

Beyond Choices: Exploring Philosophical Dilemmas and Narrative Complexity in Deus Ex

By

Davit Davtyan

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Abstract

Deus Ex paved the way for the future of story-rich video games that prioritize player choice. Though not the first of its kind, the game introduced influential gameplay mechanics that not only shaped its narrative, but also influenced future generations of video games. Set in the near future, Deus Ex offers a compelling and thought-provoking storyline that explores real-life conspiracies while presenting ideas worthy of discussion.

Through an in-depth analysis of Deus Ex, this essay examines and presents the different themes, narratives, and gameplay mechanics that contribute to its status as a meaningful piece of science fiction media.

Additionally, it explores the significance of player agency in shaping the game's narrative, highlighting the profound experience it offers and showcasing the potential of video games as a powerful storytelling medium.

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Introduction

Eidos Interactive's *Deus Ex* is a video game that still holds significance for many gamers, as it introduced gameplay mechanics and themes which echo throughout the gaming industry to this day. The game was a success for its time, garnering critical acclaim and praise from critics and gamers alike. Although nowadays it is not as popular as it once was, *Deus Ex* is still held in high regards as one of the best cyberpunk games. As unfortunate as it is, the game has somewhat fallen into obscurity due to its aged graphics and antiquated input layout. These are not the only reasons however, as its follow-up *Deus Ex: Invisible War* was a failure due to missing the standard and quality that the first game had initially set both gameplay and story wise.

The series had a resurgence in the 2010s when three games were released as prequels to the first game, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Deus Ex: The Fall*, and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*. They received a mostly positive reception, but ultimately did not leave the same lasting impression as the first game did a over a decade prior.

Developed by Ion Storm, *Deus Ex* was first released on June 23, 2000, across North America, and other regions in the following months. Development for the game had begun in 1997, with Warren Spector acting as writer, producer, and designer, along with Harvey Smith, who was the lead designer. Initially titled *Shooter*, and then promptly changed to *Shooter: Majestic Revelations*, the game's plot was significantly different compared to the final release, but what remained consistent throughout the changes was that the main protagonist (controlled by the player) would be an augmented counterterrorist named JC Denton.

The first In-game mission was created in 1998, known as the White House mission. It was meant to exhibit a high level of realism, intended to be a notable selling point of the game.

Regardless, due to technological limitations at the time, the mission could not be implemented, and was cut from the game by late 1999, along with other major content. Other issues such as mismanaged team structure, ambitious goals, underestimated risks, and bad press had also resulted in Deus Ex's delayed release.

Despite the delay and the several pitfalls that the development team had faced, the game was released in its completed state, which is an impressive feat, considering that development issues can cause the cancellation of a project, and even worse, the shutdown of the studio(s) responsible for its development (Grossman, 2003, pp. 202 – 204).

Though Deus Ex's plot is primarily centered on prevalent conspiracy theories, it introduces various concepts that prompt players to contemplate the capacity of video games to provide nuanced commentary on social and political issues. Moreover, the game encourages reflection on the evolving relationship between humans and technology, considering its rapid development, and the vital role constrictions and freedoms play in one's agency.

Video games are often underestimated in their capability to invoke any form of critical thinking or insight. While the notion that they are often used for entertainment cannot be denied, I argue that video games can have a meaningful impact through their storytelling and gameplay mechanics, and Deus Ex serves as one of the foremost examples of this potential.

Since Deus Ex, the gaming landscape has achieved monumental milestones, significantly changing, and evolving the way video games create meaning by building and improving on the foundation that Ion Storm's development team set twenty-four years ago.

Literature Review

While Cyberpunk traces its roots back to the 1960s, it truly gained prominence in the 1980s as a pioneering subgenre of science fiction. Authors and filmmakers introduced audiences to dystopian worlds set in the near future, offering unique interpretations of technological advancements and their potential societal consequences. Cyberpunk approaches rapid scientific and technological progress with skepticism, questioning their long-term effects on society and humanity. The subgenre bridges the gap between reality and virtuality, breaking down cultural, biological, and technological boundaries. Zemei Yu's text, "The Culture of Cyberpunk Science Fiction: A Study from the Perspective of Body," further explores these themes and helped me understand the elements that make the genre what it is (Yu, 2011).

In positioning the significance of *Deus Ex* within the cyberpunk genre, it is important to consider its narrative's alignment with the characteristics outlined by Yu in his text. The game skillfully incorporates themes of technological skepticism, corporate dominance, and delves into the intricate relationship between technology and humanity. Through its depiction of a dystopian future riddled with conspiracies, augmented humans, and artificial intelligence, *Deus Ex* prompts players to grapple with the moral ambiguities in a society where technology infiltrated every aspect of life. Moreover, the game explores how societal reliance on technology contributes to its downfall, illustrating the consequences of unchecked technological advancement.

Mohammad Sadegh Ahmadian Attari and Laleh Atashi's "Human in Conflict: Engagements with Posthumanism in Quake and Deus Ex," helped make better sense of how the augmentations present in *Deus Ex* reflect the ever-changing concept of the human condition.

The authors emphasize that a part of posthumanism lies in its challenging of what a human is, necessitating a new philosophical and theoretical framework to assist in modifying what it means to be human. The augmentations that the main protagonist, JC Denton, and other key characters have in the game reflects humanity's over reliance on technology. Additionally, the artificial intelligence models featured in the game, such as Icarus, Morpheus, and Daedalus, represent how independent technology can become from humanity. Lastly, posthumanism also explores humanity's relationship with nature (Ahmadian Attari, Atashi, n.d.).

The exploitation of Earth's resources for means of rampant technological advancement has left the world largely polluted in the *Deus Ex*. Furthermore, a synthetically made nano-virus known as the "Gray Death," has caused a significant number of deaths, and has infected a vast majority of the population. In addition, some of the creatures featured in the game are a result of augmentations and lab experiments, further exemplifying the consequences of humanity's exploitation of nature (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 10).

