Deus Ex Ludos: Representation, Agency, and Ethics in *Deus Ex: Invisible War*

Joseph Hogle
University of Pittsburgh
233 Romeo Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213
jjh53@pitt.edu

Do players have agency?

According to Alec Charles (2009), videogames offer a "fictive agency": they purport to be places where players have free will, but they are not actually such places at all. This is because every choice available to videogame players is determined by code, and the code is written in advance by developers. The game world is thus limited, or determined. Players can *react* to this determined world, but they cannot *act* in it. Charles calls this "functional reactivity": players respond to the determination of the game in order to serve the game's determinations. So gameplay is not self-determination (i.e., agency), but faux-determination, a facsimile of agency.

Charles finds this problematic because games present themselves as places where players have *real* agency. Illusory self-determination—players assuming they have total freedom of choice when in fact their choices are restricted—sneakily robs players of their real-life self-determination. Players are "subsumed to the game's constructed subject." They are duped into believing that "their participation represents a form of activity, a mode of agency, [when] they are, in effect (and in consequence), mere puppets of the text". In seeing their game-agency as true agency, players lose their ability to really challenge the world of the game. They have no room for

interpretation or meaning-creation. By *pretending* to give players some freedom of choice, videogames actually *prevent* players from having real autonomy.

To counter Charles's claims, let us first look at how the game world is structured in comparison to the real world. The game world has laws, much like the real world, although such laws are often simpler than their real world counterparts. It is these laws that make game-agency fictive: only a finite set of actions are recognizable to the game, which means that players' choices are narrowly delineated and their agency undermined. To illustrate this, imagine I am playing a simple videogame as a character who can throw a ball. In both the game and the real world, I can throw the ball in the air. In both the game world and real world, the ball then falls to the ground. But in the game world I can only throw the ball straight up or straight down. In the real world I can throw the ball in any direction. There are boundaries to what I can do in the game world, boundaries put there by the game's developers. Such boundaries are lawful restrictions, separate from those in the real world and discoverable through experimentation.

Thus, what can be done in a game is restricted. A game world has its own immutable mechanics. Its laws exist because there is a code—a programmatic structure—made by developers, and this code allows or does not allow for certain actions. The game world is, in effect, purely determinate. But does this mean that *players' actions* are purely determinate? Return to the example of the ball-throwing game. A videogame version of Laplace's demon—one that can see every line of code, the determinate structure of the game—is watching me play. Can the demon predict what will happen at every point in the game while I play it? The answer is no. At each instance in the game where there is more than one possibility—where players can push either one button or another, where I can throw the ball up or down—the demon only has access to the determinate world of the code. The demon does not have access to me, the player. I am an indeterminate influence on the world of the game. In fact, determination in the game *hinges* on an agent external to the game's programmatic structure: the player. That's what gameplay *is*.

So we see that in games, interactivity—i.e., the significance of the player's agency in the game—is not illusory. While all internal parts of the game are determinate, those parts cannot function independent of players' input, and players are *external* to

the game. They are not determined by it, and even though the game can limit their choices, it cannot make their choices for them or predict their choices with any kind of certainty. This is not a mere *sense* of agency. It is *real* agency, even if it is structured by a world whose rules are different from the real one.

Players of videogames are generally aware of this system of restricted choice and consequence. Any person who has played with a friend might have heard the friend ask "*Does the game let you do X?"* or *"What happens if you do Y?"* or *"Why can't I do Z?"* Such questions acknowledge the restrictive nature of a game's laws. Players experiment with game worlds to test their boundaries. This experimentation reveals that players *know* they are in a world of restrictions that do not mirror those of the non-virtual. Players have some agency, but are not fooled into thinking they have the same *sort* of agency in the game world that they have in the real world, as Charles would have it.

In many ways, agency in videogames mirrors how theorists of intelligent design see agency in the real world: an all-powerful creator makes a universe with particular restrictions, laws, functions, and meanings. In this universe, individuals with free will act. Such individuals make decisions and the consequences of those decisions are determined by the laws of the universe, which were determined by the creator and in which the creator does not intervene. The individuals are indeterminate actors within a determinate, intentional system.

