Smarmy Purgatory Strategy Guide

Overview

Smarmy Purgatory is a desert cutthroat with disturbing undertones and very slippery play. The design scrambles many of the standard assumptions of the game, and the result is arguably the strangest form of Stellar Crisis you'll find anywhere.   Each player must choose between the Standard Opening and one of several Morpher Gambits. Since the various openings lead to radically different styles of play, the result is asymmetric warfare.

> **The Design Story** Part of the impetus for this series was the overwhelming power of the jumpgate in v3 games that do not limit its range. I asked myself, what could possibly serve as an appropriate trade-off for that kind of power? I concluded that you would need to give up something fundamental to the game like 1) colonizing, or 2) exploring. After much revision and rebalancing, these two ideas ultimately became Shifting Sands and Smarmy Purgatory, respectively.

Game Specifications

Format 13 player daily cutthroat with 13 systems each on a random map with peeking allowed
Homeworld 133 Agriculture, 33 Minerals, 133 Fuel
Average System 0 Agriculture, 13 Minerals, 13 Fuel
Initial Tech 13.33
Tech Advance Rate 0.13
Max Ships 133
Max Ag Ratio 1.33
Minimum Pop to Build 13
Prohibited Tech Attack, Satellite, Terraformer
Developed Tech Carrier (Loss 0.13, Build Cost +1333, Maintenance Cost +133), Cloaker (Built Cloaked), Colony, Doomsday, Engineer (Loss 0.13), Jumpgate (Loss 0.13, Infinite Range, Build Cost +1333, Maintenance Cost +133), Minefield, Stargate (Infinite Range), Troopship
Unrestricted Tech Builder (Build Cost −13, Maintenance Cost +0, Planet Create Cost 13), Minesweeper
Restricted Tech Morpher (Loss 0.13, Build Cost −13, Maintenance Cost +0), Science
Restricted Techs Allowed 1
Trade-Ins Allowed 1

Lesson 1: Rookie Suicide

Want to lose on the first turn? Go to the Tech Menu, take Science tech, and then trade it in for Morpher. Congratulations, you just committed Rookie Suicide! By permanently eliminating your ability to build science ships, you've made certain you will never nuke an enemy homeworld. The lesson here is very simple. Once you take it as one of your tech selections, **don't trade Science tech away** unless you can either see all enemy homeworlds, or have a stockpile of science ships and are willing to gamble that they will last the rest of the game.

Lesson 2: Science and Other Electives

In the Overview, I mentioned that you can expect several assumptions of the game to be turned inside-out. This is one of them. In Smarmy Purgatory, you might very well lack Science tech for a portion of the game—maybe an extended portion! Science tech is required to win the game, so what is going on here?
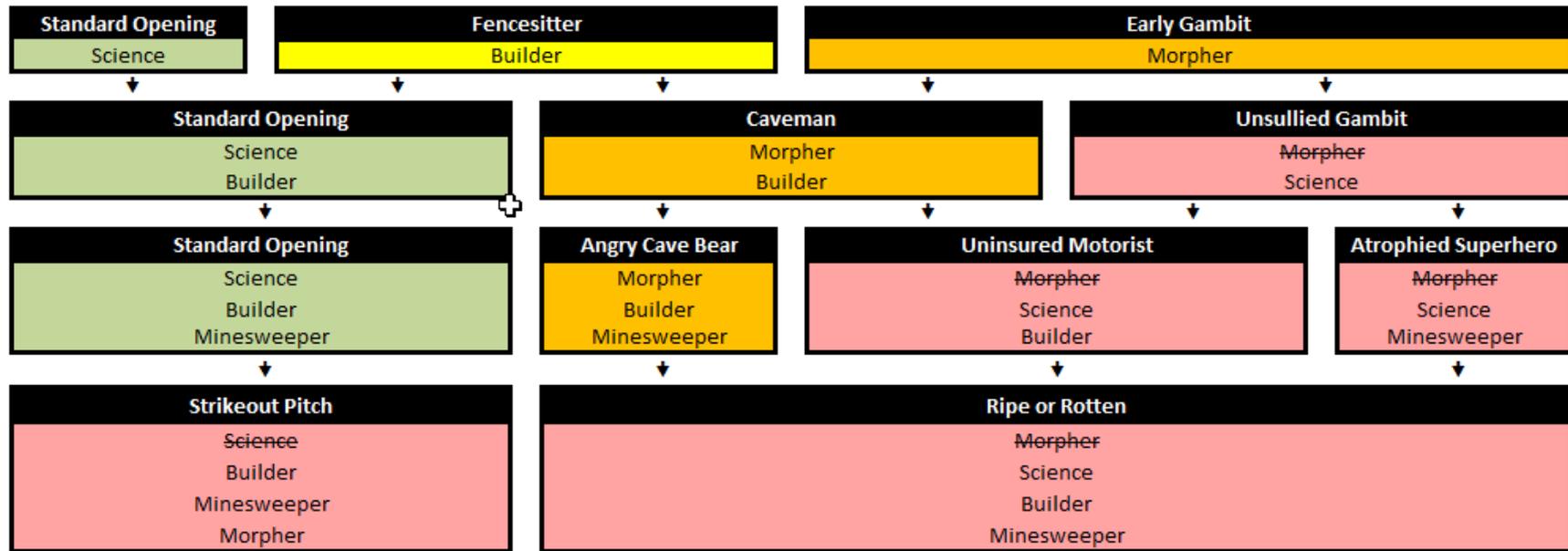
You start the game with three tech selections available. There are only four elective techs to choose from—Science, Morpher, Builder, and Minesweeper. Of the four, Science and Morpher are restricted—you can't have both at the same time, and you can switch between the two just once. Logically, there are three possibilities:

- Start with **Science** tech. You are now committed to the **Standard Opening**. Your next two choices will be Builder and Minesweeper. For the endgame, you have the *option* of switching from Science to Morpher—but do mind Lesson 1.
- Start with **Morpher** tech. You are now committed to some form of the **Morpher Gambit**. There are many variations, suited to different situations and play styles. Your subsequent tech selections will determine the precise flavor of gambit you are using. At some point—whether early or late—you *must* switch from Morpher to Science if you hope to compete for victory.
- Start with **Neither**. You are momentarily a **Fencesitter**. You are essentially postponing the choice between the **Standard Opening** and **Caveman** (a specific type of **Morpher Gambit**) until you discern the result of your attempt to create hidden colonies using Builder tech.

I don't want to overwhelm you at this stage, but go ahead and take a quick peek at Figure 1, Strategy Pathways. It is a map of known strategies and the tech pathways between them. The ten named strategies will be discussed at length throughout this guide. I recommend reading considerably further before trying to decide between them.

You can never know more than three of the four elective techs at a time. At BR 4—perhaps 25-40 turns—you will be able to take the tech you haven't tried yet. Even so, you will still be lacking one of the two restricted techs.

Figure 1
Strategy Pathways

Standard Opening	Fencesitter	Early Gambit
Science	Builder	Morpher

Standard Opening	Caveman	Unsullied Gambit
Science Builder	Morpher Builder	~~Morpher~~ Science

Standard Opening	Angry Cave Bear	Uninsured Motorist	Atrophied Superhero
Science Builder Minesweeper	Morpher Builder Minesweeper	~~Morpher~~ Science Builder	~~Morpher~~ Science Minesweeper

Strikeout Pitch	Ripe or Rotten
~~Science~~ Builder Minesweeper Morpher	~~Morpher~~ Science Builder Minesweeper

Legend

Standard Opening	If you possess Science tech and have never possessed Morpher tech, you are using the **Standard Opening**
Morpher Gambit	If you have ever possessed Morpher tech, you are using some form of **Morpher Gambit**
Hermit Opening	If you have never possessed Science tech, you are using some form of **Hermit Opening**
Hermit/Morpher	Many **Hermit Openings** are *also* considered **Morpher Gambits**
↓	One possible path of evolution from one strategy to the next
~~Strikethrough~~	A tech that has been traded away

Lesson 3: Agriculture

Are you ready for another scrambled assumption of the game? In Smarmy Purgatory, homeworlds are the sole source of agriculture. More poetically, all other systems are **agrivoids**. And don't look to fix the problem by terraforming—that tech is prohibited. You start with 133 Ag, and there are only two ways to get more, both involving other players:

- Trade (+10% for each trade partner)
- Take enemy homeworlds (usually +66 each, depending on nuke history)

If you are in a position to eliminate an enemy but doubt your ability to hold the homeworld, or simply don't want the attention that would come with colonizing it, consider annihilating it instead.

Lesson 4: Minerals

Colonizing won't increase your population, but you need to do it for the sake of mineral production. Your homeworld has but 33 minerals—a serious straitjacket until colonies come online. As you colonize (and as the colonies grow), remember to reduce the maximum population at your homeworld accordingly, or your Ag ratio will suffer and some of your newfound minerals will vanish. The net effect of colonization isn't to increase population, but to transfer it. When you have developed to your full potential, your homeworld will have 33 pop remaining.

