

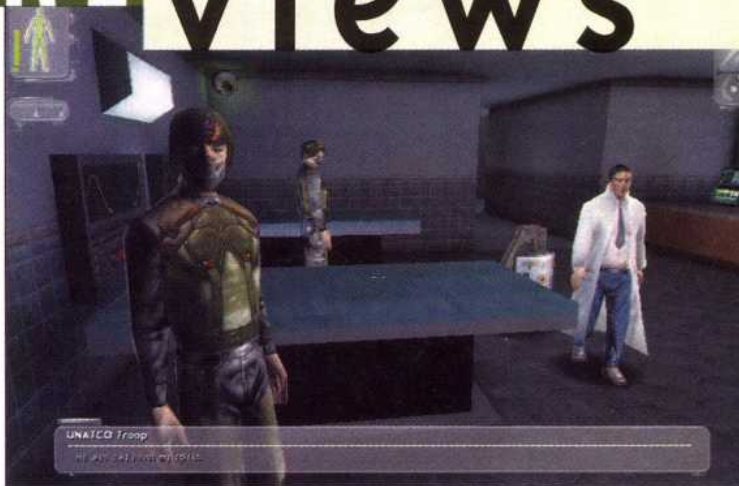
REviews

UPSIDE

Lots of freedom, interesting plot, really long.

DOWNSIDE

Poor Direct3D performance, inconsistent AI



Environments like this Hong Kong temple are rich and full of atmosphere.

[left] You can talk to anyone, not just critical NPCs, and get unique responses.

Deus Ex

Opening the Ex Files

Why isn't the future ever sunny? The near-future setting of *Deus Ex*—the first title from the Austin-based division of Ion Storm—is dark indeed. The world is a never-ending night fraught with problems: plague, terrorists, and enough government and paramilitary group conspiracies to give Fox Mulder an aneurysm.

As J.C. Denton, special agent for the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition (UNATCO for short), you enter the game fresh from the academy and already have your work cut out for you. No sooner do you arrive at UNATCO headquarters on Liberty Island than you have to deal with terrorists who've occupied the bombed-out remains of the statue of liberty. This shouldn't be much of a challenge for you, since you're second only to your brother Paul in the pool of a new breed of agents. While other UNATCO agents might have cybernetic augmentations of the standard "metal, wires, and servos" kind, your blood swims with the pulse of

millions of nanites. These microscopic machines and your special training give you powers beyond those of normal men. Thus begins a 3D first-person game that begs comparison to such critically acclaimed titles as *System Shock 2* and *Thief*, and with good reason. *Deus Ex's* gameplay is very evocative of those titles, all of which owe something to the vision of producer Warren Spector.

A Game of Choices

Deus Ex is more than anything else a game of choices. At its heart it's an RPG, and that means improving your abilities with experience, steadily improving your equipment, and taking a more cerebral (rather than reflexive) approach to problem-solving. Guns and explosives dominate the game's setting, so there is plenty of action; even so, this is definitely not a game for those looking to scratch their "twitchy reflex" itch. Shooting isn't about dodging rockets and bullets, or leaping and running around your enemies with your finger on the trigger. In fact, the game forces a bit less spastic play



Hacking security computers to access cameras and guns is great fun.

THE BUZZ

"I'm not sure what planet you guys are living on, but to me so far this is game of the year material both in its class and overall." —Chris D.

"I find I'm very sucked into the game, because I can play it anyway I want. I can make choices and see the outcome of those choices. I love it!" —Douglas Peterson

by reducing your accuracy when you move, and steadily increasing it when you stand still. This, combined with the deadly nature of most enemies' attacks, means that successful combat in *Deus Ex* depends on your performance in relatively small fights, where you get the jump on your opponents, and use whatever tactical advantages your environment affords you. Circle strafing and rocket-jumping are not options here.

