Game Narrative Review

====================
Your name: Maximilian Ximenez
Your school: State University of New York at Stony Brook
Your email: maximilian.ximenez@gmail.com
Year you submitted this review: 2012

====================
Game Title: Deus Ex: Human Revolution
Platform: PC, Xbox 360, Playstation 3
Genre: Stealth/Action RPG
Release Date: August 23, 2011
Developer: Eidos Montreal
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Game Director/Narrative Designer: Mary DeMarle/Jean-François Dugas/Mark Cecere

Overview

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is set as a prequel to the cult classic *Deus Ex*, a hybrid stealth, action and role playing game with a cyberpunk and conspiratorial theme, created by Ion Storm Inc. in 2000. Because the genre of cyberpunk is incredibly dependent on social themes and technological progress, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s narrative is closely tied to topics introduced in the last ten years, a concept exacerbated by the decision to set the game just sixteen years into the future from its release date. The question of just what constitutes "human" in a rapidly changing world becomes a central question of the game's story as the player character, Adam Jensen, is modified on multiple levels and thrust into a multifaceted conspiracy that seeks to shape society in the image of a few powerful individuals.

Characters

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is a story of great societal change with a globe-trotting scale, bringing many individuals with vastly different viewpoints and biases into conflict with one another. Often, individual characters serve to stand as straw men for entire philosophies, corporations or factions, usually at the cost of long term development and flexibility.

- **Adam Jensen** – The player character. A disgraced veteran of the Detroit Police Department's SWAT division, he begins the game as Chief of Security for Sarif Industries, one of America's leading biotech and cybernetics firms. An attack by a group of cybernetically augmented mercenaries during the game's intro leaves Jensen critically injured, necessitating immediate, experimental augmentation surgery without his consent. Jensen, once recovered, is charged with investigating

the attack that apparently lead to the death of five scientists working with Sarif Industries (including Jensen's ex-girlfriend, Megan Reed). This mission leads to Jensen uncovering a vast corporate conspiracy to change the face of the world involving a secretive group known as the Illuminati. Despite being a defined character, some aspects of Jensen's personality are able to be shaped by the player, most notably his views regarding lethal force and the value of human life. Jensen's backstory indicates that the reason he left the DPD was due to the fallout from refusing to fire upon a young criminal suspect, and the game consistently rewards the player for finding non-lethal solutions to various situations. The question of whether or not Jensen's augmentations and the medication required to maintain them has changed his personality and made him into the murderous monster that some members of society will see him as is entirely up to the player.

- **David Sarif** – A visionary industrialist and philanthropist, Sarif is the CEO of the eponymous Sarif Industries, Jensen's employer and source of his high-quality cybernetic augmentations. Sarif champions a technoprogressive viewpoint; that advances in technology can and should be used to better society. This optimistic philosophy characterizes many of his actions, from his attempt to revitalize Detroit's economy by transforming it to a center of the biotech industry to his assignments for Jensen that consistently serve to further augmentation's place in society. While an advocate of social progress and justice through technology, Sarif is not above underhanded corporate tactics and ultimately believes that the best course of development for humanity is one where he and his colleagues are on top.

- **William Taggart** – William Taggart is the founder and leader of the anti-augmentation group known as "Humanity Front", and serves as a foil to various pro-technology characters and groups within the story. Taggart is first personally introduced to the player apologizing for terrorist attacks carried out by a more radical anti-augmentation group, in an attempt to make himself seem moderate and distance himself from controversy. However, it is later revealed that not only did Taggart personally assist the radical group, but that he is in bed with the secretive Illuminati, hoping that by controlling society they can curb the destructive effects of radical, unabated technological progress.

- **Eliza Cassan** – Eliza is initially presented as the glamorous and adored news anchor of the almost omnipresent Picus TV, the primary news media source of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*'s future. Like many powerful characters in the story, it is revealed that Eliza is tied to the Illuminati. Specifically, Eliza is an artificial intelligence crafted by the Illuminati to monitor all news and manipulate public opinion to their ends. Eliza showcases the fluid definition of "human" in the setting; the public simply adores her as a perfect specimen and infallible source of information, when in reality she is nothing but a ruse. Many see her, a machine with human characteristics, as more human than many augmented individuals, humans with mechanical properties.

