

Deus Ex: What Price, Choice?

“If we want the freedom to become more than we are,
we can’t be blinded by a misguided morality. Some people
will be left behind -- it’s reality. It’s evolution, son.”

David Sarif from *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*

Deus Ex: Overview

The aforementioned quote from *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011) suggests that morality is inherently interrogative and that an individual’s ethos develops by virtue of the tension between predictability and randomness when the human will exerts control. Ethical dilemmas arise when the actor is afforded agency, but not the control to determine consequences of results – in other words, ethical dilemmas are inherently ambiguous. The *Deus Ex* game franchise (Ion Storm/Eidos) is exemplar in presenting gameworlds rife with questions of control and self-control, as well as, engaging the player with issues of agency and ethics, and therefore it can be suggested that *Deus Ex* games emphasize their moral content to a high degree.

There are currently four major titles in the role-playing, first-person stealth shooter game series, with the latest, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* having been released in 2016, for PC and console. *Deus Ex* was the brainchild of game designer, Warren Spector, but he was unable to realize its production until being hired by John Romero, and joining the Ion Storm team. Eidos Montreal took over development of the *Deus Ex* series in 2011, releasing two games featuring the quasi-messianic protagonist, Adam Jensen (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in 2011 and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* in 2016). For my purposes, I will be focusing my analysis on *Mankind Divided* (DE:MD) with some reflection on *Human Revolution* (DE:HR). These two games play very similarly and share the bulk of their narrative-based and ludic-based mechanics. Their narrative-based mechanics, especially through the device of the C.A.S.I.E. system, reveal how ludic-based instrumental value in games can stymie a player’s opportunity to engage genuinely with questions of morality and ethical dilemmas.

Deus Ex: Mechanics

As mentioned, DE:HR and DE:MD are role-playing shooters, and can be played across a spectrum of styles, either emphasizing the narrative-based mechanics of effecting influence in the gameworld through conversation choices with NPCs, or by focussing on the ludic-based mechanics of combat. Depending on the playstyle for a particular playthrough, there will be greater or lesser demand on the player to apply stealth during missions, intuition during conversations, and management skill with Adam Jensen’s cybernetic “augmentation” upgrades.

DE:HR and DE:MD have ludic-based mechanics which are fairly standard for shooter games. The games rely on a cover system and the stealth playstyle will either

require the player to completely avoid physical confrontation with enemies, or move in for a close-quarters takedown when there are no witnesses present – a nuanced appreciation of NPC pathing and targeting is necessary for stealth playstyle success. DE:HR and DE:MD have sophisticated narrative-based mechanics emphasizing role-playing elements. Adam Jenson is a character designed to encourage the player to take a stance on how the “new bad” future of the dystopian world to which he belongs will be realized. The narrative-based mechanics focus on player choices during “social battles” with NPCs. These games generate a lot of interest from players for their production of unique endings keyed-in on player choices throughout the game.

This form of denouement provides the player with a sense of accomplishment and reward for the decisions which they made regarding the fate of NPC characters in the game – and the most important choices the player is faced with occur during social battles, which are the equivalent of “boss” fights. It is the C.A.S.I.E. augment implant mechanic which provides the player with additional insight on the impact of their choices prior to making a decision, however, as I plan to show, this mechanic can be detrimental to player agency and preclude the possibility of the player engaging genuinely with ethical dilemmas that the games present.

Narrative-Based Mechanics: Agency and Avatar

Adam Jenson is an “Aug” or augmented human being, in a dystopian vision of our world where rapid progress in biotechnology, nanotechnology and robotics has ensured that a large chunk of the human race is outfitted with cybernetic implants (or “augmentations”). Jenson has the illustrious distinction of being genetically well-suited to augmentation and he does not suffer from “rejection syndrome” (the biological body rejecting mechanical augments), thus he is not prone to fits of rage, and therefore he is also not addicted to Neuropozyne, a popular drug which quells that rage.