You don't really have to be much of a gunslinger to do well in the game, though. Just about every situation has several solutions. In fact, the freedom you have to come up with creative solutions is unsurpassed. Here's an example of a typical *Deus Ex* problem: a couple of soldiers guard a locked door with an electronic

keypad, and you need to get into that room to complete a mission objective. There's a security camera and automated turret nearby, and a big security bot that will rather quickly turn you into Swiss cheese trundles by every minute or so. A simple shooter would have you run in, guns blazing, taking out everything in sight, and you can certainly do that if you choose to. But you can also pick the lock on the door to the security terminal nearby, use a stolen code or hack into the security system, and turn off the security camera while you turn the automated turret against the guards, killing them by remote. You could toss a scrambler grenade at the security bot as it passes, making it fight for you for awhile and let it take out the guards. You could wait for

THE GOODS

GENRE Action/RPG

PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive

REQUIREMENTS P2 300, 64 MB RAM, 150 MB hard drive space, DirectX 7.0a compliant 3D card

MULTIPLAYER N/A

RATING





Perform tasks out of order and the game keeps up.

everyone to group together and toss a grenade at them. You could throw an object off to the side to distract the guards while you sneak by. Once you've made it to the door, you could either use the code you stole from a computer terminal or disable the electronic lock with your electronic multi-tool. Oh, and if you find your way into the ventilation system, you could crawl in through the floor and avoid the hassle completely.

Other games have striven to offer multiple solutions to every situation, often with limited success. This time it's been done right: what you do and how you do it are almost always entirely up to you, and the game responds accordingly. Even what you say to NPCs makes a difference. Tell someone what he wants to hear, and you may get that security code or computer password you were looking for. Say the wrong thing to the wrong person, and you'll have to find another way to get what you're after. You might even tick off some people enough to make them fight you. It's amazing how the game tracks your actions and works them into people's conversations.

Accomplishing one optional objective (of which there are many) will often lead to others when you talk to a certain NPC. Skip it, and that part of the conversation just won't happen. You'll want to speak with most NPCs multiple times, since they often have more information than is covered in the initial conversation. With the multitude of tasks and objectives in most missions, it's nice that you can usually perform them in any order. The plot is definitely linear, but each of the missions has parts that can

be addressed however you see fit. Fortunately, the game encourages exploration and taking on optional tasks. You earn skill points not only for accomplishing main mission goals, but also for finding new areas, performing certain feats of skill, digging up new information, etc.

The list of possible solutions to problems expands even further



Duke Nukem, eat your heart out.

when you consider the number of usable objects in the world. Every map is loaded with "stuff," most of which can be picked up, pushed, destroyed, or manipulated. Don't want to waste explosives to take out that robot? Activate your strength augmentation and carry a 50-gallon drum of fuel into its patrol route, then sit far away with a sniper rifle to blow it to kingdom come when it walks by. Automated turret giving you trouble? Shove a large metal crate in front of it to block the bullets.



A soda machine conspiracy? No, just a little foreshadowing.

Since multiple solutions require different skill sets, *Deus Ex* offers a greater variety than those in many other games. There are 11 skills, each of which can be upgraded to a maximum level of four with skill points earned by accomplishing mission objectives. If you want to shoot everything on sight, improve your weapon skills. If you want to avoid enemies, you'll need lock

picking and electronics skills. Want to be a computer hacker and steal all your info? Not a problem. While it might pay to specialize, eventually you'll come across a situation you're not prepared for (not enough ammo to fight it out, not enough lock picks to sneak in, etc.). With so many ways to deal with the challenges you come across, improving a broad range of skills can come in handy, and regardless of how you want to play the game, you are likely to need a reasonable hacking skill.

In addition to these 11 skills, each of which adjusts your abilities enough to drastically change the way you overcome your obstacles, you'll encounter conversations where your responses actually make a difference. You have a horde of specialty equipment and an environment chock-full of usable items. Not enough choices? Let's not forget that you're a cyborg of sorts. As you find augmentation canisters throughout your adventures, you'll fill nine empty "slots" (eyes, chest, arms, legs, etc.) to give you special powers and abilities. Each of these canisters gives you a choice of two different augmentations for that specific slot, and each one of those can be upgraded up to four levels by finding augmentation upgrade canisters. J.C. Denton's growth can progress in so many different ways and every task, from overall objectives to individual obstacles, can be overcome by so many means that a thousand people could get in a room together and discuss how they played and a thousand different stories would emerge. Decision making so thoroughly permeates *Deus Ex* that there are even three different solutions in the grand finale, each of which delivers a different ending.