Lesson 5: Fuel

Fuel will not be a significant constraint for many turns, but it's best to think ahead. You start with 133 units. Your fuel levels will dip a bit as you colonize, but eventually climb back towards 133. Avoid colonizing low fuel systems, no matter how many minerals are present there. If you do grab such systems, be prepared to drop populations there below builder status. Otherwise, you will never reach a base of 133 minerals and 133 fuel at the same time—a significant goal for any opening.

Lesson 6: Selective Colonization

When colonizing, try to focus on systems with *both* minerals and fuel 13 or higher—any created system, and roughly one random system in four. These systems will make excellent builders. When setting population at a colony, consider using the lower of minerals and fuel instead of the higher. You want to get the maximum out of each unit of population, since it is such a limited resource. Most importantly, do not overcolonize (i.e., settle more planets than your agriculture can support).

Lesson 7: Trade Winds

Trade is a significant advantage and seemingly costs you little. Each trade partner directly increases your agriculture, minerals and fuel by 10%. However, the real bottleneck is agriculture. If your agriculture increases by 10%, you can colonize more. If you do, you stand to increase minerals and fuel by more than 20%. However, I advise caution. In a cutthroat, all trade winds are fickle. Without exception, the ultimate fate of any trade bonus is to suddenly vaporize—often at the worst possible moment! If your population has grown larger than your agriculture can support without trade, be prepared for your growth rate to go negative without warning. If several of your systems suddenly lose builder status, you could have quite a catastrophe on your hands.

Lesson 8: Morpher Tech

Morphers are dirt cheap in this series, yet oddly precious at the same time. Because you start with so many known techs, morphers are amazingly versatile. The potential to operate "flying mines" is quite powerful in itself, but there are two very potent known techs—Jumpgate and Carrier—that should actually be seen as subtypes of Morpher. With prohibitive build and maintenance costs, they are all but impossible to build and use *except* as morphers. In addition, morphers are quite handy for routine but resource-intensive tasks like engineering. The only limitation on Morpher tech is the way it collides with Science tech. As a consequence, morphers are typically an ever-dwindling resource. Once you switch to Science tech, you have a defined number of morphers—and they tend to erode with use. That is what makes them precious.

Lesson 9: Builder Tech

Builder is the other dirt cheap tech in this series, with exactly the same build and maintenance costs as morphers. Yes, morphers are far more versatile than builders. But what builders do, they do extremely well:

- Builder doesn't collide with Science the way that Morpher does. Therefore, unlike morphers, builders are an indefinitely renewable resource. If you lose a fleet of builders, you can just build more. That's a rather valuable trait for a cheap combat ship.
- Builder tech is often the best method of getting past a doomwall
- A BR 1 sniffer is very efficient at uncovering hidden positions such as **Caveman**
- Builder tech is extraordinarily useful for efficiently creating hidden colonies (Lesson 6). Yet, unlike some games that implement this tech, there is absolutely no danger that builders will lead to runaway econ!
- If your homeworld adjoins one or more voids, Builder tech can potentially allow you to colonize systems without ever exploring! This is the foundation of the intriguing **Fencesitter** and **Caveman** strategies.

To create a system using a solitary builder ship, it needs to be BR 1.300 or better at the moment the order executes.

Lesson 10: Minesweeper Tech

Minesweeper tech has a fairly traditional role in this series, but there are a few notable quirks:

- You can expect explosions to be rather common, since Minefield is known by all empires, and the build threshold is only 13 pop
- You might need Minesweeper tech for defense! Always be aware an enemy that has a morpher and is willing to expend it can set a mine just about anywhere, including any of your visible systems.
- Though by no means a simple task, it is *possible* to take out an unwary or hard-pressed enemy even if you lack Minesweeper tech. The series design encourages players to set homeworld population as low as 33 (Lesson 4), so as few as two consecutive explosions can reduce a homeworld to non-builder status. Due to the game's Max Ag Ratio, it will take at least three turns to fully recover the population lost in an explosion.

Lesson 11: Science Tech

Now that we've discussed the other elective techs, we are in a much better position to understand this seemingly basic ship. Since it is a prerequisite to winning the game, all empires require Science tech—but when? One of the defining qualities of any strategy is *how soon* it will enable you to build science ships:

- **Turn 1** The **Standard Opening** and the **Unsullied Gambit** can potentially build science ships sooner than any other strategy
- **Turn 2** If it quickly opts to revert to the **Standard Strategy**, the **Fencesitter** has a one turn delay before exploring. An **Unsullied Gambit** will often accept a one turn delay in building science ships in order to possess more morphers.
- **Turn Varies** The **Caveman** may hole up for an indefinite period, typically until the position runs out of voids to fill with created systems, is breached by an enemy, reaches 133 minerals, or reaches BR 4. These events can take anywhere from 4 to 40 turns.

