Modern Artifacts: What our Video Games say about us

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Abstract

This thesis project attempts to frame video games as cultural artifacts, by examining the values communicated through the systems in the games from the *Deus Ex* franchise and recognize the real-world cultural and social climates that inform the games' narratives. By demonstrating how video game narratives are informed and influenced by discourses in popular culture, one can also recognize how narratives in games shift alongside cultural climates. Based on previous theoretical frameworks, video games as a medium provide a unique interaction between player and system. Video games are reflective of contemporary cultural and political discourses, but more significantly, they are unique spaces in which players become active participants in these systems of values

The goal of this project is to examine video games as cultural artifacts to provide insights on the contemporary cultural values and anxieties, at the time of their release and development. In addition, this project also aims to demonstrate how video game narratives, as a medium, is susceptible to change influenced by social and political discourses in popular culture. The *Deus Ex* franchise aims to contextualize real-world debates within fictional, digital spaces that encourage players to exercise agency and become an immersed actor within the game world. Video games are defined by the interactions between the players and systems, which form an active participation from the consumer that is unique to games as a medium. Systems within games and their narratives communicate values to the player, which are not consumed a-politically, as previous literature suggests that games can provide context to the geopolitics of players. The first *Deus Ex* game, released in 2000, communicated contemporary debates regarding modern globalization and the growing power of economic institutions over political bodies. 2011's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* took narrative cues from the growth in civil unrest and government distrust seen in the late 2000s within the United States, demonstrating how changes in cultural values and anxieties influence narratives in video games. Lastly, the commentary and criticism towards 2016's *Deus Ex: Mankind Dividend's* handling of sensitive racial iconography is reflective of the real-world negotiations that occur between video game narratives and real-world geo-politics.

Before discussing the narrative elements of Deus Ex and their real-world parallels, it's important to address video games as a medium. In a short essay on attempting to create a generalized definition of video games, Nicolas Esposito proposed video games as "a *game* which we *play* thanks to an *audiovisual apparatus* and which can be based on a *story* (Esposito, 2005, p.1). A broader definition that has been influential in how games and video games are interpreted

and studied came from Jasper Juul (2003), who identified six key components to games: (1) games have a fixed, formal rule set that have (2) variable and measurable outcomes. (3) These outcomes are assigned different values in relation to win states and the rules, and (4) it's the player's efforts that influence the outcomes of the game. (5) Players feel attached to the outcomes and (6) the consequences are negotiable (Juul et al, 2003, p. 5-7).

As Juul pointed out, video games are structured on systems designed for the player to interact with and reshape with their inputs. As a result, the relationship between the game designer/the systems of the game and the player creates a dynamic, unique to video games. This relationship between system and player enables a two-way interaction, in which the game design and narrative can be actively engaged with rather than be passively consumed by the player (Bowman, 2018, p.4). This two-way interaction helps the player in creating meaning out of the game's system, and can elicit emotional responses. Pippin Barr et al. (2007) pointed out that in Juul's definition to games, there is an emotional component to games, as well as an exchange in values as well. Barr (2007) claims that values are assigned to the various win states or lose states in a game, and thus to successfully operate within a game's predesigned systems, one must adopt the values imparted by the game itself: "In this sense, a player of *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) will accept the value of 'shooting alien attackers' because not doing so leads to losing the game, while doing so yields points and success." (Barr, 2007, par. 29). Values are a core concept to video games as games, as they inform the player both how the developers expected them to complete the tasks presented, but they're also relevant in understanding video games as cultural artifacts. Ultimately, the game designer implements the systems and aesthetics within a game to communicate values, framed within the context of the game world presented to the player. Narratives in video games are among the aesthetics that is influenced by values. In a study attempting to categorize video game narrative structures, Marcello Picucci (2014) made the compared game designers to a narrator, the player to

the narratee, and the resulting collaboration between narrator and narratee, the narration. This comparison highlights the dynamic within the designer/player relationship; a video game, no matter the levels of agency it offers in completing the challenges presents, always follows the systems determined by the developer's values and designs.