A Dark World, An Unreal World

The fictional future that is the backdrop for *Deus Ex's* story is very dark. Its global themes involve oppression, tyranny, and unseen forces plotting to control mankind. J.C. has to personally wrestle with conflicting information that makes him question who to trust, whom to work for, and which faction is doing the right

thing. Nothing is clear-cut or quite as obvious as it seems. The reasoning behind the conspiracy theory strikes home more than once if you're the least bit untrusting of your government or the corporate elite—and who doesn't raise his eyebrow at least a little when hearing about the latest scam of some congressional lobbying group? Despite being a little over-the-top at times, the story keeps you engrossed and you'll be anxious to hack into just one more computer or read just one more data-cube, simply for the chance to find out who's pulling the strings of the giant web you're caught in. You'll keep playing for quite some time, too. There are about 15 "missions," each of which is comprised of several maps, many of which are quite large. If you spend your time exploring and take on most of the side-quests, you'll likely spend 30 or more hours finishing the game.

The plot twists and turns its way to the finale via scripted dialogue and com-link transmissions, and most of these communications are pretty good. Writing and voice acting are usually above par for a computer game, though some of the accents are a bit cheesy. Unfortunately, much of it comes off a little lifeless. Your character is deliberately monotone, cold and dispassionate. Other characters show a bit more life, but they stand around like pillars when speaking, occasionally throwing in a small random move of the arm. It helps that the characters are quite

varied, with different faces, accessories, and textures mixed and matched to form a wide variety of different-looking people. The animation for most of the characters' actions as they roam the world is good enough, but a little more expression and variety in the conversations would have been a big help. At least people turn their heads to look at the person to whom they're speaking, and their mouths sync with the speech.

If *Deus Ex's* setting seems dark, that's nothing compared to the graphics. The entire game takes place at night (which seems to follow you around the world as you visit New York, Hong Kong, Paris...). This is an intentional aesthetic that works well within the context of the plot. However, in a game where exploration is so vitally important, it would be nice to see a little more clearly—even when you crank up the brightness, useful objects tend to get lost in shadows too often. Some of the maps are well-lit corporate buildings, which offer a refreshing change of pace from running around with your flashlight augmentation on all the time.

This dark world is built using the *Unreal* engine, which is certainly capable of delivering visuals that meet or exceed what we're used to seeing in modern RPGs and shooters. Unfortunately, this comes with a significant caveat: *Deus Ex* is heavily biased toward Glide. If you have a 3dfx brand video card, the game runs quite well even on a modest 400Mhz machine. If you've



"The same thing we do every night, Pinky...try to take over the world!"

got another brand and have to run the game through Direct3D, it's significantly slower. Driver updates have alleviated the problem for some, but it's still necessary to turn down the detail settings on even the fastest machines to keep the frame rate smooth, especially in high-action scenes or crowded places with lots of colored lighting, like the nightclub in Hong Kong. Disappointing Direct3D performance is probably the biggest technical glitch in an otherwise impressively stable game. Most games that try to offer half of *Deus Ex's* freedom to do things "your way" end up with lots of situations where doing the wrong thing at the wrong time ends up breaking the game—the plot won't advance, a crucial person or item won't be there, and so on. Amazingly enough, nothing of the sort ever seems to happen here.