The videogame, too, is an intentional system, one made by game developers. As I have shown, an intentional structure of restrictions (determined by other humans, not an all-powerful creator) is the defining difference between game agency and what we see as real agency. Charles would have us believe that this difference makes videogames mendacious, or at least deceptive, but players experiment within videogames precisely because they are aware that videogames limit their agency. Hence, rather than being deceptive, might the intentional structure of videogames be an appeal to creativity?

What I mean is this: through a determined system of restrictions, choices, and consequences, skilled developers can challenge a player ideologically, or otherwise prompt self-reflection. Videogames can use their coded consequences to represent concepts in new or meaningful ways. They can make claims about the world which are not closed off to interpretation or challenge from players. Indeed, the finitude of choices in games can give rise to moral frustration and self-evaluation—in

other words, to meaning-creation. In the interest of explaining these things, I will examine how *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (*DX:IW*) accomplishes them.

Core, shell, and ethical practice

To make my analysis of *Deus Ex: Invisible War* as lucid as possible, I will hold off on it for a little longer and talk about the construction of video games in general. King and Krzywinska write, "games have their own dimensions, distinct from those of other media … but games are also social-cultural products, involved in the broad processes through which ideas are circulated … [games] often draw upon or produce material that has social, cultural, or ideological resonances … they can be understood as reinforcing, negating or challenging meanings generated elsewhere in society" (King and Krzywinska, 2006, 169). This is exactly what *DX:IW* does: challenge players' received or inculcated meanings.

Frans Mayra's (2008) concepts of "core" and "shell" will help us understand the *how* of this challenge. A game's core is the coded set of laws/restrictions discussed above. The game's shell is its "representation and sign system," i.e., its images, sounds, words, characters, plot, and so on. Without the core, the game probably does not exist *per se*; at least, it does not work. Without the shell, the game cannot communicate. I will look at parts of both *DX:IW's* core (its players' agency) and *DX:IW*'s shell (its representation of political structures) to show how it prompts meaning-creation.

To be specific, I will deal with *ethical* meaning. The serious application of ethical frameworks to videogames is fairly new. Sicart (2005) looks at how ethical community-practices within a game world change based on a game's rules. Shulke makes a case for *Fallout 3* as a game that excels at moral teaching. Particularly helpful are Simkins and Steinkuehler (2008): they develop a compelling case for why ethical choices in games matter, as well as a useful framework for RPG features that drive critical ethical reasoning.

All these studies place experience and practice at the center of ethical learning. Drawing from thinkers like Aristotle and Dewey, they assert that just thinking about ethical assertions or dilemmas is not the only, or even the best, way to cultivate one's sense of ethics. It helps if one can make *decisions* that have

consequences. To put it another way, ethical decision-making must be *practiced* in a variety of scenarios if one's ethical reasoning (1) is to mature.

Videogames allow for such practice. Because of their design mechanics—e.g., their ability to situate players' agency in an imaginary narrative context—they can demand that players experiment with ethical decision-making. Moreover, they can connect players' decisions with dramatic consequences. To show this process of ethical cultivation at work, I will give a detailed account of an ethical dilemma players face at the end of *DX:IW.* To my knowledge, a rigorous ethical analysis has never been applied to any specific part of the game.

First, for the sake of clarity, I will provide a brief expository account of the diegetic world—the narrative, representations, and logics—of *DX:IW*.

Deus Ex: Invisible War

Deus Ex: Invisible War, the sequel to *Deus Ex,* is a science fiction game set at an unknown point in the future. The world of *DX:IW* is suffering economic depression and widespread social upheaval. Technology plays a pivotal role, especially insofar as it allows people to make drastic alterations to their bodies. Known as "biomods," these alterations can give a person superhuman abilities, e.g., incredible reflexes, strength, vision, or intelligence.

The same technology that gives us biomods can also be used for acts of violence: the game opens with a nano-technological terrorist attack that destroys Chicago, and later, a corporation spreads a lethal nanite virus. Biotechnological violence is done with weapons too small to see—hence the game's title. As one character remarks, "We don't need cities or armies. We have the cells of human bodies. An invisible weapon, for an invisible war" (Ion Storm, 2003). Finally and perhaps most importantly, biomodification increases the gap between rich and poor. The wealthy can afford biomods to extend their lives and give themselves fantastic attributes. The poor do not have this luxury.