- **Zhao Yun Ru** – Zhao Yun Ru is the CEO of Tai Yong Medical, one of the largest biotechnology and augmentation corporations in the world if not the largest and a driving force in China's new, high tech economy. Zhao is an incredibly ruthless businesswoman, using various underhanded tactics (legal or otherwise) to drive her competitors out of business and increase her own power. It is no surprise, then, to find out that Zhao is a member of the Illuminati and arguably the member most directly responsible for the events of the game, having triggered the attack that sets Adam on his mission. Zhao also serves as the game's final boss, directly interfacing with an Illuminati-created supercomputer in an attempt to take control of almost all augmented individuals across the world. While many characters are secretly part of the Illuminati and their schemes, Zhao is definitely the most open and overtly antagonistic, serving as a "face" for the nebulous organization and a method by which the character can achieve a "victory" against a force that is required by the series to survive the game.

- **Hugh Darrow** – Touted as the "father of augmentation technology", Hugh Darrow almost singlehandedly invented the process that lead to the widespread adoption of cybernetic augmentations by the time of *Human Revolution*. In a tragic case of irony, however, Darrow possesses a rare genetic defect that causes his own body to reject augmentations and leaves him crippled. Overtly, Darrow appears to be a colleague of David Sarif and shares his views on technology, even going so far as to create a massive station in the Antarctic Ocean to regulate ocean temperature and curb global warming. However, Darrow's allegiances and motives are not revealed until the final moments of the game; the player is first lead to believe that Darrow is part of the Illuminati, but after confronting him in the final mission the player learns of his true views and intentions. As one of the few individuals in the world who did not benefit from augmentation technology, Darrow believes that his creation has been ultimately harmful to humanity, causing mankind to overstep its boundaries. Darrow used the Illuminati's resources to build a massive supercomputer capable of controlling all augmented individuals and cause them to begin to mindlessly attack each other, in hopes of convincing the world that augmentation technology is too dangerous. Darrow is perhaps the most extreme anti-augmentation advocate in the game, his actions almost causing a global breakdown of society in an attempt to save it. The question of whether or not augmentations make humans into "monsters" is directly contrasted with the absolutely monstrous actions of a single, simple human.

Breakdown

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is a conspiracy techno-thriller at its heart, with all of the twists and turns that belonging to such a genre entails. The events of the game have the player character, Adam Jensen, investigating mysteries of increasing scope, scale and stakes. The main storyline, which more often than not has Adam Jensen infiltrating massive corporate headquarters or high-tech military bases, is almost specifically designed to introduce a feeling of dehumanization. If the player rushes through the game,

Jensen only encounters sterile environments filled with heavily armed enemies, fluorescent lights and grandiose characters that more often than not exist solely to serve as mouthpieces for particular viewpoints or to move the story along. It is through the many available side missions that the world is properly and fully fleshed out and populated with characters who have more down to earth concerns, like a struggling businesswoman whose expensive augmentation has indebted her to the local mob, or cop seeking evidence on a corrupt politician who uses cybernetic hit men to silence his opponents. These quests serve to give a gritty, urban feel to the story, anchoring it to individual characters and small scale problems that serve to define the human side of *Human Revolution*.

The game begins with an attack on Sarif HQ in Detroit, where an augmented band of mercenaries break into the labs on the eve of a presentation for a major breakthrough. The attack severely wounds Jensen and the player is told to believe that it killed five scientists working on the project, including Jensen's ex-girlfriend, Megan Reed. Jensen is cybernetically reconstructed by Sarif, given top of the line experimental military and espionage enhancements, and sent to stop an attack by an anti-augmentation extremist terrorist group on one of their factories. This sets up but the first of many mysteries that the player is told to unravel: who is targeting Sarif Industries and why?

