The Empire Tree (left) looks scary, but it's surprisingly easy to understand.

JUST AS THE PACING MAKES *SINS* POSSIBLE, THE INGENIOUS INTERFACE MAKES IT PLAYABLE.

*Sins* is a Games for Windows–branded game, but it doesn't use GFW Live. Instead, it uses Ironclad Online and offers its own version of Achievements. You can save online matches and resume later.

A.I. civilizations offer you missions (not unlike MMORPG quests) that affect your relationship—positively if you complete them, adversely if you ignore them.

# SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

## It's about time

## REVIEW

**Conventional wisdom says** that if a strategy game's to have the depth of, say, *Civilization*, where one is expected to simultaneously deal with labor riots in Turkestan, elephant-mounted barbarians in Greece, cultural revolution in Sicily, and a sudden influx of whale-meat traders from the newly discovered Arctic north, taking turns is a design necessity. *Sins of a Solar Empire* begs to differ: It's not about turns—it's about *time*.
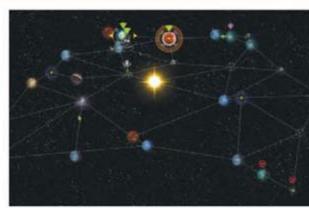
### PACE IS THE TRICK

Consider this sci-fi concept: In *Sins*, all activity takes place in the spheres of gravity around planets, asteroids, or stars (the gameplay is ostensibly 3D, but the third dimension proves to be almost inconsequential). These isolated pockets of play are connected by phase lanes—straight lines—through which ships can travel at astounding speed, and in which they are entirely off-limits, invulnerable to attack and unable to process player input. Before making a phase jump, wise players wait for their fleet (often 100 strong) to crystallize at the edge of a gravity well so they can jump in synchronicity. Add an extra minute if a single ship's antimatter chambers aren't charged enough. In *Galactic Civilizations II* (the game's closest cousin, and not just because both are published by Stardock), similar transactions are abrupt, businesslike. Here, I'd almost call them poetic.

But these serene dead spaces enable the living ones. While your fleet's in transit, engage in an anonymous bidding war—analogous to the final 60 seconds of a heated eBay auction, only the prize isn't a *Momma's Family* VHS collection but a band of pirate raiders you can sic on a rival civilization (*Sins'* clever way to give economy-minded players a counter to early-game war-mongers). Excavate the surface of your newly acquired ice planet to discover alien artifacts (manifested as, say, a percentage boost to frigate construction speed). Culture-bomb a rival planet (quite literally, in the case of the Advent race's superweapon) to make its inhabitants susceptible to your propaganda and potentially turn traitor. Swing your attention to the ongoing skirmish around New Iota IV, where your cruisers' swarms of bombers repel a fleet of enemy capital ships, *Sins'* versatile answer to hero units (though how many RTS games feature heroes that debuff an enemy's economy?). All this and more can be taking place at any given moment in *Sins*—or none of it at all, a fact that will make you wish upon a star for an in-game speed slider. *Sins* is graceful, but its rare lulls make you realize the potency of an End Turn button.

The game's scope makes for marvelous upheavals; a single civilization can uproot and crawl, spiderlike, around the galactic web to make a new home on the other side. Smart retreats are as important as offensives, and a single colony ship snuck through a wormhole can yank a civilization from the brink of extinction. This back-and-forth is a huge part of *Sins'* appeal and is one of the reasons a single game stretches on for hours.

Just as the pacing makes *Sins* possible, the ingenious interface makes it playable. *Sins* is the fulfillment of *Supreme Commander's* promise—



● **The musical score, which changes from frantic to serene to menacing depending what you're looking at, reflects the enormity and isolation of your empire.**

zoom in to see the tracers of a fighter squadron launched from a carrier ship, and zoom out to take in 60 planets and five star systems at a time as utilitarian icons. Halfway through your mouse's scroll wheel, you're playing a different game. Don't be scared by the daunting cluster of candy-colored icons and collapsible arrows in the Empire Menu at the side of the screen—it's programmed in the language of pure instinct, and finding your way around your expansive empire is far, far easier than it should be for a game that necessitates a "search" function.

### RELATIVITY

While games like *Medieval II* have tried to marry the tenets of *Civilization* and *StarCraft*, *Sins* is the first game to successfully do so without storing them in separate compartments. But I wonder if the game's triumphs may be a direct function of its setting. The contrived sci-fi notions of hyperspace, synchronous jumps, and vast dead spaces make the game possible *and* plausible—all are central to why it works, and I can't think of conceptual analogs in Tolkien, Homer, or World War II history books that'd fit as well. Maybe someone as clever as the folks at Ironclad will figure out how to take this concept beyond the stars, but I'm skeptical. *Sins* may, in fact, be one of a kind. ●**Sean Molloy**

## VERDICT

➕ **Ingenious control scheme; great depth and pacing.**

➖ **No single-player campaign; no speed slider.**

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