, the journey of continual self-improvement that a winner must walk is good and right and true--but it's not for everyone, nor should it be. The response to these articles was amazing. I've been contacted by hundreds of players of all sorts of games I've barely heard of. Links to the articles are posted all over the internet, often in forums of various gaming websites. Although the ideas always spark debate, almost every e-mail I've ever received on the subject has been of the form, "You've changed the way I think about games, thank you Sirlin." After the constant barrage of thanks I've gotten for years now, I finally decided to extend the material, flesh it out more fully, and organize it into one guide for all competitive gamers. I start with the very basics of choosing a game and how to get familiar with it. I stress the importance of getting connected to the player community and building an environment for yourself that sets you up to succeed. I then give some advice on how to build up basic proficiency in a game. Next is the tough section that's hard for people to swallow. The #1 thing holding back most players is purely mental. You must shed all the rules and limitations that exist in your head about how to play, and

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**Sirlin** About the Author David Sirlin is a multiple-time national tournament champion in video games. Part of Street Fighter Team USA, he represented America in an annual international fighting game tournament held in Japan. Sirlin is known (and sometimes teased) for his decided