Over the course of the game, Adam Jensen must trace a hacker's signal back to a government base, infiltrate the headquarters of Sarif's most powerful corporate rival, interface with an AI that controls virtually all media, trace a missing scientist to a top-secret lab and finally stop a doomsday transmission causing all augmented humans to go berserk. As Jensen travels around the globe, he often solves one question while raising two more, expending the mystery from "simple" corporate espionage to what appears to be a government conspiracy, to a plot by an organization that seeks to control the fate of all mankind. And as these massive questions are raised, interesting if not particularly deep characters often chime in to provide commentaries and counterpoints.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution's story extensively explores the theme of dehumanization. The value of an individual human life is quickly plummeting in the face of increased government and corporate control over the world. Individual augmented humans can be "hacked" into and controlled like puppets. Gangs prey on the augmented, killing them and hacking them apart like butchered livestock to sell their parts on the black market. Employees of powerful corporations have their entire lives monitored, even if they don't know it. While augmentation technology has certainly changed society, the game forces the player to ask if it is necessarily for the better. Ultimately, the fate of not the human race, but the human condition, lies in Adam Jensen's hands. And yet, every choice ultimately furthers the goals of some group or individual, when everything is said and done, Adam is still ultimately an instrument guided by another's hand.

The game follows a rather formulaic structure that is clearly recognizable by the halfway point. The developers state that the four pillars of gameplay in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* are combat, stealth, hacking and the game's relatively innovative social system. There are two kinds of areas in *Human Revolution*, combat zones and city hubs,

which can usually be differentiated by the fact that Jensen wears a suitably cyberpunk trench coat in hubs and switches to a more militaristic tactical vest in combat areas. Hubs (of which there are two, each visited twice in the game), have relatively little combat and stealth but a fair helping of hacking and social components and a generous shake of side quests, while combat areas, as their name implies, often have an abundance of combat and stealth but not many opportunities to talk to the heavily armed enemies, though certain areas do have plenty of hack-able locks and containers, mostly to further facilitate stealth. The game follows distinct pattern for its pacing: two combat zones, then a hub. The game's act structure also revolves around this: the first act is about gathering information on who was responsible for attacking Sarif industries and is completed when the player character learns of the Illuminati from Eliza Cassan after completing the second combat zone after the second hub, Hengsha. Likewise, the player learns about the Illuminati's ultimate plan in the second act, doing another tour of Detroit with two combat zones, then the Hengsha hub, then another two combat zones, where the player wraps up most of the plot threads by meeting with the presumed dead scientists who kicked off the game's plot. From there is the game's climax, an extra-long combat zone with a lot of hub-like exploration tossed in to serve as a nice capstone to utilize most of the skills the player has accrued by the end of the game. While somewhat rigid and restrictive, the strictly formula plot of clearly demarcated levels in a regular pattern ensures that the game retains an even pacing with the stakes of the conflict rising consistently.

One of the core strengths of gameplay inherited from the original *Deus Ex* is the concept of a "pacifist run", playing through the game without using lethal force on any enemies. This is masterfully and subtly woven into the game's story and gameplay. As players, we are often rewarded for violence, and when given the choice between a violent and nonviolent solution, the violent one often results in a greater reward, be it through dropped loot, currency, or experience points. In *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, many anti-augmentation advocates note that dependence on the drug required to prevent the body from rejecting augmentations and implants leads to neural degradation and violent outbursts, scapegoating all augmented individuals as dangerous monsters and criminals. In playing *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* like a typical game, the player steers Adam into reinforcing this image. This is especially ironic considering that Adam is one of the few individuals who do not need the drug to keep his augmentations running. The game actually rewards players for seeking a nonviolent resolution, be it through the game's extremely well developed social system, using less-than-lethal weaponry or sneaking around by providing them with more experience than a standard "kill". This is further reinforced at the end of the game, where, depending on how many people Adam Jensen has killed, the ending differs somewhat, reflecting his personality. Many of the characters in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* are frightfully static, and so Jensen potentially undergoing a radical character shift from a man who would not carry out an order to kill unjustly to a murderous sociopath carries relative weight.

Strongest Element

Many RPGs involve some form of persuasion system, usually a chance-based system where the probability of convincing an NPC is increased by raising a certain stat or value (such as the Elder Scrolls series or Fallout 3) while others use a simple pass or fail system based on a raw stat value (such as the Mass Effect series or Fallout New Vegas). *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* creates a very interesting persuasion system, referred to as the CASIE Mod in-game, which involves making certain remarks based on a provided psychological profile of an NPC. Many minor characters have one of three basic personalities and respond best to short conversations with a single type of dialogue, while there are a handful of "boss" conversations in the game that require equal parts strategy, psychology and intuition on the part of the player to pass. Everything about such a system showcases a high amount of polish and core synergy between narrative, art and gameplay; the player has the best chance of winning such conversations if they accrue as much information on the characters as possible by paying attention to dialogue, reading in-game books and even analyzing the superbly animated body language of the character's model.