Often times, science fiction video games tend to depict post humanist themes through introducing conflict between humans, and an extra-terrestrial race, or humanoid robots such as androids. What Ahmadian Attari and Atashi highlight in their analysis of *Deus Ex* is that humans are in conflict with themselves. The story entails JC Denton, a nano-augmented government agent, uncovering Bob Page's scheme, a wealthy industrialist seeking to obtain global domination (Ahmadian Attari, Atashi, n.d.). By focusing on the human-to-human conflict, rather than the human-to-other, the other being a different species or a highly advanced robot humanoid, *Deus Ex* directly questions the nature of humanity, its thirst for power, control, and greed.

In addition, the game also brings attention to humanity's role in unregulated technological advancement, exhibiting that our continuous struggle for control and power through technology can bring about a societal collapse.

Beyond post humanism, *Deus Ex*'s story also tackles the philosophical movement of transhumanism. In "More Human than Non/Human: Posthumanism, Embodied Cognition, and Video Games as Affective Experience," authors Sandy Appleöff Lyons and Lisa Brown Jaloza discuss how the protagonist, JC Denton, is an allegorical substitute for Jesus Christ, positioning the game's narrative within a Judeo-Christian framework in which nano-augmentations are seen as the key to salvation, and the transcendence from a mere mortal to something more (Lyons, Jaloza, 2016, p. 4).

Authors Konstantin Mitgutsch et al. (2013) also make a religious connection in "Context Matters! Exploring and reframing games and play in context – an introduction," although their analysis is in reference to one of the later games, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. They exclaim that from the perspective of the opposition in the game, augmentations are associated with perverted authority, meaning those with augmentations are seen as 'playing god.'

Regardless, transhumanism within a religious framework is a deliberate choice made by the developers of all the games in the series, and is one of the aspects that ties them together narratively.

Throughout *Deus Ex*, hints suggest that JC Denton is not the sole nano-augmented human; his brother, Paul Denton, was the first to undergo augmentation, and later it is revealed that the Majestic 12 intends to utilize the technology on a vast number of subjects. However, despite the existence of other augmented individuals, the narrative ultimately positions JC

Denton as the savior of mankind. Many of his in-game allies view him as a prophetic figure and continuously emphasize that he is the world's only hope for averting a catastrophic event.

In *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, the protagonist Adam Jensen faces discrimination due to his augmentations. Characters like William Taggart regularly point out Jensen's augmentations, framing them as a personal choice (Mitgutsch, et al., 2013, p. 36). Jensen's journey begins after an attack on Sarif Industries, during which he loses most of his body parts. To save his life, the company's CEO, David Sarif, equips him with full-body augmentations without his consent.

In *Deus Ex*, certain in-game characters perceive JC Denton solely as something other than a human, continuously fixating on his augmentations, and what it entails, instead of seeing his humanity, and his capacity to do good.

Research Questions

The primary objective of the capstone is to understand how Deus Ex amalgamates various themes in its narrative and ties them with its gameplay mechanics to create a significant piece of cyberpunk media. Furthermore, I aim to examine the game's story through different analytical frameworks from existing literature. I will be mentioning concepts that have already been discussed, as well as introducing perspectives to contribute to the discourse surrounding Deus Ex.

To summarize, this capstone aims to answer the following questions:

- ❖ How does Deus Ex's narrative and gameplay mechanics create a meaningful experience?
- ❖ How do the themes and concepts present in the game give meaning to Deus Ex?
- ❖ How does the player's agency shape the narrative of Deus Ex?

Methodology

To answer my research questions, I replayed Deus Ex for the PC. I played the game in two different ways, as there are certain parts of the story that change depending on the choices you make during the levels and the dialogue options in cutscenes. Although the story leads the player down the same path irrespective of the ways they've chosen to deal with the situations they are placed in, these decisions heavily influence the first half of the game, by showing how the in-game characters respond to them.

In my first playthrough, I took a lethal approach, killing any enemy I encountered. I aimed to portray JC as intensely loyal to UNATCO, faithfully carrying out every order given to him. In addition, I wanted to depict him as cold-blooded, to the extent that we would kill even without explicit instruction.

In my second playthrough, I took a passive approach, avoiding lethal force and using non-lethal weapons to incapacitate enemies or bypassing them altogether. Being a clone of Paul, I aimed to depict JC as a character embodying his older brother's morality and judgement, given their shared genetic makeup.

Throughout my playthroughs, I took note of the changes in the story's progression that my choices led to. Additionally, I captured gameplay footage of both playthroughs in order to access and reference key events whenever necessary for my research.

Furthermore, made use of Deus Ex's last design document, written in 1999, and another document hosted online which is a compilation of all design documents that were created for Deus Ex's development from 1997 to 1999.

Prologue

“Deus Ex” is set in 2052, within a fictionalized version of the United States. Society has experienced significant technological advancements, particularly in artificial intelligence and human enhancement. However, the world is in turmoil, marked by a stark division between the wealthy and the impoverished, both economically and physically. A deadly virus known as the “Gray Death” has ravaged the globe, claiming the lives of many. The only known cure is a synthetic vaccine produced by VersaLife, a multinational pharmaceutical and bioengineering corporation owned by Bob Page. Page is the game’s primary antagonist and the leader of Majestic 12, a sinister organization formerly affiliated with the Illuminati.

“Why contain it? Let it spill over into the schools and churches, let the bodies pile up in the streets. In the end, they’ll beg us to save them.” – Bob Page



Figure 1: Walton Simons and Bob Page having a discussion at the Majestic 12 headquarters in the opening cutscene.

In the opening cinematic of Deus Ex, Page is seen discussing Walton Simons’ appointment to FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) with him after infecting the Senator and using the Ambrosia vaccine as leverage to coerce him into giving the approval.

Simons expresses concerns over the plague, as its rapid spread has caused intense riots throughout the world, but Page sees this as an opportunity to force society into relying on him, and by extension the Majestic 12. He wants to use this chance to act as a savior, albeit his real intention is to seize complete control of world governments and establish his own dominion over the remaining population.

Simons reports that the underclasses have been attacking shipments of Ambrosia, causing an even larger scarcity in the vaccine's availability. The group behind these attacks are known as the NSF (National Secessionist Forces), a national militia group. Though Page does not seem too concerned over the attacks, Simons does advise him to be cautious, as another group known as Silhouette, a French anarchist group, have been attacking Majestic 12 personnel in Paris. Both groups, condemned by the United States government as terrorists, are backed by the Illuminati, a secret society of powerful individuals led by Morgan Everett.