The advantages of early exploration are obvious, but let's summarize them here:

- Better view of enemy territory
- Better use of your jumpgates, if any—by virtue of the better view
- Better selection and faster access to potential colonies, if you plan to colonize random systems
- Superior access to trade partners

If your strategy involves some form of delayed exploration, you are hoping that the advantages of morpher tech or a sealed position—or both—will more than make up for the fact that you are late to the party.

Lesson 12: Carrier Tech

For the next several Lessons, we will be examining all of the developed techs in turn, starting with Carrier.

Too expensive to build directly, Carrier is essentially a subtype of Morpher tech (Lesson 8). For that reason, you typically won't see large fleets of these ships unless someone manages a **Strikeout Pitch**. Instead, carriers have three niches:

- **Morpher Preservation** From Lesson 8, we know that morphers are precious. If you want to preserve a morpher from random destruction in battle, but still allow it to contribute to a fight, put it in carrier form. Even at very low BR, it cannot be destroyed unless you lose the entire accompanying fleet.
- **Forks** Well-placed carriers make excellent double threats, because the nuke order from a carrier will *always* succeed unless you lose *all* the ships that operate in support of it. Of course, if you *don't* put enough ships in support of the morphed carrier, you will lose it! An opponent that knows you are running short on morphers will be able to read your carrier fork a little more accurately.
- **Minefields** In exceptional cases, a fleet including carriers can sometimes overcome a minefield or minewall *without using a sweeper*. To succeed, the fleet must be *strong enough* to survive combat, yet *too weak* to destroy any minefields. However, I wouldn't rely too heavily on this technique, because bringing just the right amount of strength is essentially a matter of luck. An enemy who is wise to you will make the strength of the defense unpredictable.

Lesson 13: Cloaker Tech

Because most strategy pathways have access to much cheaper ships, you won't often see large packs of cloakers. Another impediment is the fact that any system capable of building ships can defend with a minefield. On the other hand, the other classic defense against cloakers—engineering—can be quite difficult for an empire that lacks morphers (or is running short of them). In sum, there's no doubt that cloakers can have a dramatic effect when used skillfully. Some ideas:

- **Rank and File** There is one strategy—the **Atrophied Superhero**—that often seeks conquest but lacks an ongoing supply of cheap combat ships. An empire using this strategy may well rely on cloakers to fill its ranks.
- **Overbuild Disruption** Overbuilding is almost unavoidable in this series. If you have access to an enemy builder and can accurately guess when an enemy overbuild is coming, you can do immense damage with just one or two uncloaking ships.
- **Morpher Preservation** If you want a morpher to avoid battle entirely, put it in cloaker form. You can also use this technique to secretly seed an area with morphers.

Lesson 14: Colony Tech

We've already covered Colony tech in Lessons 3 to 7, but there's an aspect that we haven't discussed yet—the best BR for colony ships. While recognizing that it isn't always feasible, I prefer higher BR. Besides the military value of the ship itself, I like the fact that the higher BR ship puts the colony several turns ahead on the growth curve. Given the Max Ag Ratio of 1.33, pop-tricking is rather constrained. It will take a minimum of eight turns for a BR 1 colony to reach builder status, but only five turns at BR 2, or three at BR 3. In terms of the return on investment to your economy, it's cheaper and better to build a single BR 3 colony than two at BR 1.

Once a colony is planted, optimizing its growth is a matter of manipulating your homeworld population every turn so that your empire-wide population *next turn* is low enough to ensure the ideal growth at the colony *the turn after that*. I have run this type of calculation so many times that I finally decided a table would be more useful:

Landmark	Pop	Pop After Ideal Growth	Desired Ag Ratio	Desired Empire Pop (Assuming 133 Ag)
BR 1	1	2	1.001 or higher	132 or fewer
	2	3	1.001 or higher	132 or fewer
	3	4	1.001 or higher	132 or fewer
BR 2	4	6	1.251 or higher	106 or fewer
	5	7	1.201 or higher	110 or fewer
	6	8	1.167 or higher	114 or fewer
	7	10	1.286 or higher	103 or fewer
	8	11	1.251 or higher	106 or fewer
BR 3	9	12	1.223 or higher	108 or fewer
	10	14	1.301 or higher	102 or fewer
	11	15	1.273 or higher	104 or fewer
	12	16	1.251 or higher	106 or fewer
Builder	13	18	1.308 or higher	101 or fewer
	14	19	1.289 or higher	103 or fewer
	15	20	1.267 or higher	105 or fewer
BR 4	16	22	1.313 or higher	101 or fewer
	17	23	1.295 or higher	102 or fewer
	18	24	1.278 or higher	104 or fewer
	19	26	1.316 or higher	101 or fewer
	20	27	1.301 or higher	102 or fewer

