

• The forge of God: New "mega-events" pulverize planets into mineable asteroids and suddenly, unexpectedly alter the course of your game.

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: DARK AVATAR

eXceptionally eXecuted, eXpansive eXpansion

PUBLISHER: Stardock DEVELOPER: Stardock GENRE: Turn-Based Strategy AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.totalgaming.net) ESRB RATING: Everyone 10+
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB hard drive space, *Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords* MULTIPLAYER: None VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW



You can count the first *Galactic Civilizations II* expansion's major improvements on one hand—a new campaign, planets that require specific tech prereqs for colonization, mineable asteroid fields, spies, and custom opponents—but in this case, little things add up to a lot. *Dark Avatar* is Stardock's way of "fixing" a game that didn't really need repair, and proof that the old "if it ain't broke" adage is a bunch of Anterrelian tubeworm leavings.

Dark Avatar's best and most game-changing (and most "well, duh") addition is a new tech track that makes "uninhabitable planets"—toxic-coated, supergravity, whatever—perfectly acceptable places to park your colony pods. While it doesn't entirely eradicate the frantic *Monopoly*-style land grab of *GalCiv II*, it does make the early game a lot more interesting. Come across a Class 18 (that's *GalCiv II* speak for "potential utopia—grab it quick!") toxic world, and you're suddenly faced with some tough trade-offs. Rush to research what you need to colonize it, but risk falling behind in other key early-game technologies. Bump up espionage spending and carefully monitor the Krynn Consulate to make sure they're not researching the tech yet, but stunt your own economic growth—or bump up taxes and gamble on your citizens' morale.

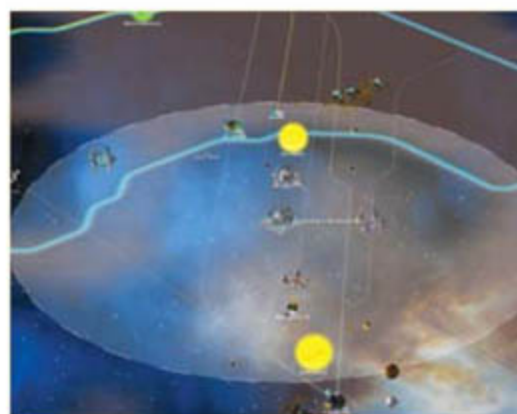
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The other additions have less of an impact on game flow, but all of them are good: Asteroids offer an easily divertible resource (planets even

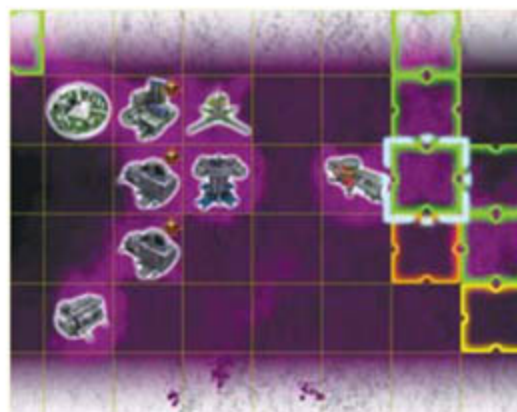
occasionally explode and leave 'em behind—catastrophportunity!), and a couple of new diplomatic treaties offer fairly potent ways to manipulate your opponents. Spies are the only sketchy newness. You place them in other civs' colonies to sabotage buildings, effectively shutting 'em down—that part's lovely and good—but they feel a bit like cheating, since as long as you have an agent to place, you're allowed access to all your opponents' planetary layouts...a privilege previously available only once you'd attained an advanced level of espionage on that civ.

The 10-mission campaign does a good job introducing each of the new concepts and techniques in situations you normally wouldn't encounter in skirmishes (stealth? Really?). The story arc puts you in control of the evil Drengin Empire, fighting against its more evil Korath sub-clan...but narrative certainly isn't *GalCiv II*'s strong suit. Custom skirmishes, however, are—and that's where *GalCiv II*'s most surprisingly compelling new appendage sprouts: custom enemy races. What sounds like a throwaway feature actually proves to extend the game's life expectancy more than any other bullet point. New Cylons vs. old Cylons vs. the Borg. Ur-Quan vs. Vogon vs. the *Spaceballs* crew. You can drop your own alien portraits in the "Gfx" folder, too, if that's your thing—but few "famous" galactic civilizations exist that you can't satisfactorily model using *Dark Avatar*'s stat bonuses and racial superpowers.

Dark Avatar does what a good expansion pack should—it makes it tough to imagine ever playing the base game without it. It makes a great game greater, even if its achievements are measured in pinky widths instead of leaps and bounds. •Sean Molloy



• The forever peace: *Dark Avatar*'s diplomacy still boils down to "make demands 'till the words turn green," but new treaties help strengthen unpredictable relationships.



• This alien shore: The *Dark Avatar* recycling program transforms toxic wastelands into habitable territory.

PROOF THAT THE OLD "IF IT AIN'T BROKE" ADAGE IS A BUNCH OF ANTERRELIAN TUBEWORM LEAVINGS.

VERDICT

❑ Early game's less of a land grab; custom opponents are great fun.

❑ No multiplayer; graphical overhaul's pretty minor; spies feel a bit like cheating.

9/10

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