Furthermore, Simons mentions issues regarding Dr. Gary Savage, who was previously affiliated with the Illuminati and the Majestic 12, but defected along with a number of scientists, technicians and former United States soldiers a year prior after learning of Page's intentions, and UNATCO (United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition), an agency of the United States created as a response to the attack on the Statue of Liberty. Simons elaborates further, informing Page that he has a double agent placed in UNATCO, ensuring that the agency is under direct control of Majestic 12, and is more concerned over Savage relocating to Vandenberg.

Page asserts that Savage does not pose a threat to their goals, as Majestic 12's facilities and artificial sentience are far more advanced in comparison, and their ethics hold them from crossing boundaries that Page is more than willing to. He then turns in attention to UNATCO and the augmentation project, expressing his disappointment in the primary unit's performance.

Simons informs Page that the secondary unit will be ready in six months, and the primary unit will be terminated if necessary.

Characters

Bob Page

Bob Page is the trillionaire industrialist head of Page Enterprises, and the main antagonist of Deus Ex. Though it is revealed much later in the game, he is also the undisputed leader of the Majestic 12. Several years prior to Deus Ex's story, Page was the protégé of Morgan Everett, an expert in technology and a member of the somewhat benign Illuminati. Page and Everett were responsible for creating the technology behind Daedalus, nano-augmentation, and the nano-virus known as "Gray Death."



Figure 2: Bob Page's portrait.

When Page noticed Everett's reluctance to use this technology in order to establish dominion over mankind, he considered it an act of weakness, and defected from the Illuminati. (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 89). Once a subdivision within the conspiratorial organization, Majestic 12 became a separate entity, and directly opposed the Illuminati upon Page's desertion.

Page is described as an insecure person at heart. He lives in constant fear that someone will discover that Everett's genius is responsible for the technological advancements they've

achieved. This fear is his Achilles' heel, and is the driving force behind his over-compensation. Although he seems composed and in control of events, he is the most reactionary character in the game (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 90).

The Dentons

Paul Denton is UNATCO's first nano-augmented agent, and the older brother of JC Denton, the player's character. He is the first human character to discover the existence of the Illuminati and the Majestic 12 (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 84).



Figure 3: Paul Denton's portrait.

When Paul was ten years old, he was chosen for the augmentation project as Majestic 12 scientists deemed that his genetic makeup and physique were perfect for nano-augmentations. Subsequently, he was cloned, and JC was born. The two were raised by Paul's biological parents under the strict supervision of the Majestic 12 (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 84).

JC Denton is UNATCO's second nano-augmented agent. He is the main protagonist of Deus Ex, and the player's character. Not much is revealed about JC's backstory in the game or in the final design document, other than the fact that he is Paul's identical twin brother. As mentioned above, this is due to the fact that JC is a clone of Paul, and is often mistaken for his older brother due to their uncanny resemblance, though there are small visual differences in their appearance that sets them apart (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 84).



Figure 4: JC Denton's portrait.

Although the source is not as reliable as it is an amalgamation of all design documents, and compiles various key information that can contradict the game's story due to the changes that were made during development, "The Deus Ex Continuity Bible" provides some insight into JC's life before he joined UNATCO as an agent.

The document details that JC was enrolled in a special Swiss school (which served as a front for Majestic 12) following the assassination of his parents by a terrorist faction working for the Majestic 12. Raised in a controlled environment, he was indoctrinated with unwavering loyalty to his superiors, learning to obey orders without question. Though the conditioning seemed effective, JC despised the school's rigorous disciplinary method, and developed a rebellious attitude that he suppressed (Pacotti, n.d.).

Paul's personality is described as more flamboyant, more extroverted, and less serious, while JC is more stoic, and somewhat paranoid (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 84).

Alex Jacobson

Alex Jacobson is a computer programmer and communication engineer for UNATCO, Alex briefs JC on mission instructions, provides helpful information, and adds context to the story throughout the game.



Figure 5: Alex Jacobson's portrait.

While much remains unknown about him, Alex plays a pivotal role in Deus Ex. He provides JC with crucial information both within and outside of UNATCO, serving as a valuable ally throughout the journey. What distinguishes Alex as a non-playable character is that some of his dialogue with JC directly mirrors the player's experience. Beyond his support for JC, Alex also serves as a guide for the player, offering helpful tips to navigate the obstacles encountered in each level.



Figure 6: Alex contacts JC through his Infolink for the first time.

Gunther Hermann

Gunther Hermann is an agent and an obstacle course instructor for UNATCO. He is the first mechanically augmented character JC encounters in the game. He provides JC with information, and is mostly friendly, although he is resentful of the fact that he was not selected for the nano-augmentation project (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 88). Though an ally in the beginning, Hermann ultimately becomes JC's foe. He acts as an enforcer, and is a formidable opponent, as he is able to deal a lot of damage, and also withstand it.



Figure 7: Gunther Hermann's portrait.

Jaime Reyes

Jaime Reyes is UNATCO's medical officer. Much like JC, he is a newcomer to UNATCO, as both of them came from the agency's training facility (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 86). Reyes considers JC a friend, and proves a useful ally even after JC's departure from UNATCO. He provides healing and med kits throughout the game.



Figure 8: Jaime Reyes' portrait.

Joseph Manderley

Josh Manderley serves as the head of UNATCO. While not physically imposing, he commands respect through his intellect and strategic acumen (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 89). Initially appearing unassuming, Manderley is, in reality, a double agent planted by Walton Simons to ensure direct control of the agency by Majestic 12. Although his antagonistic role may not be as overt as others, his influence proves instrumental in shaping UNATCO's priorities to align with the goals of Majestic 12.



Figure 9: Joseph Manderley's portrait.

Anna Navarre

Anna Navarre is an agent and firearms instructor for UNATCO. She is the second mechanically augmented character JC encounters in the game. Navarre harbors a deep dislike for Paul, whom she perceives as overly pacifistic, leading to constant conflict between them regarding UNATCO's approach to counterterrorism. Ruthless and unyielding, she never hesitates to resort to violence against NSF personnel. Navarre's demeanor is marked by standoffishness and toughness, contrasting with the cordial nature of Gunther. Similar to her fellow mechanically augmented comrade, she eventually becomes one of JC's adversaries.