Lesson 15: Doomsday Tech

The surest defense against enemy jumpgates is a thick wall of annihilated planets that your opponents cannot see beyond. That much is true of any game with jumpgates, however. I would also like to point out a couple features of Doomsday tech that are fairly unique to this series:

- If you explore at all, you will likely find numerous systems that are worthless to you as colonies. A doomsday ship will ensure that they are worthless to your enemies as well—not just as colonies, but as gate destinations.
- This game is largely a struggle over limited agriculture, found only at homeworlds. You can entirely alter the balance of that struggle if you choose to annihilate a homeworld. If you try to seize the prize for yourself, you may be setting yourself up as the next target. But if you remove the prize from contention, perhaps the fight will move elsewhere.

Lesson 16: Engineer Tech

Though not every empire will own them, you should fully anticipate that jumpgates will be used against you. So, at some point in the game, sealing off an unexplored patch for yourself is almost imperative. If your strategy includes morphers, you will achieve this goal easily. If not, the expense of engineering will be a sharp, if brief setback to your other operations. The same reasoning applies to the other potential uses of engineers:

- Setting up double attacks
- Limiting the movement of cloakers
- Rooting out hermit positions such as **Caveman**

Lesson 17: Jumpgate Tech

Like the Carrier, the Jumpgate is too expensive to build directly, so is only available to an empire that possesses morphers. However, no player tries the **Morpher Gambit** just to pull a few stunts with carriers. They do it to get Jumpgate:

- If your strategy includes early science ships, possession of a jumpgate or two will radically increase your rate of exploration
- For almost any strategy, a jumpgate will also significantly speed your rate of colonization
- For an aggressive empire intent on conquest, a jumped overbuilt fleet can grant significant surprise. Given suitable targets, a pair of jumpgates can effortlessly create double attacks.

Lesson 18: Minefield Tech

In a sense, we already covered this tech when we discussed sweepers in Lesson 10, carriers in Lesson 12, and cloakers in Lesson 13. But we still have several important points to add:

- **Fuel** Since satellites are prohibited, minefields are the *only* ships that consume no fuel. Even though minefields are a bit more expensive to build and maintain than, for instance, builder ships, the fuel savings offered by the minefield can result in a better tech advance rate for the same firepower. And even though fuel is the most plentiful resource in this series, there may be a time when you have reached your fuel capacity and still need to build ships for defense. In that case, build minefields.
- **The Minewall** One peculiar feature of a group of minefields is that in a fight, you will either lose all of the mines or none of them. Again, this can conserve tech in the long run, if it saves you the trouble of rebuilding the defense. On the other hand, the surviving mines will take more damage than you might expect from a more conventional combat. If you want the ships to repair to full strength after a major fight, you won't be able to build right away. The beauty, of course, is that you don't have to. The worst result is when the minewall is so damaged that it cannot repair in a single turn.
- **Flying Mines** If you have a morpher available, you can create a devastating weapon. The best morphed mines are already heavily degraded—for instance, BR 0.22—and hence expendable. Where possible, they are best delivered by jumpgate. In order to pass through the gate, the morpher needs to be in a form that is movable. To have the best chance at catching the enemy off guard, the form must also be plausible. Builder and minesweeper are usually good choices, though much depends on context. The turn after the jump, change the ship to a minefield. You have the option of moving your other ships away to increase the chance of explosion, or staying put to achieve an immediate objective with the mine as an insurance plan.

Lesson 19: Stargate Tech

Despite the power of Jumpgate tech, there are still two niches for the good old-fashioned Stargate:

- In the **Standard Opening**, your primary weakness is slow transit time for your ships. Once you grow a bit, you can consider building a stargate. Though it will consume a significant percentage of your available fuel, it can shorten transit time considerably. To increase the reach of your stargate, you might even deliberately plant weak colonies at strategic locations and leave them at population 1. Later, if you want rid of the colony consequent to Lesson 6, ask a semi-friendly empire to do you a favor and nuke it.
- In most forms of **Morpher Gambit**, your jumpgate will eventually wear down from jump loss until it drops below BR 0.13 and becomes useless. Just before reaching that point, consider changing it to a stargate. Now the ship can potentially serve—in a diminished capacity—for the rest of the game.

Lesson 20: Troopship Tech

Though you won't see this tech every turn, I want to point out two sets of facts that make the Troopship quite powerful given the right sort of opportunity:

- The population of the average colony is perhaps 15. Since most of the game is played at BR 3 or 4, the typical colony can easily be trooped. Even a failed invasion will often drop the colony below builder status. Growing at a maximum rate of 33% per turn, the system might take several turns to regain the ability to build.
- Smarmy Purgatory is perhaps the only series that encourages an empire to permanently set homeworld population as low as 33. So it is conceivable you can manage an invasion of an enemy homeworld at BR 4 or even BR 3—particularly if you can set off a flying mine or two before bringing the troopships. Again, even a failed invasion might drop the system below builder status—very bad news for the owner of the homeworld!