When considering the cultural value of the narratives and systems video games can offer, it is important to keep the values of the designers and developers a part of this consideration. In any piece of media, the narrative that it presents is reflective of contemporary social and cultural values and anxieties. In the film industry, the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center resulted in a new-wave of Islamophobia within the United States. This Islam-anxiety in the United States was clearly reflected in the post 9/11 film and television industry, with many storylines centering around a Middle Eastern individual or group posing a threat to America's national security, only for the terrorist threats to be stopped by predominantly Western hero figures (Veldhauz, 2017). In the 20th century throughout the Cold War, film and television were heavily influenced by the Red Scare and anti-communist sentiments that dominated public discourse through the 1950s-1980s (Pearson, 2011). Pointing out the real-world values and anxieties that influenced film and television in the United States is not to liken the narratives of video games and film, but rather to highlight the ways in which cultural and societal norms influence the narratives of popular culture. The same is true in video games. Examining the narratives throughout the Deus Ex series, allows for an opportunity to engage with the cultural and societal anxieties, and values, that were a part of the public discourse at the time of each game's release. This raises the question of how players engage with video game narratives and relate those to their everyday lives.

Nicolas Bowman's (2018) discussion of video game players as active participants, as opposed to passive consumers, can be applied to the ways the player interactives with the narrative of games themselves. Daniel Bos (2017) conducted a multilevel study that attempted to recategorize consumption of popular media and their given narratives as interpretive, and instead reframe video game consumption as a geopolitical event, through examining the narrative impacts of modern military games. Bos (2017) noted that previous literature on the subject of military games, specifically the *Call of Duty* franchise, have framed their narratives as enforcing a militarized, American jingoistic ideology, but there was little literature on the ways in which players internalize and apply these narrative experiences. The *Call of Duty* franchise has always toted a pro-American military ideology, particularly in its *Modern Warfare* series which sets combat in contemporary military settings. Bos' attempts to recategorize the engagement player's experience is not to question or support the values presented in the franchise, but rather to contextualize the geopolitical experiences presented to the player. Bos summarizes the ways in which players actively engage with the geopolitics of military games; "players do not necessarily understand, experience nor practice video gaming in a decontextualized vacuum, but show varying emotional investments, different preferences and practices and spatial circumstances that alter their engagements and encounters with the geopolitics of playing virtual war" (Bos, 2017, p. 63). Though the *Deus Ex* franchise has fundamentally different game design and structure than the *Call of Duty* series, the ways players engage, interpret, and relate with gameplay narratives discussed by Bos (2017) can be applied, regardless.

As discussed above, there is cultural value to examining the ways in which video game narratives and values interact with the player. Utilizing the frameworks above, a textual and cultural analysis of the *Deus Ex* franchise provides insight on the contemporary geopolitics of the

real-world, and the ways it tasks players to negotiate and interact with the values and text of the games. Since its conception in 2000, *Deus Ex* has been a series that set a standard for a sub-genre of video games, known as immersive simulations (immersive sims). Games that follow this design philosophy create environments that emulate interactions in a physical space, similarly to how they would in the real world (Gomes, 2005). In the case of *Deus Ex*, when the player character carries an object and throws it, they can either throw it further or shorter distances, depending on the weight of the object. Lifting and throwing objects is a small-scale design mechanic, but *Deus Ex* attempts to achieve immersion through its smaller designs and features. Amongst the games' systems and features, the *Deus Ex* franchise also presents global narratives that drive the player to engage with the systems. Renata Gomes (2005, p. 1) refers to Andrew Darley's (2002) description of players entering into a "kinesthetic acting" role, taking cues from the game's themes as justification for the events that occur in a game and ultimately motivates the player to interact with the systems presented. While narrative shouldn't be labeled solely as motivation for the player character, it's significant to note how games that follow designs similar to *Deus Ex* and other immersive sims create a push-pull relationship with the player.