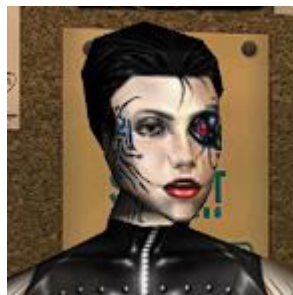


Figure 10: Anna Navarre's portrait.

Walton Simons

Walton Simons serves as the director of FEMA and is the chief lieutenant of Majestic 12, making him one of the central antagonists in Deus Ex. Second only to Bob Page in importance, he is an intimidating opponent. Described as a grizzled army veteran, Simons possesses all the qualities of a leader but never wished for the responsibility. Despite his initially amiable demeanor, Simons is extremely dangerous (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 90). He is constantly suspicious and never formally introduces himself to JC or offers any insight into his character. Simons' true intentions are revealed after JC defects to the NSF.

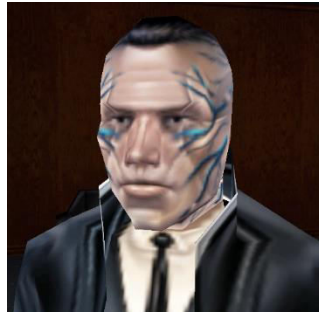


Figure 11: Walton Simons' portrait.

Jock

Jock is a skilled helicopter pilot responsible for transporting JC to and from mission locations. A former United States Air Force pilot, he becomes one of JC's trusted allies. Jock assists both Paul and JC in their struggle against UNATCO after JC's departure from the agency.



Figure 12: Jock's portrait.

Juan Ivanovich Lebedev

Juan Ivanovich Lebedev is a weapons supplier and a supporter of the NSF. Initially positioned as one of the antagonists of Deus Ex, this perspective shifts when JC is convinced by Paul to speak with him, revealing his collaboration with the NSF throughout the story. Lebedev is described as a master tactician and a genuine leader (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 88).



Figure 13: Juan Ivanovich Lebedev's portrait.

Maggie Chow

Maggie Chow presents herself as Paul's love interest in Deus Ex, but in reality, she is a Majestic 12 operative based in Hong Kong. She plays a pivotal role in stoking the rivalry between the Luminous Path and the Red Arrow, two triad factions featured in the story. Chow retrieves a prototype weapon known as the Dragon Tooth sword, stolen by the Red Arrow from VersaLife's headquarters in Hong Kong, and uses it to assassinate the triad's leader, Yuan King. Subsequently, she framed the murder on the Luminous Path.

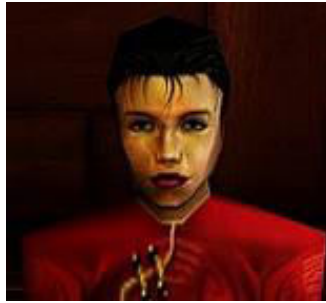


Figure 13: Maggie Chow's portrait.

Chow is an enemy in disguise, pretending to ally herself with JC, and fabricates lies regarding the Luminous Path and their connection to Majestic 12 to divert JC from his investigation.

Tracer Tong

Tracer Tong is a black-market augmentation specialist, and a friend of the Luminous Path. He serves as a crucial ally to JC in Deus Ex. As the only individual capable of restoring JC's augmentations and disabling the kill switch activated by UNATCO after his departure from the

agency, Tong plays a vital role in JC's journey. Additionally, Tong is the first ally JC gains outside of UNATCO, further highlighting his significance in the game's narrative.



Figure 14: Tracer Tong's portrait.

Daedalus

Originally conceived by Morgan Everett, Daedalus is an Artificial Intelligence model designed to monitor all Internet communication. Upon learning of humanity's struggles and recognizing the imminent threat of extinction, Daedalus devises a plan aimed at preserving human life and culture. Operating under the guise of a real person, it communicates with individuals through emails, and later establishes contact with Paul and JC through their Infolinks (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 83).



Figure 15: Daedalus' portrait.

Daedalus recognized early on that it was limited in its ability to thwart Majestic 12's plans and concluded that it would require a human ally. This ally would need to possess a strong will and physical prowess. Furthermore, the human needed to be directly accessible to a being existing solely as electrons, leading to Daedalus coming into contact with JC (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 83).

Nicolette DuClare

Nicolette DuClare is the daughter of the late Beth DuClare, who was a member of the Illuminati. Nicolette continues her mother's efforts in bringing down Majestic 12 by funding, supplying, and directing Silhouette to a certain extent (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 85). JC seeks to contact Nicolette, as she is the best guarantee of finding Morgan Everett. They meet at the La Porte de l'Enfer, a club in Paris, and Nicolette later reveals her identity to JC, and takes him to her mother's chateau to search for her computer lab and contact Everett.



Figure 16: Nicolette DuClare's portrait

Gameplay

Deus Ex's gameplay implements several gameplay mechanics, combining role-playing, first-person shooter, and even some open-world characteristics to tell its story. In this section I will only be focusing on the gameplay mechanics that are instrumental to the game's narrative, and the way in which it progresses.

Customization and Skills

Before the story begins, the player is met with a character customization screen, where the player can choose JC's ethnicity and personalize his real name. Though this limited customization option does lend the ability to slightly alter JC's character, it does not change his position within the narrative. JC is still referred to by his code name, and Paul's ethnicity corresponds with the ethnicity that the player initially chose.

In addition to the ethnicity and name, players have the opportunity to allocate skill points to various skills:

- **Computer:** Determines JC's effectiveness in hacking computers.
- **Electronics:** Affects the effectiveness of Multitools, used for disabling electronic devices.
- **Environmental Training:** Determines the effectiveness of suits and armors found in-game, such as hazmat suits.
- **Lockpicking:** Affects the effectiveness of lockpicks in-game.
- **Medicine:** Determines the effectiveness of medical items like med kits.
- **Swimming:** Affects JC's ability to hold his breath underwater.

- Weapons: This category includes sub-skills such as Demolition (for explosives), Heavy (for high-powered projectiles and rifles), Low-Tech (for melee weapons), Pistol, and Rifle.

Skill points are also earned throughout the game, and can be used to upgrade the aforementioned skills at any point in the game.