DX:IW is a first-person role-playing game, with "Alex D." being the role. Alex is heavily biomodified and has been trained as an anti-terrorist agent. To progress in the game, players must, as Alex, accomplish a number of objectives. They can do so

through stealth, dialogue, espionage, combat, or a mixture of all four—notably, killing is never *required*.

The player is routinely presented with multiple, mutually exclusive objectives and forced to choose one. For example, she might have one objective that requires her kill a scientist, and another that requires her to protect that scientist. Her decision affects the options available to them in later stages. While interesting, these branching decision points make it all but impossible to provide a thorough summary of the plot: there are too many twists, turns, and alternatives. In light of this, and since my claims do not rest on minute plot points, I'll choose brevity and simplicity over summarization. The skeletal background I've provided is enough to understand my next section, a description of political representations in *DX:IW*.

Political representations

If the shell of a videogame is its representations, or diegetic elements, then political organizations make up the most important part of *Deus Ex: Invisible War's* shell. There are four major political organizations in *DX:IW*: ApostleCorps, the Illuminati, the Knights Templar, and the Omar. These organizations define the player's functional objectives; i.e., they give the player assignments. They also structure the narrative world of the game—not only the main story, but also the marginal but persistent backdrop against which events unfold.

Players find themselves aligned—by accident or design—with one of the four organizations by the time the game ends. Since these organizations are the backbone of the game's diegesis and, thus, determine its ethical landscape, we cannot evaluate the game's creation of ethical meaning unless we know something about each organization's ideology and aims. To this end, we will look at some selections of dialogue (2).

ApostleCorps. This is the most philosophically sophisticated of the four organizations. Its goals are twofold: to create a "pure" democracy and to create a posthuman civilization in which ability—i.e., the capacity for physical or intellectual problem-solving—is a universal public resource.

Alex D: What would this "pure democracy" look like?
JC Denton: The Helios AI has the processing power to handle all governmental functions worldwide, legislative, executive, and judicial. Once every mind has been enhanced and can merge with the AI, attitudes toward major legislation can be processed on a daily or even more frequent basis.
Alex D: You want everyone to...meld themselves together into one huge AI construct?
JC Denton: Helios will communicate, not assimilate. Life will go on as usual.
Alex D: Helios is starting to sound like an enlightened despot.
JC Denton: All governments have power. The benefit of giving this power to a synthetic intellect is that human affairs would no longer need to be ruled by generalities. Helios will have a deep understanding of every person's life and opinions...de Tocqueville noted that an all-knowing mind—the mind of God, as he conceived it—would have no need for general ideas. It would understand every individual in detail and at a glance. Incomplete applications of law or justice would be impossible for such a mind.
Alex D: So you see yourself as a god?
JC Denton: I want human affairs to be driven by wisdom. Finding the correct recipe for wisdom has been my project these long years under the ice.
Alex D: You seem to think you've succeeded.
JC Denton: Wisdom must first be human. You must start with what a human sees and feels. But wisdom must also be knowledgeable, logical, and fair to billions of other beings.

In the interest of creating a pure democracy, an AI construct would be given access to every person's mind. The construct would acquire this access through universal biomodifications, which would be installed in all people at once and become part of

the human chromosome. The universalization of ability would be a natural consequence of this process.

> **Paul Denton**: If you want to even out the social order, you have to change the nature of power itself. Right? And what creates power? Wealth, physical strength, legislation—maybe—but none of those is the root principle of power....ability is the ideal that drives the modern state. It's a synonym for one's worth, one's social reach, one's "election," in the Biblical sense, and it's the ideal that needs to be changed if people are to begin living as equals.
> **Alex D**: And you think you can equalize humanity with biomodification?
> **Paul Denton**: The commodification of ability—tuition, of course, but, increasingly, genetic treatments, cybernetic protocols, now biomods—has had the side effect of creating a self-perpetuating aristocracy in all advanced societies. When ability becomes a public resource, what will distinguish people will be what they do with it. Intention. Dedication. Integrity. The qualities we would choose as the bedrock of the social order.

Universalizing ability entails a sort of physicalization of Martha Nussbaum's "capabilities approach". For Nussbaum (2007), a government's job should be to ensure that all individuals have the capability to possess certain basic characteristics that ensure dignity and quality of life. These include things like bodily health and bodily integrity, as well as control over one's environment/senses/imagination. ApostleCorps' plan guarantees, or seems to guarantee, those capabilities for everyone. According to them, all people will start life "truly equal in both body and mind...lucid, knowledgable, and emotionally sound" (1).