In *Deus Ex,* the camera is fixed in a first-person perspective, not unlike contemporary *first-person shooter* games. While guns are present in the game, *Deus Ex* is designed to allow for the player to take whatever approach to a challenge they see fit. Players are free to take the lethal approach to reaching an objective, but there are alternatives designed throughout the games. Entire conflicts can be bypassed by finding a quieter, unseen approach like crawling through an air vent, or by physically moving objects to then climb to grab a ledge and circumvent entire areas. Players often can reach their objective without conflict at all through dialogue interactions with non-player characters (NPCs). Typical to other role-playing games (RPGs), the player can

customize their character with skills that emphasize their choice of playstyle. *Deus Ex's* design

provides multifaceted approaches to reach objections and interact with the game world, which

can elicit an immersion and relationship with the player that contextualizes them as an active

participant in the games' systems and values. In a reflection after *Deus Ex's* release, lead director

Warren Spector discussed the immersive design of the game:

> "Ideally, nothing reminds you that you're just playing a game -- not interface, not your character's back-
> story or capabilities, not game systems, nothing. It's all about how you interact with a relatively complex
> environment in ways that you find interesting (rather than in ways the developers think are interesting), and in ways
> that move you closer to accomplishing your goals (not the developers' goals)." (Spector, 2000, p.1)

The *Deus Ex* franchise's immersive design philosophy encapsulates the player-designer

relationship previously discussed in several theoretical frameworks. With these frameworks, one

can discuss the ways the *Deus Ex* franchise tasks players to engage with its narratives and

negotiate with the real-world social and political climates that inform the narrative.

For the purposes of this project, narrative and systems from *Deus Ex* (Eidos Interactive,

2000) will be examined, as well as narrative elements from *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos

Montreal, 2011) and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montreal, 2016). *Deus Ex* (Eidos

Interactive, 2000) was released as a personal computer (PC) exclusive and was revered as a cult

classic due to its relatively small marketing and player base. The game world is set in a dystopic

2052, where the player inhabits JC Denton, an agent who works for the United Nations Anti-

Terrorist Coalition (UNACTCO). The game begins with an introductory cinematic of the world

Deus Ex is set in. A conversation is shown between two men, who later become familiar to the

player as Bob Page and Walter Simons, two of the game's main antagonists. It's revealed that

Page and Simons are part of an organization that manufactured Gray Death, a disease meant to

diminish populations and reduce infrastructure, as well as the limited supply of its cure. Page

informs Simons of his appointment to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA),

hinting at the extent to which their shadow organization has influence over politicians and

institutions. Page and Simons reference the development of human augmentation, whereby

humans enhance their physical and cognitive attributes through technological enhancements.

Page cryptically alludes that the convergences of this technology and their control of governing

systems will enable them to become ruling gods, referencing 13th century theologian Thomas

Aquinas and his discussion of the city on the hill model of society. This introduction both sets

the tones of the game and introduces key characters, but largely informs the player of the global

narratives and climate in *Deus Ex*.

The game world is set as a world in which industry has privatized every sector,

converging global economies and politics, and placing a group of individuals as being the sole

puppeteers and benefactors of these systems of structures. Right away, immediate parallels can

be drawn from the overarching game narratives presented in *Deus Ex*, and the sociopolitical

climate preceding the development of the game. *Deus Ex* decisively relates the governing

economic entities and their policies as directly responsible for the majority population's

discontent and suffering, echoing the contemporary discourses on globalization and its impacts

on human populations. Sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman discussed the impacts on

human social structures and economies in his book *Globalization: The Human Consequences*

(1998). In discussing the impacts of neoliberal ideals on economic mobility in globalized

societies, Bauman stated:

"The mobility acquired by 'people who invest' – those with capital, with money which the investment

requires - means the new, indeed unprecedented in its radical unconditionality, disconnection of power from

obligations: duties towards employees, but also towards the younger and weaker, towards yet unborn generations

and towards the self-reproduction of the living conditions of all; in short, freedom from the duty to contribute to

daily life and the perpetuation of the community" (Bauman, 1998, p.9).