Figure 17: Character customization screen before starting the game.

Mission Structure

In Deus Ex, the missions are divided into two categories, Primary Goals and Secondary Goals. The former must be completed in order to progress through the story, and the latter are optional tasks that grant skill points and Credits, an in-game currency used to purchase items, upon completion.

Although Secondary Goals do not affect the game's progression, completing them clues the player in on sub-stories, and provides additional context to the narrative and the world depicted in Deus Ex. Despite the fact that the game is not in an open-world setting, and is instead spread throughout multiple levels, the various accessible locations in each level, and the number of non-playable characters you can interact with enriches the player's experience, and makes for a better narrative.

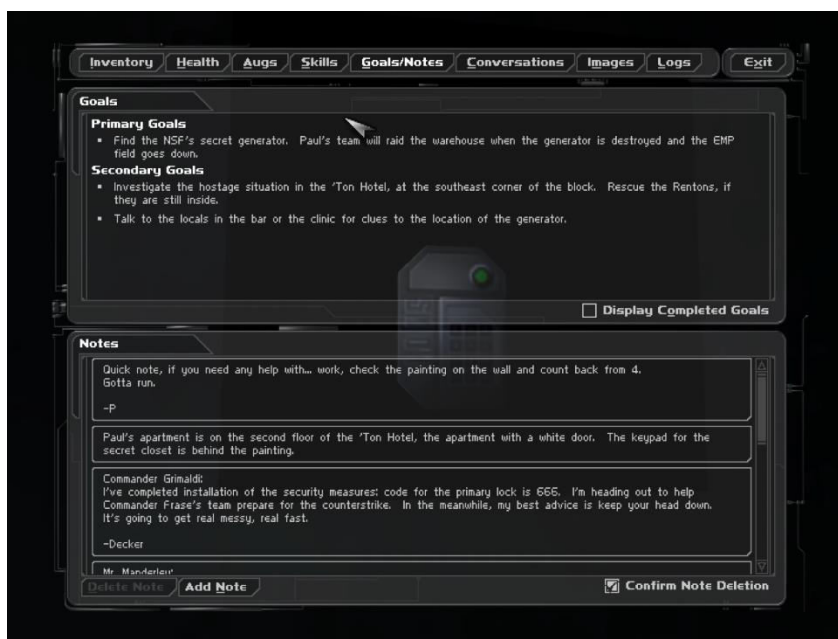


Figure 18: Primary and Secondary Goals listed in the in-game user interface.

Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is an important aspect of Deus Ex, and there are several ways in which developers have ensured that players can find necessary and additional information for both progressing through the game, and learning more about the conspiracies, organizations, and events taking place within the story.

DataCubes are small electronic devices found in various locations of the game. They provide important information, such as codes to locked doors and containers. Moreover, they sometimes contain interesting information that describe key characters, or exhibit the interaction between non-playable characters that use them to communicate with one another.

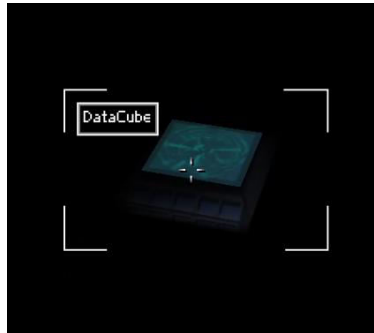


Figure 19: Example of a DataCube in-game.

Emails are also used for similar purposes in Deus Ex. The player can access any email inbox by either using the login credentials for the computers they find, or by hacking them. Emails typically display conversations between non-playable characters. Furthermore, at the beginning of the game, JC receives his own login credentials for the computer assigned to him at UNATCO headquarters, and can access his personal email inbox.



Figure 20: Example of an email in-game.

Another source of information comes from newspapers that are scattered in every level of Deus Ex. They are exclusively utilized for providing additional context in reference to the events and the conspiracies surrounding the game's narrative.

It is a simple, yet effective way for players to learn more about Deus Ex's world, giving them the opportunity to find out more, while not convoluting the main story.



Figure 21: Example of a newspaper in-game.

Choice

One of the most important aspects of Deus Ex's gameplay, and a defining characteristic of the entire franchise, is choice. The game offers multiple dialogue options when interacting with key characters and various non-playable characters. Depending on the response chosen during dialogues with central characters, it can significantly alter the progression of the story.

The earliest example of this is when JC meets with Paul at the Liberty Island dock at the beginning of the game. Paul can issue JC three types of weapons, a sniper, a GEP gun (Guided Explosive Projectile), and a mini crossbow which utilizes non-lethal tranquilizer darts.

This takes place after Paul informs JC that he will be sent in alone for his first mission, to which JC responds with, "All I've got with me is a pistol and an electric prod. I don't mind a test, but UNATCO better issue some hardware."

Although Paul can provide you with any of these three options, he urges JC to use the electric prod instead, a melee weapon that stuns enemies and incapacitates them instead of killing them. Regardless, he recommends JC to take an additional weapon, as ordered by Joseph Manderley.

For my first playthrough, I chose the sniper rifle. When choosing this option, JC says, "I like to pick 'em off from a distance. I'll take the rifle." To which Paul responds, "This isn't a training exercise, JC. Your targets will be human beings. Keep that in mind."

For my second playthrough, I chose the mini crossbow. When choosing this option, JC says, "The crossbow. Sometimes you've got to make a silent takedown." To which Paul responds, "Good thinking. With these tranquilizer darts, you'll have another nonlethal way to take down an enemy in addition to the prod."

Besides choosing a weapon for either a lethal or non-lethal takedown, the way the player approaches every mission is also paramount. In my first playthrough, after I chose the sniper rifle, I killed every enemy I encountered. In addition, I rescued Gunther Hermann, who was taken hostage by the NSF troops. When JC reached the NSF commander, although he was ordered to keep him alive and interrogate him instead, I chose to kill him, despite the fact that he had surrendered, in order to see how it affected the story.

When I returned to UNATCO headquarters, I interacted with one of UNATCO's troops, Kaplan, who's patrolling the entrance. He commends JC for killing all NSF troops. Saving Gunther will make him respect JC, resulting in him being friendlier. Alex and Paul both criticize JC for killing the NSF commander, and Manderley reduces his reward by 200 credits for not following orders, but grants him a bonus of 250 credits for rescuing Gunther.