The pretense is that Jenson is perfectly able to exert control over his attitudes and self-control over his behaviour, and in turn the player is afforded the better part of these opportunities through in-game choice. Jenson’s agency is transferred to the player, who can then feel liberated to freely choose. The game tends to suggest that “Jenson knows best”, not merely through his status as the protagonist and playable avatar, but also by virtue of his immaculate augmented state of existence within a world of the cybernetically-disabled (augments) and cybernetically-deficient (naturals). Nanotech plutocrat, David Sarif, is constantly reminding Jenson that he is an evolutionary step forward for the human race. As the player realizes the legitimacy of this claim, the stakes are raised and the player can approach moral choices with greater seriousness and sincerity.

Narrative-Based Mechanics: Social Battles and the C.A.S.I.E. System

In social battles, the player is provided with two to three choices at each fork of a conversation's dialogue tree. There are ideal choices which the NPC will be most receptive to, however there are several ways to complete a conversation apart from the "optimized" route. In this respect, "failure" in social battles is not the mitigating factor for continuing the game, but instead the social battles provide the player with an opportunity to forge Adam Jensen's personality and motivation, determining whether he is morally oversensitive or emotionally sociopathic. Typically, the choices in social battles don't go to these polar extremes, but the game designers do tend to code individualist reasoning as morally spurious and collectivist reasoning as morally sound. Either way, Jensen is morally culpable as the player uses him to complete tasks that may determine the fate of the human race within the Deus Ex universe.

One of Jensen's augment development possibilities relates to social abilities. In DE:MD, the augment is labeled a "social enhancer" and described as the Computer Assisted Social Intelligence Enhancer (C.A.S.I.E.). It is an implant which analyzes the mental state of targeted individuals and includes a "dialectic enhancer" which allows Jensen to dominate conversation through chemical-pheromone manipulation. This implant is billed as providing the player an opportunity to sway the conversation towards a desired goal. In effect, Jensen releases a cocktail of pheromones into the air around his target in order to render them psychologically malleable and mentally cooperative.

When this implant is unlocked in the menus, it provides HUD overlay information during social battles. Alignment analysis identifies NPCs as alpha-, beta- and omega-personality types, their major personality traits are listed, and a somewhat reductive psychological profile is provided for the player to review. In addition, when the NPC speaks, there are moments where the C.A.S.I.E. system lights up the alphabetic symbols in the HUD to indicate which player conversation choice would mesh well with the NPC's attitude in that moment. Volatile graphic display windows pop up where C.A.S.I.E. makes special note of dynamics such as an NPC detecting Jensen's duplicity or contradictions and target altering heartrate. Finally, the HUD displays a response level meter which will fluctuate during the conversation, based on choices and in such a way that optimized choices will see the meter fill up to its maximum. Regardless of the implant being activated, each optimized choice will be accompanied by a non-diegetic chime to signal that the player chose the "best" option for progressing.

It might be interesting to consider whether the C.A.S.I.E. system disrupts the potential for Adam Jensen to be considered a morally sound character given its invasive quality of neurochemical manipulation however there are already a long list of other game features consistent with the stealth genre which imply violence and violation, thus precluding the real possibility of Jensen being a truly ethical person. For example, even when aiming to kill absolutely no NPCs in a playthrough, the game still requires the player to break-and-enter homes, steal property, and physically assault complete strangers. In some ways the C.A.S.I.E. system presents the player with an opportunity to mediate the most favourable social outcome and to render a tough dilemma into a workable solution, however, in C.A.S.I.E. providing the player with the ideal solution, agency is disrupted and the player is too easily coaxed into favouring the instrumental value of player choices over the ethical value. C.A.S.I.E. allows the player to fall back on

processual logic when navigating forks in the dialogue tree – the presented optimized route precedes the player’s consideration of available options.

Analysis: Social Battles and C.A.S.I.E.

In the fifth side-mission of DE:MD, the nanotech engineer, Vaclav Koller, requests that Jenson retrieve a device that could potentially help balance Jenson’s augments and avoid a dangerous overload. For the player, this task is advantageous because it presents the possibility to unlock more of the ludic-based options for combat and stealth. For Jenson, it is a matter of life and death now that his mysterious “experimental” augments have activated after he took serious physical damage during a bomb explosion. The device (the calibrator) is to be recovered from a local mob boss, Otar Botkovelevi.