This insight is reiterated in an article discussing the history of anti-globalization, which

saw that the average growth per capita, globally, was 83% between 1960s-1980s, while the

average dropped to 33% in all countries during 1980s-2000s, the period considered to have seen

the emergence of modern globalization. (Warner, 2005, p. 238). The 1990s saw first instance of

organized anti-globalization, culminating in the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization Protests,

where over 40,000 protestors of all different races, nations, and socioeconomic statuses

organized rallies outside of the Washington State Convention and Trade Center, during a

conference of members of the World Trade Organization. The protest stood as a landmark in the

anti-globalist movement. Discontent with the ramifications of globalized economics and policies

entered popular and academic discourse through the 1990s in the United States, and *Deus Ex's*

narrative draws parallels with these real-world values and anxieties. The game tasks players with

negotiating with these themes in the game world, by interacting with the systems that

communicate these values.

Throughout the player's journey as JC Denton, they'll uncover global conspiracies, that

link shadow governments, such as the Illuminati and its more elusive subsection, Majestic 12, to

the controlling governments and economic industries. As mentioned before, JC Denton works as

an agent for UNATCO, an anti-terrorism coalition formed by the United Nations after the Statue

of Liberty was attacked by secessionist terrorists, who's aim was to force the United States

government to allow several states to secede and become independent nations. The terrorist cells

are motivated by the lack of humanitarian aid from the government in the recent outbreak of

Gray Death. Denton is tasked with dealing with the threats by his superiors at UNATCO, in what

ever method the player sees fit. However, by the end of the first half of the game, Denton

discovers financial links between FEMA leader Walter Simons, an associate of Majestic 12, and

UNATCO, revealing that the agency served as foot soldiers for the shadow government, and

Denton's missions against secessionist terrorists are recontextualized as silencing dissenters and

upholding current hegemonies. From here, Denton and the player will travel the globe, following

threads of a grander conspiracy, eventually discovering Bob Page, the richest industrialist in the

world, and his connections with Majestic 12. As CEO of Page Industries, a company that

operates in the private sectors of pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and communications, Page

created a global internet service called Aquinas toted as a service which would streamline

communications and provide internet across the globe. Page and in turn Majestic 12's true

intentions for Aquinas, were to create unlimited opportunities for clandestine surveillance and

information gathering. Upon this revelation, Denton travels to Area 51, the final setting of the

game and an infamous representation of governmental secrets and conspiracies. There, Denton is

confronted by Helios, a sentient AI that utilizes Aquinas information gathering and surveillance,

and is determined to merge with biological component, or human, to become a benevolent

dictator that orchestrates global governments and economies. Page, who lead Majestic 12 to

break away and betray the Illuminati, intends on becoming this all-knowing god, until Denton

and the player stop his merging and ultimately causes his demise.

　　　With this sequence completed, the player arrives to the ending of *Deus Ex*, where they

are presented with three choices for how the game will end. In one ending, Helios will

proposition Denton to merge with it, and inherit the mantel of benevolent dictator that Page had

aspired to. Helios argues to the player: "The checks and balances of democratic governments

were invented because human beings themselves realized how unfit they were to govern

themselves. They needed a system, yes, an industrial-age machine." (Eidos Interactive, 2000).

This ending provokes the player into considering a world where globalization has completely

converged all economies, governances, and medias, into a single entity, not unlike the status of

the United States as a reigning superpower during modern globalization periods (Bauman, 1998).

The second ending, referred to as a New Dark Age, tasks the player to refuse Helios' proposition

to become a god of a new age, and instead destroy Area 51, effectively destroying the AI, and

the converging global communications stationed there. This act would diminish global

communications, thus freeing governments from controlling shadow organizations, such as the

Illuminati or Majestic 12. Opposite to becoming a benevolent dictator, this choice trusts mankind

to govern itself by ending global communications and returning control to local governments.