Lesson 21: Standard Opening [Science, Builder, Minesweeper]

If you have Science tech but have never possessed Morpher tech, you are using the **Standard Opening**. When the opening is complete, you will have Science, Builder, and Minesweeper. It is a strong strategy, allowing early exploration, the potential for secure colonies, builders as extremely cheap combat ships, and sweepers to both enforce your threats and defend against flying mines. In terms of play style, the **Standard Opening** is the closest to a conventional game. A player who is strongest at version 2.9 will do well with this strategy, perhaps conceptualizing builders as a peculiar type of attack ship.

The strategy is quite flexible, useful in almost any situation. If your position is near the center, you will have rapid access to trade partners. And you are well-equipped for conquest, should the opportunity present itself. If your position is at the edge, you can create a very secure position even while still exploring.

The weaknesses of the strategy are expensive engineering (Lesson 16) and slow transit times for your ships (Lesson 19).

Lesson 22: Caveman [Builder, Morpher]

Caveman is about as *non*-standard as a strategy can get. When you choose **Caveman**, you deliberately eschew Science tech for a time—maybe even the majority of the game! I have to confess that when I designed the series, I did not anticipate the existence of this strategy and was quite startled to discover it when experimenting with an early game. At first, I was deeply concerned that the strategy might be too powerful. Many games later, my conclusion is that on balance, it is no better than other strategies—just very, very different. Since I now believe it greatly enriches the game, I consider myself a very lucky designer!

The goal of any **Caveman** is to immediately seal off with morphed engineers and secretly create eight colonies using builders. Jumpgates will greatly speed the process. After reaching 133 minerals, the **Caveman** must decide when to emerge. If he does so right away, he becomes an **Uninsured Motorist**. If he waits for BR 4, he is attempting **Ripe or Rotten**. **Caveman** can accurately be described as a high-risk, high-reward strategy. It requires a long time to reach fruition and there are many possible points of failure along the way.

As a **Caveman**, the first danger you must face is the distinct possibility that your homeworld does not adjoin a void large enough to create eight systems. For that reason, the strategy is best suited to a homeworld with just one or two links. With three links, the strategy is much riskier, and it is entirely pointless with four. Join order may also affect your decision to attempt this strategy. If you joined the game last, you have a better chance of a homeworld adjacent to a sizable void than if you joined first. However, you should bear in mind that maps often run counter to statistical expectation.

The next risk you will face is the possibility that someone will break into your cave. This could happen as early as turn 3, the same turn you are trying to close the links to your homeworld using morphed engineers. Or, it could happen much later. Either way, you don't have science ships, so you won't see it coming. For the same reason, you won't know very much about the intruder's strategy choices, so it will be difficult to respond effectively.

If all goes as planned, your reward is threefold. First, you have a nice set of hidden colonies. Second, with your great efficiency and quiet development, you may well have a tech edge. Third, just before taking Science tech, you can build a rather large supply of morphers—about four times as large as what you might have afforded at the start of the game!   However, you still have significant challenges ahead:

- Easy conquests have already fallen to other empires, some of whom may well have double or triple your agriculture
- Other empires had the benefit of multiple trade bonus while developing, so your tech edge may not amount to much if anything
- You are very, very far behind on exploration. Your jumpgates, though plentiful enough, aren't all that good at projecting force right away, due to lack of visible targets.
- Other empires will almost certainly see the spot you emerged and have an excellent idea where to find you. The worst part is that hunting you can be a good strategy. You're friendless, you're an Ag source, and you have a really nice set of hidden colonies nearby!

Lesson 23: Unsullied Gambit [~~Morpher~~, Science]

The **Unsullied Gambit** is the archetype of the **Morpher Gambit**—the type I had in mind when designing the series. It consists of building some number of morphers on turn 1, then trading Morpher tech for Science on either turn 1 or turn 2. If you do so on turn 1, you will have fewer morphers, but can start exploring at the earliest possible moment, using genuine science ships. If you make the switch on turn 2, you will have more morphers, though some of them will be in science form and therefore courting destruction.

Why do I call this gambit unsullied? It has to do with the way strategies acquire flaws. For the archetypical **Morpher Gambit**, the most telling flaws are apparent only after the third tech selection, which determines what elective tech the gambit lacks. An **Unsullied Gambit** simply hasn't made that choice yet. I'm not suggesting that an **Unsullied Gambit** is unflawed, only that its flaws are not yet fixed.

