

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Deus Ex

Platform: PC

Genre: First Person Shooter / Role Playing Game

Release Date: June 23, 2000

Developer: Ion Storm Inc

Publisher: Eidos Interactive

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Warren Spector, Harvey Smith

Author of this review: Philip Riley

School: The Guildhall at SMU

Overview

Deus Ex is a vast conspiracy in a not-too-future dystopian world. Terrorists unleashed a virus plaguing mankind, and the cure is in short supply. Within this context, the technology augmented protagonist circles the globe and unravels the hidden identities and motives of the multiple conflicting world powers.

A player selects which of the hero's skills are developed to allow a multitude of balanced play styles, the game maps support these skill choices with multiple paths to objectives, varied dialog options express strong attitudes, the plot permits many opportunities for major characters to die, and beating the game as a pacifist is possible. In short, Deus Ex provides true, meaningful choices to the player.

Characters

JC Denton is the player's avatar within Deus Ex. He interacts with dozens of major characters, several dozen minor characters, and hundreds of atmosphere characters. Initially, JC and his similarly nano-augmented brother Paul are allied with the UNATCO troops against the NSF (National Secessionist Force) and Silhouette, a group labeled as a terrorist organization. Eventually, Paul convinces JC to turn against UNATCO and join the NSF to combat the real enemy, the Majestic 12, who control UNATCO, but are at war with the Illuminati. The complexities of the story are tightly woven with popular myth and governmental conspiracies.

Within the game, several strong characters influence the flavor and experience of the game. They are key figures within the plot, and player's choices and actions are reflected in their convincing dialogues. Some of the key characters are:

- **JC Denton** – The player’s avatar in Deus Ex, he is a nano-augmented billion-dollar human, capable of incredible feats of speed, strength and combat. He wears a dark overcoat and sunglasses, even at night. He speaks with a no-nonsense, ‘just the facts’ tone. In most dialog trees, he has options for friendly, neutral and aggressive responses. JC starts the game under the employ of UNATCO, working with his brother Paul to fight the NSF and terrorist group, Silhouette.
- **Paul Denton** – The main mentor for JC, he is more experienced and better upgraded agent than JC. Paul advises JC through the first mission, but allows the player to ultimately decide how and when to interact with the other characters and mission objectives. Paul also delivers the first major plot twist – that he is working for the NSF and Silhouette, and wants to recruit JC to his side. Later, the player has a choice to save Paul’s life, or to let him die. If he survives, Paul provides encouragement to JC on making his decisions, but doesn’t attempt to influence them. This narrative mechanic reinforces the player’s freedom of choice.
- **Joseph Manderlay** – The UNATCO leader who directs Paul and JC through their missions. He provides chastisement regardless of the outcome, emphasizing his character as the hard-to-please boss that operates in a high pressure moment. Manderlay is ultimately a tool used by Walter Simons and Majestic 12, and subject to their whims. His voice is not sympathetic towards JC or Paul, and expects nothing short of perfection for his multi-billion-dollar augmented agents.
- **Walter Simons** – The FEMA director who conspires with UNATCO to manufacture the virus crises to gain world power. He is nano-augmented like JC and Paul, and always speaks in a condescending manner to everyone around him. In his world, he is a superhuman, and more superhuman than JC and Paul. Late in the game, his verbal sparring gives way to threats, and ultimately takes matters into his own hands and confronts JC in combat. To the end, he is overconfident and snide.
- **Morgan Everett** – The Illuminati member that fights against the ambitions of Bob Page and the Majestic 12. Morgan is level-headed, smart and steady character. He has his own ambitions of power, but prefers to maintain the status quo. He offers JC to share power at the end of the game with a fair, invisible hand.
- **Bob Page** – The Majestic 12 leader that directs UNATCO and FEMA through his personal funding. His character is a mixture of a physical weakling and intellectual bully. Overall, he is not the smartest enemy, but is unaware of his own shortcomings. He makes up for this with his monetary influence, and expects others to fall in his line.

Breakdown

Deus Ex is set in a dystopian near-future world, where a viral plague threatens to wipeout mankind. A cure exists, but only in limited quantities and is reserved for the powerful and influential. Under this existence, resistance groups fight governments and governmental agencies for help with the virus. The player is a nano-augmented super-human named JC Denton, bio-engineered by UNATCO to combat resistance fighters and terrorists. The story begins with the player subduing a resistance group through any means possible, under orders from Joseph Manderlay. During this early gameplay, the player is scolded by a character for using lethal force when non-lethal will suffice. Either way the player chooses to play, the storyline advances.

The player works in tandem with their characters' brother, Paul Denton, to investigate the cause of the resistance and terrorists and is ordered to assassinate their leadership. Prior to this moment, Paul requests that the player join the resistance with him. From his calm assurances in earlier missions, this draws the player to see his current enemies as possible allies, and his current allies as misguided, if not his future enemies.

At this moment, the UNATCO forces distrust JC and their speech reflects this. Walter Simons and Joseph Manderlay threaten JC with deactivation – his nano-augmentations also include a killswitch. The next mission, Paul contacts JC to help transmit a message to the resistance, and JC turns traitor. After deciding whether to help Paul escape or not, the player is captured by UNATCO and placed in a holding cell. The capture level is the weakest element in the gameplay, as perfectionist players are frustrated by invincible enemies. Players face a former ally in combat, who questions the player's motives, loyalties, and abilities. Defeating this opponent is satisfying.