The third option is proposed by the Illuminati. Should Denton destroy Helios and Page and leave

the rest of the global communications intact, destroying any evidence of a grander conspiracy

involving the Illuminati, then he will become a fully initiated member of the shadow

organization, collaborating and becoming compliant in their orchestrations. The three endings

encapsulate the themes and values running through the narratives of *Deus Ex.* This examination

of the parallels in the themes of the game's narratives with contemporary real world

socioeconomic and political discourses isn't to argue *Deus Ex* as an anti-globalist driven

narrative, but rather to demonstrate video games as a space in which players negotiate real-world

values and anxieties in a medium designed by individuals informed by popular and cultural

events. Video games by their design by receiving inputs by the player and responding, allowing

for the player to become an actor that interacts with the systems and values of a game. *Deus Ex*

places the player in a world that explores contemporary anxieties on the global impacts of

converging economies and governments under a handful of controlling parties, and tasks them with being an active actor within a world that follows these ideals.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Eidos Montreal, 2011) carries the torch of immersive interactions that *Deus Ex* introduced. This time, the story takes place in the year 2027, and serves as a prequel to the original *Deus Ex.* The narrative continues to be to revolve around a world governed by conspiracies and focuses on the advent of human augmentation. While human augmentation is obsolete by 2052 and the event of *Deus Ex* take place, *DEHR* frames the human body as the last point of convergence for technological advancements. The player takes on the role of Adam Jensen, a former FBI agent turned security specialist for Sarif Industries, one of the leading biotechnology, and medical corporations in North America. The game also opens with a cinematic, revealing, in similar fashion to the original *Deus Ex*, that the Illuminati are the reigning shadow organization, hinting at their global outreach through a conversation, with members from several different countries. The Illuminati members, among them a younger Bob Page, set into motion a plot to destabilize Sarif Industries for a recent decision to go public on a hinted at discovery. After a coordinated attack on the Sarif Industries headquarters in Detroit, Jensen is mortally wounded, but ultimately saved when CEO David Sarif makes the executive decision to implement the most advanced augmentations available in order to save his life. In the chaos, Jensen's longtime significant other and Head of Research for Sarif Industries, Dr. Megan Reed, is kidnapped. From here, the player, as an augmented Adam Jensen, starts a journey to uncover who was behind the attacks, and kidnapped Dr. Reed. Jensen and the player will travel the globe following connections and leads on this attack, and in similar fashion to *Deus Ex*, begin to unravel a larger conspiracy that lies at the heart of the events that occur in the game.

Systematically, *Deus Ex* (Eidos Interactive, 2000) and *DEHR* (Eidos Montreal, 2011)

operate very similarly. Besides obvious differences, like *DEHR's* more advanced graphics and

processing power which can be attributed to advancements in computing technology, the focus

of *DEHR's* narrative is the central difference that is significant when deciphering its real-world

cultural values and anxieties. The start of *DEHR* marks the advent of human augmentation

entering popularity, allowing for individuals to physically upgrade their physiology, and thus

objectively superior in this regard. For example, one might get cognitive augmentations to

become smarter, better at conversation, or an athlete might have implants that make them

physically stronger than their competition. Of course, not everyone can afford these

biomechanical augmentations, nor does everyone agree with the merging of technology and

human biology, and a social schism is caused as a result.

This is the game world that *DEHR* presents, one with social unrest based on economic

privileges and disadvantages, as a result of global efforts to improve the efficacy of the human

species. Jensen and the player will encounter civilian NPCs going about their daily lives in the

open-world streets of Detroit, and will often overhear either anti or pro-augmentation rhetoric

from strangers in the street, or the player will see many of the news broadcasts by media

personality, Eliza Cassan, reporting on global acts of terrorism and growing discontent in

populations over growing socioeconomic stratifications. Similar to how Bauman (1998)

discussed the ever increasing economic and social stratifications as a result of globalization,

DEHR centers its narrative on the individuals impacted by increased advances in technology and

the resulting social unrest. In his journey, Jensen discovers that the attackers on Sarif Industries

were connected with a radical anti-augmentation group called Purity First, who are

representative of the most extreme rhetoric against human augmentation and corporate industries

as policy makers. Jensen is even somewhat sympathetic to their discontent, remarking to himself at the start of the game that "corporations have more power than the government. Everyone's fighting for power. For control" (Eidos Montreal, 2011).