Unsuccessful Element

In almost every scenario the game throws at the player, there is an element of choice. Every problem can be toppled in multiple ways through various combinations of player skill and character building, that is, except the game's four boss fights. Throughout most of the game, Jensen is given various options for conflict resolution, be it talking his way through a situation, sneaking past it, using nonlethal takedowns or killing enemies. Different solutions usually require high amounts of planning, spatial awareness and a pinch of instinct if things go south. And yet, the game's boss battles give the player only one option: go in guns blazing. Characters that are built to focus on stealthy, let alone non-lethal methods are at a distinct disadvantage during boss fights, with no way to set up the encounter for any path other than "shoot in face until dead"; and "dead" is the only possible outcome for boss enemies, too.

This is especially egregious due to two factors. One, for every other encounter in the game the player is actually encouraged to find non-lethal solutions to problems and this is in fact encouraged by the game's reward system and ultimate ending. There's even an achievement or trophy (the ultimate carrot-on-a-stick of this current game generation) for going through the game without killing anybody, though it does not track the bosses' deaths. But even worse, is that the original *Deus Ex*, famous for its multiple possibilities for completing objectives, actually does allow the player to go through the game without killing anyone, including the bosses. It is obvious *Human Revolution* took a design cue from the original *Deus Ex*, but fell flat in that particular area. This has left a lot of fans, both old and new, with a sour taste in their mouths.

Highlight

The final "boss" social dialogue between Adam Jensen and Hugh Darrow during the game's climax is a perfect confluence of dramatic storytelling and engaging gameplay.

Darrow is presented as an expert manipulator, having duped both the public and Illuminati into his plans, a genius in multiple fields and an absolute madman who should not by any means be capable of being reasoned with. Convincing him that his plan is flawed requires the player to have an intimate understanding of his character, the plot and the world around him, to know when to pick apart his logic and when to agree with him for the sake of argument. Properly completing the sequence results in the game's final combat boss being far easier, but the real payoff is the sense of satisfaction the player gets in emerging victorious from an intense battle of wits against a superbly written and multifaceted character while giving the player an opportunity to utilize his or her understanding of the game's themes that must be accrued over the course of gameplay.

Critical Reception

Deus Ex: Human Revolution received extreme critical acclaim, with an average score of 90 out of 100 on review aggregate site Metacritic.com. IGN's Arthur Gies gave the game 9 out of 10, praising the its variety of mission solutions and the creation of an overall believable tone and setting regarding a near-future society straining from rapid change. He does criticize the occasionally poor dialogue and jarring instances of the game forcing the player into certain decisions (citing the poorly received boss fights as a major indicator of this problem). Many others, such as Gamespot's Kevin VanOrd (who gave the game 8.5 out of 10) cited many of the same facets: "engrossing story themes" and liberal opportunities for player choice were touted as great properties, while stating that the game's few instances of railroading were significant enough to lower the game's score.

Lessons

- Players love choice, and a good game infuses itself with choice at a conceptual level. Any character build should be able to solve a problem in accordance with the player's desires, and every quest should have multiple solutions to incorporate as many play styles as possible.
- Conversely, don't take away the player's choice or, even worse; give them an illusion of choice. The more fundamental player choice is to the design of the narrative, the greater the displeasure when the player's hand is forced.
- Creating a detailed world with strong themes goes a long way. Make these themes clear and have them resonate on a basic level with the audience. Minor characters, missions and events should serve to explore the themes in ways that the main quest might not be able to.
- Use the mannerisms and expectations of the player to flavor the narrative. The best designers are also players, and maintaining the mindset of a player can lead to subtleties that can flesh out singular instances and overarching themes.

Summation

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is a game of choice. Players respond best to choice when it is presented as part of a well-defined story and setting, so that they believe that their decisions matter. The player will overlook formulaic structure and flat characters if they're immersed sufficiently in the story and are preoccupied with extrapolating the

consequences of their actions. Furthermore, allow their choices to resonate throughout the game and be applicable to a variety of gameplay situations. It was a great decision to craft a world undergoing rapid change and pair it with gameplay that reinforces choice, as it gives the player the impression that his or her choices may resonate with the setting itself.