The Knights Templar. The Knights Templar are religious fundamentalists. They preach the value of "natural" human biology, and cast biotechnology/biomodification as a threat to humanity.

> **Templar Knight**: Human society is now so destructive that organic life itself is an endangered species. Remember the Templar message. The more you look at the world, the more truthful my words will seem...the individual worker—careerist, let's say—seldom understands how his small labor contributes to human history. Seemingly innocuous innovations in cell biology, nanotechnology, and computer science add up to a teeming substrate of new life. But it isn't life. It's death. It seeks to devour its clumsy, organic creators.
>
> **Alex D**: My biomods don't change who I am. They're tools—I use them to complete certain tasks.
>
> **Templar Knight**: But the tasks grow in strangeness and complexity. The demands of others corrupt you. All because you allow yourself to be something other than human.

Machines, by virtue of slowly replacing the "natural" organic structure of the human being, are also replacing humanity. This ideological stance is not especially hard to unravel: it is bigotry dressed up in a mythologized account of human biological characteristics. It is founded on the sanctity of some "natural" state or value. Appropriately, the Templars are the closest thing to an outright enemy in *DX:IW*. They commit acts of terrorism to try and prevent the spread of biomodification. Their radicalism pits them against every other organization in the game. By the end, the Templars have a plan to eliminate all biomodifications without harming the organism that's been modified (the story does allow for gray areas). Since the opponents of the Templars rely heavily on their biomods, this would allow the Templars to seize control.

The Illuminati. The Illuminati are an aristocratic organization. They attempt to bring the world out of its economic depression and social collapse through behind-the-scenes maneuvering. For example, two pseudo-factions at the beginning of the game appear to be against one another: The Order and the World Trade Organization. These pseudo-factions give the player conflicting objectives. Later it is revealed that both are actually run by the Illuminati. The Illuminati use these groups (and the struggle between them) as a means for global good. A

conversation with one of the Illuminati leaders reveals their intent and reasoning:

> **Nicolette**: We'll always lead the people, though they'll never know our names. Our sacred goal, the elevation of humankind, can only be accomplished in secrecy. We will provide civilization with only the best leadership…
> **Alex D**: Any last-minute advice?
> **Nicolette**: Yes--I worry that you still perceive the Illuminati as a conspiracy. The organization does have some image problems, I suppose. As you know, the Illuminati have imperceptibly guided civilization for centuries. How? Leadership. We elevate the capable into positions of authority, where they can do the most good for everyone. JC [Apostlecorps] and Saman [The Knights Templar] both want to level the social order, either by giving biomods to everyone or no one. It's the same either way—the end of true leadership and a descent into chaos.
> **Alex D**: What do you propose instead?
> **Nicolette**: Without extraordinary individuals, civilization will founder. Total homogeneity—now THAT'S unnatural. That's what we have to resist at all cost.
> **Alex D**: So the Illuminati wants to maintain disparity?
> **Nicolette**: Not disparity, but difference, and the well-managed specialization it makes possible. Some people just aren't leaders and shouldn't be granted great powers. The Illuminati want to ensure that humankind will always have a select few—like you, Alex—to inspire the rest.

The Illuminati think that leveling the playing field will result in chaos. They claim that a hierarchy in which a few leaders make decisions for all others is the only viable social model. It is by refining this structure that humanity can be bettered.

The Omar. The Omar seem to have no specific stake in the direction society takes. Players encounter them as traders of black-market goods. They value nothing but their own physical/mental enhancement. Thanks to extensive

biomodification, the Omar are suited to survive in almost any environment. They have all merged into a collective consciousness by replacing parts of their brains with a wireless connected interface. Their ideological commitment is to radical posthumanity; they feel the other organizations adhere to outdated ideas of human potential, for in their view, the word "human" is hardly applicable to what technology allows us to *become*. The Omar embrace a type of Darwinist fundamentalism: the only real purpose in the world is fitness and mastery.

