

Deus Ex

Format: PC (reviewed), Mac Publisher: Eidos Developer: Ion Storm Price: £40 Release: August

After the unholy mess of Romero's *Daikatana*, *Deus Ex* – a project headed by Warren Spector – perhaps represented an immediate opportunity for developer Ion Storm to make up some lost ground. Early reports touted it as a dark, 'The Matrix'-inspired adventure, or a near-future RPG, or a *Half-Life*-beating firstperson shooter. A look at the finished product shows the reason for the confusion: *Deus Ex* is all it promised to be and more, spectacularly defying all attempts at pigeonholing.

The player takes on the role of JC Denton, an agent for a post-UN peacekeeping force called UNATCO, dedicated to fighting a war against terrorism in a future world ravaged by poverty and disease. The disease in question is the

a *Doom*-style killfest? As the game morphs seamlessly between genres, adapting your tactics can be an advantage, but is rarely an absolute necessity.

Completion of goals, both primary and secondary, is rewarded with skill points with which Denton's core abilities can be improved. While skill advancement in many RPGs merely affects your destructive capabilities – weapon range, close combat, or magic – choosing how to spend your accrued skill points is crucial to the path you'll take through each level. Advance in electronics and you'll be able to disable security networks with increasing ease. Choose heavy weaponry and develop your ability to blast holes in things.

Combat methods, in particular, are massively varied. Faced with a roomful of guards, you can use heavy explosives to take as many down as possible in one blast, or just go in all guns blazing in the manner of a traditional FPS. Alternatively, you can go for head shots with a sniper rifle, or sneak in and silently dispose of individual guards with a knife or stun gun, hiding bodies to avoid detection. Another tactic is to throw in a gas grenade and use the confusion to your advantage. Your approach depends upon the situation you find yourself in, the weapon skill you've decided to specialise in, or your own particular whim at the time.

In addition to Denton's skills come augmentations – permanent special abilities that can be added and upgraded with canisters scattered sparsely around the *Deus Ex* world. Each offers a choice: speed or stealth, better energy conservation or improved performance. Once these are installed, they cannot be removed or changed, leaving you to regret, for example, not choosing toxic protection when you can see an easy route through a waste pipe. Weapon upgrades, too, are available, enabling you to personalise parts of your armoury with increased range, accuracy or laser sights. Ultimately, you build Denton up, and you're responsible for his strengths and weaknesses, which is hugely satisfying.

Above all, *Deus Ex* never tells you what to do. Goals are set, but alter according to your decisions. In turn, how you handle the stark moral wildcards thrown up by the conflict affects people's reactions to you, as well as the future missions you receive. Denton's body has been engineered and enhanced with nanotechnology in order to serve UNATCO; Denton's mind – your mind –

Denton's body has been **engineered to serve UNATCO**; Denton's mind – your mind – is having doubts about **whether he should do so**



Making the correct choice of weapon in each situation is crucial. A sniper rifle might be perfect for some situations, but not for a flamethrower-wielding guard at close range or in a boardroom shootout

'Gray Death', and the only known remedy is the drug Ambrosia, which is being hoarded for those in positions of power and influence. The terrorists have targeted Ambrosia, and are demanding its distribution directly to the people. Ethically, they have a point.

Beginning just outside New York, the game is extravagant in its locations, taking you to Hong Kong, Paris, Area 51 and beyond. The *Unreal* engine, improved with enhanced lighting and a more realistic physics model, renders each with an occasional beauty, albeit mainly due to the sophisticated level design. These are 3D mazes carved from cities, each holding secrets, a mass of non player characters, and multiple problems to overcome.

Every location holds a series of game-critical primary objectives, but talking to NPCs will often trigger secondary tasks. Though these tasks are often unrelated to the mission in hand, solving them will sometimes provide information that is either helpful or serves to advance the storyline. It's this freedom to act upon or ignore information that holds the key to the game's success.

Games often claim multiple completion methods, but rarely achieve their goal with this much variation and style. Stealth, sniping, destruction, intelligence, careful planning, murderous rampages – all have their place within the multi-layered mission structure. Is it a *Metal Gear Solid* clone,



is having doubts about whether he ought to be doing so. The choice, and the associated pressure, is all yours.

The only discernible weaknesses in *Deus Ex* concerns the gradual degeneration of the plot into third-rate sci-fi nonsense and some appalling voice acting, which detract from the immersive experience, as do the increasingly large saving and loading times between areas. These are irritations a game this well designed deserves to be without, but they aren't enough to spoil the enjoyment. Behind the plot lies a game structure and depth that stands out from everything that has gone before. Put simply, it's the anti-*Daikatana* – a game that not only lives up to its hype, but often exceeds it.

Edge rating:

Nine out of ten



Shortly after arriving in Hong Kong, Denton encounters two gangs of warring triads. Here, they settle their differences in a disused subway station

Moral dilemmas

Not long into *Deus Ex*, an attack on your brother's flat will leave you with a choice: flee through the bedroom window, as directed, or stay and fight. The decision, though non-critical, affects the path of the game, and must be made in an instant. Torn apart by morality versus cowardice, **Edge** took the Blair-esque third way and hid in a cupboard. Covering, listening to the sounds of the conflict in a dark space until it's ripped apart by stray gunfire is terrifying, slightly embarrassing, and a perfect illustration of the freedom within the game.



Explosions and smoke effects are dramatic, if not especially realistic. Structures are varied within the same geographical area, taking Denton from engineering plants to trying his luck in a local nightspot