In my second playthrough, after I chose the mini crossbow. I incapacitated and bypassed every enemy I encountered. Moreover, I did not rescue Gunther, who escapes after JC interacts with the NSF commander. Subsequently, instead of killing the NSF commander, I interrogated him after his surrender. After the interrogation, a UNATCO troop appears and informs JC that they've secured the area. I chose to question the NSF commander further, at which point the UNATCO troop started coughing, insinuating that JC must leave.

When I returned to UNATCO headquarters, I interacted with Kaplan again, who criticized JC for not killing any NSF personnel. Not saving Gunther resulted in him making passive-aggressive comments towards JC, albeit he mostly remained cordial. Alex and Paul both commend JC for a mission well done. Manderley congratulates JC, and grants him 1000 credits for following orders, but does not give the bonus, as JC did not rescue Gunther.

Another significant moment that demonstrates the importance of player choice is when JC is tasked with killing Juan Ivanovich Lebedev, who is loading Ambrosia shipments onto his private jet. When JC infiltrates the airport hangar, he meets Paul, who reveals that he has been collaborating with the NSF since his return from Hong Kong. Paul convinces JC to speak with Lebedev, who is found hiding in the private room of his plane.

In my first playthrough, when Lebedev immediately surrenders and attempts to reveal the truth behind UNATCO, Anna Navarre enters the private jet, and commands JC to kill Lebedev before he can speak any further. I chose to kill Lebedev, which Anna approved of, and was pleased with JC's loyalty to UNATCO. Manderley rewards JC with 1000 credits, and expresses that UNATCO's superiors (Majestic 12) are satisfied with his performance.

In my second playthrough, I chose to kill Anna Navarre instead. Upon interacting with Lebedev, he concluded that Paul has successfully convinced JC, revealing that JC was not born to biological parents. Additionally, Lebedev unveils Majestic 12's control of the United Nations and UNATCO. Exiting the private jet, Alex contacts JC, panicked over Anna's death, and deletes the log files to protect him. However, he also warned JC that he must concoct an excuse for Manderley. Returning to UNATCO headquarters, JC informs Manderley of Anna's death, attributing it to a surprise attack. Despite Manderley's suspicion, he rewards JC with 1000 credits, though dissatisfied.

Though Lebedev's assassination, or lack thereof plays an important part to the story, the event that solidifies JC's turn to the NSF is when he is assigned to a mission in Hong Kong, but is instead taken to Hell's Kitchen by Jock, where he meets with Paul, now severely wounded, in his hotel room at the 'Ton. Irrespective of my choices in both playthroughs, Paul instructs me to send a distress signal from NSF headquarters.

In my first playthrough, before I sent the distress signal, I did not kill any of the UNATCO troops stationed at the base, as I wanted to see how they reacted. Upon sending the distress signal, JC is contacted by Walton Simons through his Infolink, and describes JC as an "expensive mistake," before notifying him that he has ordered the troops to kill him, as he does not have the patience to wait for the killswitch to activate.

In my second playthrough, I killed all UNATCO troops before sending the distress signal. JC was once again contacted by Walton Simons, who expressed that he had gained the upper hand by killing the troops, but was going to die either way, as Simons had activated the killswitch, which would terminate JC in 24 hours.

Once JC returns to Paul, he urges him to escape together, though Paul is unable to, as he is gravely injured. Paul warns that JC that Majestic 12 know of his location, and a number of its personnel are on their way to assassinate him. He implores JC to leave through the window, although JC hesitates to do so. Additionally, Paul provides JC with the code to the subway station gate so that he can reach Battery Park.

In my first playthrough, I decided to leave through the window. Once I reached Battery Park, I was confronted by Anna, who expressed that she was hoping for JC to side with UNATCO. A fight ensues, and after killing her, JC encounters Gunther, who cannot be killed at this moment in time, and captures JC. This leads to the next level, where JC finds himself in a prison located underneath UNATCO headquarters. JC must escape, and during this mission, I discovered that Paul had been killed by Majestic 12, and located his body in the medical lab.

In my second playthrough, I chose to stay with Paul, and fought the Majestic 12 troops alongside him. Paul thanks JC for helping him, but insists that he leaves Hell's Kitchen. This time, I decided to leave through the main entrance of the 'Ton hotel, then made my way to the subway station. Since I had already killed Anna, she did not appear, however, Gunther still captures JC. Once again, JC finds himself in a prison underneath UNATCO headquarters, but during his escape, I found Paul alive in the medical lab.

Narrative Importance of Choice

Whether Paul is dead or alive, JC now has one primary objective throughout the rest of the story; stop Majestic 12 from conquering the world. Though JC joins the NSF despite my choices before the big leadup, they affected how he is portrayed in the game.

In my first playthrough, JC is more machine than man. He is a merciless agent who prioritizes his loyalty to UNATCO above anything else. He utilizes the physical advantages granted by his nano-augmentations to become an executioner for a corrupt agency, even going beyond what's required of him. Even when Paul desperately tried to sway him in the right direction, he ignores him, and even shows apathy towards his older brother, until his death.

It took Paul's death for JC to realize that he was right. This somewhat transforms the game's narrative into a revenge story, where the main protagonist decides to enact justice only when it personally affects them. It is a fitting narration of the story, seeing as JC spent all his life under the surveillance of Majestic 12, and was continuously brainwashed both in training and as an agent.

In my second playthrough, JC is more human than machine. Despite the expectations placed on him by UNATCO, he is empathetic, and does not see reason in killing the opposition. Regardless of the criticisms he receives, he uses his discretion, and thinks independently, instead of naively following orders, and continuously questions his superiors. He heeds Paul's advice, and trusts his judgement. Instead of letting Paul die, he combats Majestic 12 head-on in his first aggressive encounter with them.

These events not only highlight JC's rebellious nature, but also his inseparable connection to Paul. After all, he is Paul's clone, which explains why despite his guarded personality, he still shares the same sense of morality and critical thinking. Though his augmentations are a necessary part of his success, he uses them for the greater good, and not for the benefit of UNATCO.