The strength of this opening is that it combines early exploration with morpher technology. As you make contact with neighboring empires, you are likely to lose some of your science ships. With an **Unsullied Gambit**, you just jump more science ships to the front and keep exploring. For this reason, you have about the best possible view of the map during the opening and midgame, even if you opt for the one turn delay in exploration. You will likely have a large number of potential trade partners, a choice of above average colony sites, and the chance to make opportunistic surprise attacks where warranted.

On the other hand, the **Unsullied Gambit** is poorly equipped for a protracted battle, has colonies that are exposed to attack, can have difficulty finding enough colony sites to reach 133 minerals, is easily frustrated by a doomwall, and is potentially vulnerable to enemy morphed mines. You can remedy some, but not all of these defects with your third tech selection, thereby becoming an **Uninsured Motorist** or **Atrophied Superhero**.

Lesson 24: Fencesitter [Builder]

The typical **Fencesitter** actually wants to use the **Caveman** strategy, but is unwilling to commit to the latter strategy without proof of concept. In other words, the **Fencesitter** wants to know that at least *some* of the hidden systems that **Caveman** depends on can, in fact, be created.

The strategy starts by taking Builder tech on the first turn and building at least one BR 2 builder. After update, you learn the results of your experiment. Go to the ships menu and note whether the builder is capable of any Create orders. If you are happy with the number of voids you have detected, take Morpher tech, seal off, and become a **Caveman**. If not, take Science tech, explore, and revert to the **Standard Strategy**. If you still can't decide, remain a **Fencesitter**—create what systems you can, build some more builders, and take a peek at the next layer of the onion that is the void.

By refusing to commit to a particular strategy, the **Fencesitter** retains a lot of flexibility, but at the cost of time. If the **Fencesitter** ultimately opts for the **Standard Opening**, his science ships are at least one turn behind. And if he opts for **Caveman**, he seals off at least one turn later than normal.

A **Fencesitter** that stays on the fence too long has another name—Humpty Dumpty. If someone crashes his pad, poor Humpty certainly won't be able to see it coming. He has an unsealed homeworld and no science ships, what did he expect?

Lesson 25: Early Gambit [Morpher]

The **Early Gambit** isn't really a full-blown strategy, just a temporary stepping stone with another goal in view. The goal might be **Caveman** or it might be **Unsullied Gambit**. If you use the **Early Gambit**, you need to know which direction you are going, because unlike the **Fencesitter**, you can't play it down the middle.

- If you are aiming for **Caveman**, build a modest number of morphers—just enough to quickly seal off. When that is done, *slowly* proceed with the **Caveman** strategy. Compared to the typical **Caveman**, you are three turns behind on planet creation, but if all goes well, you will win the race to BR 4.
- If your goal is the **Unsullied Gambit**, build a more aggressive number of morphers. In Lesson 23, we saw that there are two ways to run the **Unsullied Gambit**. By using the **Early Gambit** as a stepping stone, you are choosing the version that grants more morphers but slower exploration.

Lesson 26: Angry Cave Bear [Builder, Morpher, Minesweeper]

If a **Caveman** is poked hard enough with morphed mines, the result is an **Angry Cave Bear**. No one *plans* to become an **Angry Cave Bear**. It's just a reaction. It's a desperate strategy at best, but it's certainly better than a dead **Caveman**.

If you are the poked **Caveman**, consider your options carefully. You may be able to survive as a simple **Caveman**. If your attacker is an **Uninsured Motorist**, try defending with a supported minefield, or even a minewall. Or, against an **Atrophied Superhero**, try to form a doomwall after letting him nuke a system or two. Against an **Unsullied Gambit**, you can try either or both. If you do become an **Angry Cave Bear**, your only goal is to survive intrusion until BR 4. If you are approaching BR 4 anyway, it can be the smartest move.

As an **Angry Cave Bear**, you lack Science tech and have no hope of mounting a true counterattack until BR 4. You also have an extremely limited view of the enemy. What you *do* have is the ability to make any ship type *other* than science very cheaply. Given sufficient time, this potentially applies to sweepers as well. Build them as morphers and change to sweeper as needed.

Always remember that your morphers are renewable, while those of the intruder are not. Make him reopen links multiple times. When he sends another engineer, try to snipe it. Let him know you intend to be a very costly nuke.