When Jenson arrives at Otar’s underground gambling den, a social battle ensues. The conversation with Otar involves three choices labeled as “straight-talk”, “compliment”, and “dodge”. As always, hovering over the choices provides a preview of the dialogue that will be spoken by Jenson. With C.A.S.I.E. activated, these choices are also labeled with the alphabetic symbols, in order to make deduction on optimized choice a simple matter of visual perception and recognition. In addition, C.A.S.I.E. makes evident what the optimized choices are: straight-talk (to ensure mutual trust with Otar), then compliment (to profess sharing values about loyalty), and straight-talk again (to agree to protect Koller and thus accept working with Otar).

Through the visual information provided by C.A.S.I.E., the player is dissuaded from making the choices - by virtue of clearly not being “optimal” - that may result in failure. The player is thwarted from putting Jenson’s self-interests (of secrecy of identity and motive) first, and there is little point in making an ethical decision to not aid mafia thugs in their crooked business enterprises. The C.A.S.I.E. results “suggest” that the player have Jenson play nice with Otar for the instrumental value that is attained: get more side-missions, gain more experience points, unlock more augments, and play for more hours. The C.A.S.I.E. solution is unmediated however a player who challenges this mechanic may in fact be playing very ethically and asserting their agency to a high degree. They would be putting their values and the development they seek for Jenson’s character ahead of actuating the optimized result produced by the game designers.

C.A.S.I.E. providing the answer key is the equivalent to letting a player know that sneaking through a pipe and getting behind a boss will provide vantage for an easy head-shot kill during a critical combat-based game battle. The player may fail to consider whether it is ethically right to shoot the boss as opposed to looking for other opportunities to clear the zone and progress with the game. Can we imagine someone being shown the answers to a multiple-choice test and then intentionally marking off the box which they prefer because that particular choice better represents their ethical values and moral ideals? Very few would take the opportunity to be so adamant regarding ethics and morality. C.A.S.I.E. can stymie many players from enacting the kind of agency which allows them to make ethical-based decisions in the game, however it must be admitted

that this mechanic may also challenge other players to defy C.A.S.I.E., “augmenting” player agency, in effect.

Without C.A.S.I.E. activated, the player must rely on intuition and a “cold-reading” of NPC body language and physical tells in order to mediate reasonable solutions. In the Talos Rucker social battle, Rucker presents himself as both a helpless victim of ghettoization and a determined militant freedom-fighter. The social battle which ensues seeks to untangle these contradictions and the player must carefully consider the implications of each choice and how the intention to recognize Rucker as a victim may in fact encourage his efforts to militarize ARC (Augment Rights Coalition). Without C.A.S.I.E. activated, the player must read signs of the mise-en-scene (such as the glass of whiskey in Rucker’s hand), intonation in Rucker’s voice after a player choice in dialogue, and evaluate the appropriateness of the options in dialogue given a particular mandate toward crafting Jenson as morally sensitive. There are seventy-five unique ways to get through the Rucker conversation, with many possibilities for effecting peaceful solution.

With C.A.S.I.E. activated, the HUD overlay information impresses itself upon the player. Rucker’s speech is passionate, the room is bristling with visual intensity, and Jenson’s pregnant pause creates thick tension – or at least this is what the player should be noticing, but instead the C.A.S.I.E. HUD overlay undermines these visual, auditory and intellectual cues of the scene. Simple textual display and graphics – the see-sawing of a meter bar filling up and falling down, keywords to reductively characterize Rucker, some flashing lights over basic symbols – demand the attention of the player. The three-dimensional vividness which brings to light real issues and genuine ethical quagmires in a face-to-face conversation is reduced to a linear, two-dimensional process of obvious happenings and graphic read-outs. The solution provided by the C.A.S.I.E. mechanic is overly simplistic and straightforward in its presentation.