Less of a System, More of a World

The net result of the amazing freedom you have to do things your way is a greater sense of accomplishment than most games offer. Break out of the holding facility in some other game, and you feel good that you beat an arbitrary game system—linear traps with predetermined solutions set up by a designer. Your skill as a game player got you there. Do the same in *Deus Ex*, and you feel like it was much more than that. Finding a unique and creative way to eliminate or avoid your obstacle doesn't feel as much like you were playing within some predetermined system, with only your game-playing skill to rely on. In this game, you've got to make a decision, a personal choice, and then have the skill to pull it off. Being in charge of both making the plan and executing it is tremendously rewarding. Such an open, free game world is actually a bit daunting at first. As gamers, we've been trained to work within confined systems for so long that when presented with so many options, we tend to only see the obvious solution. *Deus Ex* often seems too hard until you realize you're just not "thinking outside the box." If you continually die trying to accomplish something, a quick look around your environment and inventory for creative inspiration will often lead to a solution that works far better than the obvious thing.

The same sense of accomplishment and freedom is what made other Warren Spector games like *System Shock* and *Ultima Underworld*, and those he influenced like *Thief* and *System Shock 2*, so much fun. *Deus Ex* is more than similar to the games in that list—you could consider it a sequel to any one of them. Though the



Yikes...good thing they're on your side.



In the future, everything is owned by Microsoft.

other designer credited for his work on *Underworld* and *Shock*, Doug Church, had little to do with *Deus Ex*, it's a game he would probably be proud of. The only real difference between these classics and Warren's latest is that *Deus Ex* adds another layer of complexity, and prominently features dialogue (which was only really seen in the *Ultima Underworld* games, and then somewhat sparingly).

The creature AI is perhaps the most interesting of the components that make this game less like a "closed system" and more like an open world. It is generally quite good, with various human troops, robots, and animals all acting differently. Listening to them search an area when they hear a noise is an experience straight out of *Thief*, and crawling silently past a patrol route is just as much fun as in that game. There are a few inconsistencies, though. Shoot a guard from a mile away with the sniper rifle, and he somehow immediately knows exactly where you're hidden crouched in the shadows, and comes running with his friends

(assuming you didn't take him out in one shot). On the other hand, you can usually leave a dead body lying right in the middle of a room without fear of it arousing suspicion, as most people simply won't notice it. Sometimes, however, they do, and the frequency with which this happens seems to vary from level to level. Creating the AI for a game like this is definitely a big challenge. There are different hostile and non-hostile NPCs that sometimes stand guard, sometimes patrol a route, and sometimes go about their daily business. They've got to fight well, or act scared and run away, or sound the alarm, or fight to the death, and so on. When all is said and done, the AI is there to present specific challenges and needs only to have reactions that are dynamic enough not to feel totally scripted but predictable enough to get an idea about whether or not some cockamamie scheme you've cooked up is going to work. To this end, the AI is effective and while it could use a few improvements here and there, it's good enough to keep the game fun.



These guys have all kinds of cool equipment.

A Very Warren Spector Game

If you can't tell by now, *Deus Ex* is a very "Warren Spector" game. Gamers familiar with his past design work will see parallels to other games he's worked on all over the place, even down to the acquisition of a light saber-like

other games haven't done before. It's just a little more refined this time around. It's not hard to imagine that someone will eventually make a "Warren Spector/Doug Church style game" with a world simulation so complex that you'll have complete freedom to do absolutely anything you want in a



The game automatically takes notes for you, and often provides useful images.



Wow...gas prices are much lower in the future.

weapon and a rogue AI that whispers orders in your ear. Though the game's lead designer was actually Harvey Smith, with Warren Spector in a production role, it definitely has his touch. As with many of Warren's other games, *Deus Ex* is definitely not something "for everyone." You either enjoy a thoughtful mix of role-playing, action, adventure, and tactical strategy, or you prefer something that can be pigeon-holed a little more easily, something more "pure."

Deus Ex doesn't offer anything particularly innovative or revolutionary. It doesn't do anything that

realistic and believable fashion. Until that day, *Deus Ex* is the closest thing we've seen. Despite a few small complaints about inconsistent AI or disappointing Direct3D performance, this is a tremendously entertaining game. You'll tell your friends stories about how you got past certain areas, clue them in to secrets you've found, and brag about how cool your fully-augmented agent is. When it's all done, you might even find yourself playing again, just to build a different J.C. Denton and tackle things differently. If *Daikatana* has you laughing at Ion Storm, take a look at *Deus Ex*. —Jason Cross