Representation and genre

These political structures fit nicely into a reading of *DX:IW* as a science fiction text. The game is faithful to many of the characteristics that define the genre. It uses a fictional *novum*—in this case, a future defined by biomodification—to establish cognitive estrangement. That is, the game world is both relatable and plausible, because its representations of reality correlate to the actual world; yet at the same time, the game world is unfamiliar, because even though its representations involve plausible innovations and advancements, they are not part of our lives. So we recognize the subject but are also removed from it. This allows us to see the game's representations from a critical distance and to reflect on reality in new ways. It allows the text to work as a "diagnosis, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives" (Suvin, 1972). Thus, representation in *DX:IW* serves the same function as in science fiction literature. It prompts reflection and critical thought, which alone is enough to create ethical meaning.

Consequences and ethics

That said, I am not interested in dealing only with the shell of *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. Rather, I am arguing that its elemental design, or core, is also conducive to the creation of ethical meaning. Specifically, I want to look at the mechanism of player agency, which makes the game not just an opportunity for ethical reflection, but an *arena* in which ethical decision-making is *practiced*.

There can't be ethical decision-making without consequences, so it only makes sense to describe the consequences of aligning with *DX:IW*'s factions. I find *DX:IW* particularly sophisticated in this regard. Instead of communicating ethical consequences through pedantic mechanics like morality points, rewards, or sliders (see *Fallout 3, Fable, Knights of the Old Republic*), *DX:IW* embeds ethics in its narrative, or diegetic representations. It does not use some metric to tell players which actions are right and which are wrong, but requires players to critically evaluate what they do. In keeping with this spirit of critical self-evaluation, I will now stop referring to third-person "players" and make my own (first-person) experience of gameplay an explicit part of my analysis (spoiler alert: the bulk of this analysis concerns the final moments of the game).

Remember that the political organizations listed above are not part of a background narrative, but actually represent dense webs of choices that affect how the game's plot unfolds. Remember also my critique of Charles: as a player, I must act within the determinate system of the game. Thus, I cannot choose *not* to choose between the factions unless I stop playing entirely. I have to align myself with one, and that alignment comes with consequences. But this determinacy does not foreclose agency. As we've seen, the game's determinate structure is rich with multivalent meanings, many of which are mutually exclusive. In order to advance in the game, I must weigh the in-game characters' ideologies against one another and act accordingly. The game gives me a limited number of actions to take, but it cannot force me to choose one in particular. All it can do is try to *persuade* me; I myself will decide what to do with the choices given me, and if I decide to do what seems most ethical, then this surely is an exercise of agency. After all, my decision causes the game to progress in one way rather than another.

Just as it would take too long to summarize the game's entire plot, it would also take too long to describe every possible ending, or ultimate consequence, in detail. I will only go into some, and in doing so, I will describe what went through my head as I played. I'll do this because playing games is often a kind of performance, and one of the keys to understanding such performance is the thought process of the performer (Mayra, 2008).

The game's ending invariably occurs on Liberty Island. When I reach it, the leaders of three of the four factions ask me to fulfill certain tasks—e.g., activating a machine, killing another

faction's leader—in service of their ideological aims (3). Absent from the factions giving orders are the Omar: as in the rest of the game, they seem to have little interest in what happens to the rest of the world.

Having to decide between the factions brings me to a standstill. My initial impulse is to endorse ApostleCorps. The Illuminati are manipulators; it seems that at best, they will maintain the status quo. The Knights Templar are more or less odious, so they're out. ApostleCorps is the most ethically persuasive of the factions, being interested in fixing the problems of humanity at their source.

Nevertheless, something about ApostleCorps seems amiss. Though I've decided to take it on faith that humanity will not become slave to a godlike artificial intelligence, it seems wrong to make biomodification compulsory (as would be the case if it were universalized the way ApostleCorps wants). The only way the plan can work is if *all* people are biomodified, even those who don't want to be. Achieving a "pure democracy" by stripping people of their bodily autonomy strikes me as…unjust, to put it lightly.

None of my choices is palatable. So what happens next? I come upon a non-player character in the game who proposes yet another path. Named Leo Jankowski, this character was introduced as a friend earlier in the storyline. Although he briefly sided with the Omar, he explains that he rejected their organization once they asked him to become part of their hive mind.