The narrative of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* explores a world where the imbalances of power in favor of economic entities, produce social tensions that is manifested in the pro or anti-augmentation debate that occurs throughout Jensen and the player's journey. The game world in *DEHR* produces a space that asks questions about the efficacy of a societal structure that advances global communications and technologies, advancing even the individual's own physiology, at the cost of creating stratifications between people and governments, and interpersonally. This focus on the removal of the public as an influence in the global political and economic sphere in the game's narrative, is where *DEHR's* medium as a video game allows for the player to interact with the values and anxieties imbedded in contemporary cultures and societies.

The economic and sociopolitical climate of the United States in the 2000s, preceding *Deus Ex: Human Revolution's* 2011 release, reveals the cultural values and anxieties that became woken in and implemented in the game's narrative and systems. The start of the 2000s was marked with a dissent in trust in government amongst the majority of Americans, with the national trust level at 44% nationally, to 21% in August of 2011, the time of *DEHR*'s release (Pew Research Center, 2019). Large-scale international events, such as the War on Terror and the subsequent U.S invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan stands as moments which saw public opinion clash with government policies (Rosentiel, 2019), but dissent in domestic economics and policies was a prevalent cause in the displacement of governing bodies and the public.

The late 2000s in the world saw the emergence of the Great Recession, and the United States experienced a housing market crash and rising unemployment rates (Byun, 2010), the likes of which was unprecedented in modern economies. In an address on stabilizing the markets, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernake (2008), suggested that the recession was a caused by the public and private sectors distrust of economic institutions, and that the way to stabilize the free market was to trust in it, without intervention. This climate of distrust helped conceptualize and pave a way to the public sphere a new wave of economic movements. On the Republican aisle, the Tea Party movement protested Obama administration policies, such as the Affordable Care act and other federal interventions to resuscitate the economy, displaying public dissent in their first protest in 2009, where over 11,000 members of the movement convened in Chicago (Martin et al, 2018). While the Tea Party appeared in the public sphere, a movement on the opposite end of the political aisle began to gain traction as well, Occupy Wall Street, or the Occupy movement. Following America's economic recession, many in the public were frustrated with the seemingly preferential treatment that executives and members of the financial sector in the U.S. received, when a large population had been left unemployed and financially unstable as a result of the crisis (Hayduk, 2013), and coined the phrase "We are the 99%", to highlight the inequality in economic distribution to America's wealthiest members. Members of the Occupy movement protested Wall Street in September 2011, where upwards of 15,000 protestors rallied in New York City, with subsequent protests nationally, as well as in Canada (Hayduk, 2013). The Tea Party generally consisted of conservative, white, male, middle to upper-class, and older members (Martin et al, 2018), while the Occupy movement members were more diversely distributed amongst, race and ethnicities, socioeconomic class, and age (PRRI, 2011).

The political climate of the United States in the 2011s was marked by public opinions of distrust in government and economic entities. While it is significant to note the parallels between cultural climates and the narrative and values found in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, it is more important to recognize that narratives within video games are attuned with and influenced by cultural values and anxieties. *DEHR* presents a space for the player to interact a medium that is attuned to changes in cultural and political climates in Western globalized societies, and to engage with the discourses on public dissent of governments and fragmentation between social and economic classes. The changing narratives in video games, and their ability to present values that a player can negotiate with, demonstrates video games as cultural artifacts that reflect contemporary cultural values and anxieties.

Games from the *Deus Ex* franchise serves as examples of how the systems and narratives change with contemporary climates. The endings of *DEHR* exemplify the changes in narratives and values. At the end of Adam Jensen and the player's journeys in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, a broadcast is sent across the globe, triggering violent outbreaks in augmented individuals, resulting in a loss of life in the millions. This event was dubbed simply as "The Incident". Discovering this triggering was at the behest of the Illuminati to further destabilize public opinions on augmentation and create restrictive legislation. Jensen can choose reveal the Illuminati's involvement, blame anti-augmentation extremists and preserve public opinion on augmentation, hide the Illuminati's involvement in favor of a scapegoat, or allow for the public to make of the incident as it will. These endings don't assert one system of governance over another, like the endings in *Deus Ex*, but rather displays values and anxieties centering around issues of trust in established systems of governance, and further demonstrates video games as a medium reflective of the cultures they're consumed in.