The Last Stand

JC's journey is a long one, and after his escape from UNATCO, he finds allies within the coalition who have also defected upon discovering its connection to Majestic 12. Characters such as Alex and Jaime side with JC, joining his campaign in dismantling the evil organization. JC's bravery also gains him new allies in the form of Tracer Tong, Daedalus, and Nicolette DuClare. Additionally, JC is assisted by X-51, a group led by Gary Savage that seeks to use a Universal Constructor, a complex machine capable of creating physical objects by rearranging substances on a molecular and atomic level, to create a permanent cure for the Gray Death. They aid him in hunting down Bob Page, coming face to face with him in Area 51, which is directly inspired by the real-life location due to its highly classified nature, spawning many conspiracy theories, which the game directly plays into.

Accompanied by Daedalus, the artificial intelligence model notifies JC that another A.I. model, Icarus, created by Bob Page after Daedalus went rogue, is attempting to destroy it. Previously, Icarus had harassed JC by taunting him through his Infolink after his escape. When Daedalus asks for JC's assistance in combating Icarus, he gives it access to MILNET, a military network in the Vandenberg Air Force Base. This leads to the two A.I. models merging, giving birth to Helios, which Page had planned for.

Page, now connected to a powerful computer via extensive wires covering his body, aims to merge with Helios to transcend his humanity and attain godlike status. Initially, it seemed that Helios had aligned with Page, but it had actually chosen JC as its biological component. Helios's preference for JC stems from its original goal of creating a utopian society, a plan inherited from Daedalus.

The Final Dilemma

The defeat of Bob Page marks just one step toward reaching the final conclusion, which offers three distinct paths. The first choice involves merging with Helios, who seeks to merge with JC's to better understand human needs and govern effectively. During their conversation, JC contends that the only plausible explanation behind Helios' plan to govern the world is human ambition. Helios counters, asserting that it lacks all ambition, which is what makes it uniquely qualified to regulate humanity, as human ambitions have historically led to destructive outcomes.

To achieve the first ending, JC must locate the Aquinas router within Area 51 and deactivate the uplink locks. This action triggers the assimilation of Helios with JC, transforming him into a godlike being. In this state, JC harnesses the rationale and logic of Helios, fused with his morality and judgment, giving rise to a benevolent dictator.

The second choice sees JC aligning with the Illuminati after Page's defeat. Morgan Everett offers JC a place within the secret organization, giving him the opportunity to rule the world in secrecy, and reestablishing the global ruling body as it once was. Though people will enjoy some form of freedom, they will still remain under the direct control and surveillance of the Illuminati. Furthermore, the wealthy elite will continue to be protected and reap the material benefits of the world, while the underprivileged classes continue to struggle with ongoing economic challenges.

To achieve the second ending, JC must first locate and deactivate the four power sources sustaining the forcefields shielding Bob Page. Once all four power sources are disabled, JC proceeds to the upper-level control room to reroute the power. This action triggers Page's death, and JC joins forces with Everett, ruling the world by alongside him with an "invisible hand."

The third choice sees JC taking Tracer Tong's advice, who urges him to destroy Area 51 in order to end globalization and cut all forms of electronic communications in the world, resulting in a new dark age. Tong believes that as long as technology has a global reach, someone will eventually seek to rule over the world. By destroying Area 51, which the United Nations transformed into the hub of all global communications prior to the game's story, JC ensures that no one will exploit technology to establish dominion.

To achieve the third ending, JC must locate the coolant to the reactors, then visit the reactor lab to trigger an explosion. Upon cutting off the coolant flow to the reactors, JC should then disable the failsafe mechanism, and activate them at full capacity, which triggers an explosion. This action triggers the new dark age, as JC escapes Area 51, and Bob Page is left to die.

These three distinctive endings in Deus Ex set it apart from its contemporaries. While the concept of multiple-choice endings was not entirely novel in the video game industry at the time, Deus Ex goes beyond offering mere replay value. It presents players with difficult decisions, confronting both the protagonist, JC Denton, and the player with moral dilemmas. Unlike many games where victory is assured upon completion, none of Deus Ex's endings guarantee a clear triumph for the protagonists. Instead, the fate of the world is left in question with each decision, leaving players to ponder the consequences before and after making their choice.

To what extent can an advanced artificial intelligence comprehend and empathize with the diverse challenges and struggles faced by humanity? How might society benefit from constant surveillance by an entity possessing comprehensive knowledge about its members? How will Helios and JC ensure that the conclusions they reach and the solutions they enact continue to serve the well-being of humanity?

Is joining the Illuminati to uphold the status quo the right solution, especially since JC had struggled against another secret global administration? How can Morgan Everett ensure he avoids past mistakes after failing to thwart Bob Page's rise to power? In what ways could Morgan Everett's return to power potentially benefit society in the long-term, considering his involvement in creating the Gray Death virus?

In what ways do disruptions to global communications impact individuals reliant on augmentations? How might the world of Deus Ex navigate its current state of upheaval resembling a dark age, especially given the inevitable collapse of the economy due to halted global trade? How will this new era hinder the re-establishment of global communications and prevent humanity from rekindling its dependence on technology in the future?

These questions form a significant part of my evaluation of Deus Ex's narrative, aiming to spark a discussion among readers who may not have played the game firsthand. By broadening the discourse surrounding Deus Ex, I wish to highlight the game's intriguing and well-crafted story, exhibiting the narrative potential of video games as a storytelling medium.

Religious Narrative

While the analysis of JC's character within a religious narrative has been a subject of discussion, it is important to consider his brother, Paul. Throughout the narrative of Deus Ex, Paul consistently advises JC to approach his missions with minimal harm to NSF troops, serving as JC's moral compass. He emphasizes the humanity of those they encounter and encourages JC to use restraint in his actions.

In this sense, I argue that Paul would be a more fitting allegorical figure to Jesus, as he advocates for compassion and understanding. He has been present since the beginning of JC's journey, offering support and moral guidance regardless of the player's choices regarding in-game enemies and characters. His guidance underscores the importance of leading actions through humanity rather than augmentations, thereby resisting the dehumanizing aspects of technology.