Lesson 27: Uninsured Motorist [~~Morpher~~ Science Builder]

If you are an **Uninsured Motorist**, you are a serious hazard to yourself and others. You can throw a lot of weight around, but are due for a crash if you encounter minefields. Your prospects largely depend on how you reached this state:

- If you were using the **Unsullied Gambit** but got in a protracted fight and now need cheap combat ships, you are treading dangerous ground. Study the methods of overcoming mines without sweepers (Lessons 10 and 12), and make a quick end of it, if you can.
- If you were using the **Unsullied Gambit** but ran out of decent planets to colonize, you are still in good shape so long as 1) you can find a quiet place to create planets, and 2) you do not come under attack.
- If you were a **Caveman** but exhausted your access to voids, you might be in decent shape depending on the local politics where you emerge. Look for a nice quiet spot to continue creating hidden systems.

No matter how you became an Uninsured Motorist, try to conceal the fact that you lack sweepers. In other words, if they know you have builders, hide the morphers, and if they know you have morphers, hide the builders. Do your best not to enter a protracted conflict until after BR 4, when you can finally get sweeper. Don't be afraid to yield a non-strategic colony or two—you can always make more.

Lesson 28: Atrophied Superhero [~~Morpher~~ Science Minesweeper]

You were once capable of amazing feats. If pressed, you might still manage a showstopper or two. But the fact is, as an **Atrophied Superhero**, you are growing a little short on muscle. In a straight up fight, you are underpowered, because you can't field cheap ships. Your other weaknesses include the fact that your colonies may be exposed to enemy view, and a doomwall can give you fits. Hopefully, the morphers that remain to you will enable your weaker army to prevail through a combination of surprise and double threats. In addition, if you made conquests in your youth, your larger economy might help make up for the lack of cheap ships.

Lesson 29: Ripe or Rotten [~~Morpher~~ Science Builder Minesweeper]

Though you started with a **Morpher Gambit**, your position has evolved considerably as it matured and reached BR 4. The odd thing is, if you were only able to look at your tech menu, you might think you were using the **Standard Opening**! If you have no morphers remaining, that is about how your position will play. It remains a good position to be in, especially if you managed to conquer some Ag along the way. Your position will reflect the trade-offs you made at earlier stages of your career. If your view of the map is poor, hopefully you reached BR 4 before others did, have a secure base and a nice stock of morphers to compensate. If your morphers are all but exhausted, hopefully you have a superior view of the map, past conquests, and a stargate remaining. No matter how you got here, you've done well to survive this long in a 13 player cutthroat! From this point forward, your two biggest fears will be:

- Any empire that gets too big for a coalition of other players to stop
- Any empire that manages a **Strikeout Pitch** (or even attempts one)

Since other empires fear what you fear, you should use diplomacy to try to prevent any single empire from becoming overly dangerous.

Lesson 30: Strikeout Pitch [~~Science~~ Builder Minesweeper Morpher]

If you started with the **Standard Opening**, reach BR 4, and can see all enemy homeworlds, you have a **Strikeout Pitch**. Victory is nearly assured! Just trade in Science for Morpher tech and end the game with a giant fleet of carriers and sweeps jumping from one homeworld to the next. Sounds great, doesn't it? In reality, the **Strikeout Pitch** is usually not nearly as dramatic as it sounds, because it is most common when the game is down to the last two players.

What this Lesson is really about is the **Strikeout Pitch Attempt**. This occurs if you started with the **Standard Opening**, reach BR 4, build a bunch of science ships, and are willing to gamble that you can find all enemy homeworlds without exhausting those ships. You then trade in Science for Morpher and see if you gambled correctly. The morphers can greatly aid the odds of success, of course. In addition, you can potentially conserve science ships by using builder tech to make forward progress via created systems wherever possible.

When your opponents see you shift gears to the **Strikeout Pitch Attempt**, it can prove quite disconcerting to them. The entire balance of the game has changed—their highest priority may well become destroying your finite supply of science ships. For this reason, the **Strikeout Pitch Attempt** can be a more dramatic way to end the game than the **Strikeout Pitch** itself!

I need to mention one last thing. If your **Strikeout Pitch Attempt** fails—your last science ship is destroyed and you haven't found all enemy homeworlds, please do the right thing. After nuking anyone you *did* manage to find, announce yourself and then surrender. If for some reason you can't surrender, announce yourself and go to ruins. I have two reasons for this request. First of all, your gambit failed and you deserve to lose the game. More importantly, if more than one empire ends up in this situation, the game can conceivably become hung. The sporting thing to do is to prevent this possibility.

Final Thought

The game has only one winner. The twelve others are all tied for second place! Woohoo!

To Do List

Add some stuff on formal diplomacy settings (truce trade etc)

Add some stuff on free form diplomacy, i.e. persuasion, particularly in regard to the discrete nature of agriculture.

Add more about constructing and defeating doomwalls. Some of the stuff from the Shifting Sands guide applies, but not all of it!