Deus Ex: Mankind Divided (Eidos Montreal, 2016) carries this attunement to contemporary cultural and social values and anxieties. A year after the events of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Mankind Divided* examines social tensions, taking place in a world verging on mechanical "apartheid", as the game's marketing would suggest. *Mankind Divided's* game world takes cues from apartheid era South Africa, in its depiction of discrimination and segregation the augmented populations of the world experience following the Incident. Entire parts of cities across the globe become segregated into non-augmented and augmented sections, with augmented people predominantly living in ghettos. The narrative attempts to examine segregation and oppression as a result of governing policies and power structures. Parallels between *Mankind Divided's* setting and narratives with popular discourse on race relations in the United States are very stark, so much so as to implement the phrase "Black Lives Matter", popularized by the movement of the same name, and reinterpreting it as "Aug Lives Matter" in marketing prior the game's release. This campaign was largely criticized by games media and reviewers, citing the game as taking advantage of a sensitive movement for monetary gain (Frank, 2016). Executive brand director Andre Vu commented that the marketing slogan had been devised before the popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement, and that the association between the slogans was a coincidence (Frank, 2016). *Mankind Divided* also received criticism in reviews for its superficial handling of its parallels with real-world race relations (Campbell, 2016).

Continuing the game as Adam Jensen, the player is immersed in a segregated world, where augmented individuals are discriminated against and systematically oppressed. *Mankind Divided* portrays this discrimination through documentation checkpoints for augmented individuals, geographical segregation, and disproportionate harassment from law enforcements.

As the player walks around the open world city of Prague, the game's main area, they'll witness

NPC's receiving these treatments from law enforcements and other non-augmented civilians, but

never experiences the same treatment, so as not to slow the pacing of gameplay or story. Other

examples exist throughout the game that present the politics of segregation, but only provides a

superficial level of interaction or understanding to systems of oppression as a whole, resulting in

critics perceiving *Mankind Divided* largely a political failure (Muncy, 2016).

     Mankind Divided provides an example of a video game that aims to facilitate larger

cultural and societal discourses through its medium but fails to communicate values through its

interactions. Failing to communicate these values does not necessarily devalue *Mankind Divided*

to a video game with no cultural value, but rather can serve as an example of a high-budget game

intended to be sold to as large of an audience-base as possible that was hesitant in asserting its

political nature. This notion of hesitancy to assert politics in a large budget release is itself a very

politically charged approach. The reception of *Mankind Divided's* political imagery and

retrospective discussions of its handling of contemporary race relations exemplifies Bos' (2017)

discussion of games not being consumed in an apolitical vacuum, but rather as being

contextualized by a player's everyday lives and informing one of their geopolitical climate.

Mankind Divided's failure to demonstrate experiences of oppression that parallel real-world race

relations can allow for critics and audiences to facilitate discussions of ways of implementing

systems in games to convey meaningful values.

     Examining video games as a space where systems communicate values that enforce their

narratives allows for them to become significant cultural artifacts that convey contemporary

values and anxieties. The ability to convey societal values and commentate on anxieties is not

singularly unique to the video game medium, but the allowance for the player to become an

active participant and agent within those systems of values calls for games to receive their own unique consideration. *Deus Ex* franchise, video game narratives are informed and influenced by the contemporary social and political climates that they are conceived in. The *Deus Ex* games attempt to create spaces for players to negotiate the values within the games' systems, in a sense allowing them to become an active participant in larger discourses that influenced the narratives. In *Mankind Divided*, where the game's systems and interactions larger fail to enforce its overall narrative of societal systems of segregation, meaningful interpretations of how the game failed to convey meaningful, informed experiences, can still have significant cultural interpretations. Examining the narratives within this series exemplifies the ways video games are attuned to cultural climates, and the values and narrative focuses changes as societies do. The aim of this project is to advocate for video games as meaningful cultural artifacts, that communicate their values through a unique interaction between player and system.

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