With help, JC escapes into the Majestic 12 facility, and uncovers deeper secrets about the organization and their motives. A major turn in the story occurs when they player realizes that the Majestic 12 facility is part of the UNATCO facility, and ultimately runs the latter organization. JC escapes the UNATCO facility and heads to Hong Kong.

Within Hong Kong, JC learns more about the various organizations competing for world domination, their own motivations, and their mechanisms for achieving these goals. The player earns Tracer Tong's trust, and he helps JC by disarming the killswitch and in thwarting the goals of the Hong Kong offices of Majestic 12. The story advances with the introduction of other characters, including Paul's love interest who is also a spy for Majestic 12. The game contains dialog and scripting to support whether Paul is still alive or dead at this point.

After the Hong Kong threat is neutralized, JC travels to Paris, France, to locate members of Silhouette, and the Illuminati. His web of contacts expands to include additional resistance members and Morgan Everett, a member of the Illuminati. Morgan explains how Bob Page was a member, but left the group to form Majestic 12, an organization for his own personal goals. Through the Paris missions, JC encounters Gunther Hermann and either kills him in combat, or reveals Gunther's personal killswitch code. This element is anticipated and highly satisfying for players.

The last stages of the game involve JC thwarting Majestic 12 with the help of Morgan Everett, Silhouette, the NSF, Tracer Tong and other allies. JC encounters Walter Simons face-to-face in a secret underwater test facility. Simons accuses JC of dishonor, calls him a traitor, and sentences him to death. The player defeats Simons and proceeds on to a test facility called X-51 which was founded by former research scientists from Area 51 that protested the questionable ethics of Majestic 12 and their goals.

From this encounter, JC learns the location of Area 51, but first diverts a nuclear missile strike from X-51 to Area 51. Shortly after the impact, JC descends on Area 51 for the final confrontation, and faces a dilemma – kill Page and either: join Everett and the Illuminati, merge with an AI and provide a benevolent dictatorship, or help Tracer Tong plunge the world into a second dark age. This choice is the sole discretion of the player.

Some characterizations are strong, while some are transparent in their allegiance, but the overall narrative is conclusive and supports the players' decisions.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in the game is the support of the player's choices. In in-game actions, weapon and skill selection, and individual play style, all are supported by levels that provide direct and indirect routes to objectives, and allow vastly different combat styles. The dialog options and choice of actions support dramatic shifts in the plot, to the extent that major characters need not die only during a single specific cutscene. This game contains a series of meaningful choices to the player and saves the 'Game Over' screen only for player character death.

Unsuccessful Element

In spite of a player-choice filled world, most major events are unavoidable, and inevitable to advance the plot. This is clearest when UNATCO attempts to capture the player in New York City. While most enemies are dispatched easily, there is an infinite spawn point for nameless soldiers gunning for JC Denton. This can culminate with a standoff of the player against former UNATCO colleagues, also nano-enhanced. In this scenario, one of the UNATCO colleagues is invincible and you are forced to lose the fight. This frustrates the player, even more so when they discover that a previously open area is now covered in invisible blocking volumes, creating their death trap.

Highlight

The best moment in the game occurs soon after the most unsuccessful element. After his capture by UNATCO forces, the player navigates JC Denton through and must escape from a top-secret Majestic 12 facility with the help of an unknown benefactor. This facility creates some of the best sneak/stealth sequences in the game, and reveals the conspiracies within conspiracies aspect of the game. After the player retrieves their equipment and leaves this dangerous situation, they exit from the Majestic 12 facility through a secure door located in the lowest level of the UNATCO facility that was previously their base of operations. The realization of betrayal is very powerful in this moment.

Critical Reception

The overall reception to Deus Ex was overall highly positive, with a composite score of 90 at Metacritic. Reviewers found the graphics dated, the voice acting at times cheesy, and the overall game design dark. In spite of these shortcomings, they praised the story, the freedom and meaning of choice, and the level design.

Greg Kasavin with Gamespot rated Deus Ex 8.2 out of 10 due to the aforementioned issues, but stated “Even so, all of Deus Ex's gameplay features and story elements, as well as the expansiveness of the game's environments and the scope of its setting, add up to a satisfying and unusual experience.”

Chris Harding with Adrenaline Vault found Deus Ex a better experience, stating, “*Deus Ex* combines the elements of first person action with hardcore role-playing as good as any game ever released. It's also got a great story, powerful interface, some great dialogue and a lot of interesting characters.” He rated the game a 100.

Daily Radar echoed similar sentiments. “For a complete package of plot, style, depth and action, few games rival ‘Deus Ex.’”

Lessons

- Bad voice acting, or strong stereotyping can create excessive dissonance and reduce immersion.
- Allowing multiple outcomes for major characters, with supporting dialogue, plot options, and realistic supporting character reactions creates an immersive narrative experience.
- Player choices are treated amorally, but NPC dialog reflects these choices with admonition or criticism. This creates deeper immersion and interaction.

Summation

At first glance, Deus Ex appears as another first-person-shooter at a time when the genre was full of Half-Life clones. However, due to the meaningful choices provided to the player, it is a complex role-playing experience. In this case, the string of pearls game design paradigm does not apply. Deus Ex is a string of sandboxes, allowing full exploration of each space. Each level is designed with multiple paths to the objective, full of major and minor characters, and simple mechanisms allowing open gameplay. The story is flexible enough to handle different outcomes to major events, and is presented in a believable way. These freedoms of choice coupled with an elastic game design create an overall strong narrative experience.