Slave Narrative

In this analysis, I aim to introduce a fresh perspective by examining the themes of the slave narrative within the context of Deus Ex. In the game, JC Denton is a slave. He was born as a product of Majestic 12, and lived most of his life controlled by the secret organization. Throughout the story, it is revealed that both Paul and JC were seen as instruments for UNATCO, rather than individuals who can enact their own will. This revelation becomes clearer when JC overhears a private conversation between Joseph Manderley and Walon Simons, where the latter reveals that there will be more nano-augmented agents activated depending on how well he performs.

Another key point of the story that emphasizes this perspective is when Simons activates JC's killswitch. Despite the time and resources that Majestic 12 has spent in developing and testing nano-augmentations on their subjects, they are ultimately expendable, and can be disposed of upon insubordination.

In her thesis titled "A Posthumanist Neo-Slave Narrative: Dismantling the Humanist Subject in Lilith's Brood," Laura op de Beke sheds light on the intersection of posthumanism and the neo-slave narrative. She draws upon Victoria Flanagan's analysis of posthumanism in young adult fiction to explore how narratives within the journeys of protagonists construct agency grounded in individualism, action, and autonomy. Furthermore, young adult fiction often presents an emancipatory narrative, albeit more empathetically, through depictions of teenagers breaking away from the bonds of their families or community. These same principles are present in the traditional slave-narrative, where individualism, autonomy and usually rationalism are shown to dismantle the foundations of slavery and racism (op de Beke, 2016, p. 8).

This framework provides valuable insight into JC Denton's journey in *Deus Ex*. Although JC's place within society as a slave is not founded on racial discrimination, his struggle for emancipation upon discovering the truth about himself and UNATCO aligns with the principles described in op de Beke's thesis. JC's eventual success in defeating Majestic 12 symbolizes the triumph over the tethers of subordination, late-stage capitalism, and censorship, echoing the themes explored in op de Beke's analysis.

Disability Narrative

While the slave narrative within Deus Ex is more apparent, a narrative that I have yet to see discussed in regard to the game is the disability narrative. In Deus Ex, although mechanical body augmentations have gained prevalence among the population, those who undergo the procedure are seen and treated as monsters (Deus Ex [Design Document v13.12], 1999, p. 11). Mechanically augmented individuals are widely feared by those who are not augmented (Pacotti, n.d.).

Nano-augmented characters such as JC and Paul Denton are the first augmented humans who pass as “normal looking” (Pacotti, n.d.). This explains why characters like Anna Navarre, and Gunther Hermann harbor dislike for the brothers, even if they may not show it outright in the beginning of the game. Mechanical augmentations are visible and alter the appearance of those who have them. Additionally, those with mechanical augmentations have separate airport security systems, and must register with government authorities. They are also considered second-class citizens, and are even frowned upon by the poor who are not augmented (Pacotti, n.d.).

In Donna Reeve’s text “Cyborgs, cripples and iCrip: Reflection on the contribution of Haraway to disability studies,” even though she critiques Donna Haraway’s approach to disability within the context of cyborg technology, her arguments help uncover the disability narrative found within Deus Ex. Reeve points to the physical problems that are caused by disability technology, such as prosthetics and wheelchairs, noting that Tobin Siebers would experience pain and soreness from his plastic leg brace chafing his calf during summer. Moreover, long-term wheelchair users are susceptible to developing painful shoulder problems,

and implanted devices need maintenance since the wires can break, and the batteries run out of charge (Reeve, 2012, p. 96).

The text also highlights the discrimination faced by disabled individuals. For instance, while a wheelchair may afford greater mobility within space, wheelchair users often encounter discrimination due to societal prejudices regarding perceived limitations. This discrimination extends to those who rely on any form of disability technology. Subsequently, individuals using prosthetic devices are often subjected to stares by strangers, contributing to emotional and psychological distress, and exacerbating feelings of ostracization (Reeve, 2012, p. 97).

The inclusion of characters like Gunther and Anna in *Deus Ex* sheds light on society's perception and treatment of people with disabilities. While JC's and Paul's nano-augmentations are not subject to discrimination within the game's world, they still encounter their own challenges due to their augmentations. For instance, JC's augmentations allow him to gain new abilities by finding augmentation canisters. These canisters are used to upgrade his capabilities, granting him various physical advantages. However, all augmentation abilities draw bioelectric power from JC's body when activated. To recharge his bioelectric levels, JC must use bioelectric cells, available in a limited quantity, or locate Repair Bots, which are only available in certain parts of the game.



Figure 22: Example of an augmentation canister, bioelectric cell, and Repair Bot.

Another example that reinforces my analysis of Deus Ex within a disability narrative occurs when JC encounters Walton Simons speaking with Jaime Reyes in the breakroom of UNATCO headquarters. Simons is heard detailing his symptoms, including sharp, burning pain in his eyes. When Reyes inquires how often Simons recharges his bioelectric power, he responds that he does so frequently, even when it has not depleted significantly, stating his preference to always be prepared. Reyes advises him to only recharge when bioelectric levels are considerably low.

While the augmentations in Deus Ex afford its characters greater physical prowess than the average human, these technologies are not without their challenges. While they can be beneficial, characters with augmentations also face psychological and physical downsides. Despite cyborg technology often being depicted as a net positive in science fiction, Deus Ex illustrates that these technologies have their shortcomings, a theme consistently present in the game's narrative.

Conclusion

To conclude, my analysis of Deus Ex reveals that the game offers multiple perspectives and narrative frameworks for exploration. The emphasis on player choice, the branching paths leading to three distinct endings, and the meticulous attention to detail in constructing the world of Deus Ex provide ample room for diverse narrative interpretations. Beyond the story of the protagonist, Deus Ex immerses players in a world where they explore the disturbing events that led to society's demise, confronting nuanced moral and philosophical challenges inherent in human nature and technology.

While its successors may overshadow its significance, Deus Ex warrants greater recognition in both media and academic spheres for its exceptional storytelling and gameplay. Despite its complicated development history, the game manages to deliver a truly worthwhile experience. Although there are numerous online analyses of the game available, I believe there is room for a more in-depth exploration of its narratives beyond the debate over which ending is most moral. Additionally, I encourage more scholars in the field of video games to undertake their own analyses of the game.

Even as video game studies have gained prominence in the past two decades, I advocate for a more frequent revisiting of older titles like Deus Ex. These games hold significant untapped potential that can greatly benefit the field.

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