C.A.S.I.E. System: Back to the Drawing Board

C.A.S.I.E. would operate most efficiently and fairly for affording player agency when placed in the role of advisor or counsel. In addition, the C.A.S.I.E. mechanic would have to be presented without the pretense that its information represents privileged knowledge of the game designer. A suggested improvement to the C.A.S.I.E. system would be one where, like Jenson’s experimental augments, an A.I. “exconscious” backup computer system comes online for Jenson – a primarily diegetic element. The C.A.S.I.E. information is represented through this AI personality partner and the computer is potentially fallible or corrupt. Now, the player and Jenson must decide between valuing the external other (NPCs) or the internal other (the AI computer-self backup). There are potential plot-twists available where this internal computer’s primary function is to take over in case Jenson’s human brain dies, but that this could have been arranged as an insidious machination of the shadowy organization which is said to pull all the strings in the Deus Ex universe. Alternatively, the exconscious AI could simply be a natural “evolution” in biological-computer relations.

In fact, the HUD information of this exconscious AI could be identical to that of C.A.S.I.E. provided that the player is aware that this information is subjective, fallible, and

possibly suspect. The subjective nature of the information would render it ambiguous, thus allowing player agency for engaging with ethical dilemmas presented in the game (Christiansen, 2017). Currently, the objective knowledge of C.A.S.I.E. as an infallible device removes the possibility of ambiguity in the ethical dilemmas presented during social battles as well as encouraging players to fall back on the instrumental value of choice.

Admittedly, there is currently an important ethical dilemma related to whether the player should use C.A.S.I.E. or not. Is it cheating or dark play? Is it alright for a player to not genuinely choose over tough ethical dilemmas when they are presented? But, these questions only enrich the paratextual discourse for Deus Ex games while not resolving the textual problem of a ludic-based mechanic stymying the player's agency for addressing ethical dilemmas and moral questions drawn out from the narrative-based mechanics of player choice options in social battles.

Fortunately, the Deus Ex universe has been toying with notions of insidious AI takeover – Eliza Kassan is an unethical AI program that purveys news for the Picus Group media conglomerate corporation. Also, Deus Ex presents possibilities for hive minds generated from biological human collectives – the Hyron Project was a WMD against aug autonomy, and even the tech-illusionist cult leader, Richard, was blending multiple consciousness through digital interface. That is to say, that it would be a natural step to present Adam Jensen with the challenge of managing information from an exconscious AI with the whims and wonder of the social order of the gameworld as it manifests through social battles. In this way, a refined C.A.S.I.E. system (subjective information, primarily diegetic) could afford the player a game mechanic that provides some important insight without making the decision for the player, and where there would be ambiguity and thus the possibility for moral reflection.

OTAR	Choice 1	Choice 2	Choice 3	Result
	Dodge	Dodge	x	Hard Rejection
	Dodge	Compliment	Dodge	Deal
	Dodge	Compliment	Compliment	Soft Rejection
	Dodge	Compliment	Straight Talk	Deal
	Dodge	Straight-Talk	Dodge	Soft Rejection
	Dodge	Straight-Talk	Compliment	Hard Rejection
	Dodge	Straight-Talk	Straight Talk	Deal
	Compliment	Compliment	Dodge	Soft Rejection
	Compliment	Compliment	Compliment	Hard Rejection
	Compliment	Compliment	Straight Talk	Deal
	Compliment	Dodge	x	Hard Rejection
	Compliment	Straight-Talk	x	Hard Rejection
	Straight-Talk	Dodge	Dodge	Soft Rejection
	Straight-Talk	Dodge	Compliment	Hard Rejection
	Straight-Talk	Dodge	Straight Talk	Deal
	Straight-Talk	Straight-Talk	Straight Talk	Deal
	Straight-Talk	Straight-Talk	Compliment	Soft Rejection
	Straight-Talk	Straight-Talk	Dodge	Deal
	Straight-Talk	Compliment	Dodge	Deal
	Straight-Talk	Compliment	Compliment	Soft Rejection
*optimized	Straight-Talk	Compliment	Straight Talk	Deal
				Soft Rejection = allowed in gambling den but no calibrator
				Hard Rejection = not allowed in gambling den and no calibrator
				Deal = calibrator
				Always have to accept favour even on full optimized