"It doesn't take a genius to see they all want one thing," he says, referring to all the organizations (not just the Omar). "To force their system on the rest of us. The world is doing just fine without a supreme leader." This loosely echoes my own sentiments: all of the factions want to unjustly compel people into adopting their political structure. While I don't agree with Leo that the world is doing just fine, I also don't see compulsion as an acceptable solution.

I decide to take Leo's way out. I kill the leaders of all three factions and destroy the machine that would allow them to enforce their systems on a global scale.

Afterward, a cutscene plays. I see a red wasteland: ruins and desert. As the camera pans, I hear a voiceover.

> After the Great Collapse only the mighty survived.
> Two centuries of war saw the rise and fall of many

> empires. It was the age of heroes. The battle fired crucible of all subsequent history. In the end the Earth was no longer green. Nothing survived on its surface other than a few embers of human kind. But from this crucible emerged masterworks of evolution.

At the line "masterworks of human evolution," the camera cuts to the face of an Omar. The Omar has nothing we'd recognize as skin. Its face is either permanently behind a gas mask or indistinguishable from one (see Figure 1).

> They were fit not just for the new Earth, but for the most barren corners of Creation. The glory of humanity would hence forward stretch on through time and space to the vanishing point of Eternity.

As the narrator says "glory of humanity," the camera cuts to the face of a dead human, with the Omar walking away from the camera. As the image fades out, a quote appears:

> "Let us reply to ambition that it is she herself that gives us a taste for solitude."
> – Montaigne

The narration is ironic when juxtaposed with the images. Nothing about the Omar appears to be human; indeed, an obsession with biological fitness, progression for progression's sake, has led the Omar to excise all traces of the frailty we see as unavoidable, if not constitutive, aspects of our selves. It's true that by killing the leaders of the three human factions I destroyed the status quo, but this did not lead to the betterment of humanity. On the contrary, it led to an environment in which nothing we consider human could possibly survive.

In this case, I put my ethical reasoning into practice and was met with an unwelcome consequence. I have interpreted this consequence in a particular way—namely, as unsatisfying. I acknowledge that someone else, someone with different ethical sensibilities, might find the consequence completely satisfying. I also acknowledge that this consequence is provided by the

game, which, as noted, is a determined system. In real life it could have been otherwise. We can't say for sure. Regardless, I am left with the sense that I made the wrong choice. I am prompted to reevaluate my initial ethical reasoning.

As I experiment with the game, I find the other endings equally unsatisfying. The narrations are always optimistic and the onscreen images always convey a sense of manifest, hopeless injustice. The Knights Templar usher in an age of total religious intolerance: the only images in their final cutscene are bodies hanging from church rafters. The Illuminati impose an age of peace, but it is also an age of oppression, inequality, and constant surveillance. Particularly disheartening is the ApostleCorps ending. For most of the game, ApostleCorps' reasoning has been sophisticated and somewhat inspiring. Their cutscene is different:

A crowd of people dressed in white stand on Liberty Island. Their foreheads are all aglow, presumably from some type of biomod; their necks are craned backward, as if they were in rapture (see Figure 2). The camera pans upward and I see that the Statue of Liberty has been replaced with a holographic facsimile. I hear a voiceover from the AI construct (the one supposed to universalize capability).

> Helios will speak. Year of our Union, 125. Our consensus remains clear. Yes, we will prolong a second century of peace. Economical automation is complete. Our research will now encompass other frontiers. Yes, this is the consensus we have created. Our unity will soon be absolute. The remaining boundaries are vanishing. Yes, share your mind with everyone. Open yourself. Your needs are the needs of all. Let us understand and be transformed. Yes, Transform each other and transform yourselves. The only frontier that has ever existed is the self. Helios has spoken.

This voiceover is delivered in an uninflected, robotic tone. The people are motionless. Discordant music plays. The image fades to be replaced by a quote:

> It really is of importance, what men do, but also what manner of men are that do it. Among the works of man... the first importance surely is man himself. —John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

Again, the voiceover is somewhat hopeful, but it is set against an unsettling image and paired with unsettling sounds. The people in the crowd appear to be passive and uniform. A posthuman society *has* been created, but it too is unsatisfying. Given the cutscene's invocation of science fiction tropes, we can reasonably assume that poverty and violence have been eliminated for the price of passion and individuality. Our sense is that this "consensus" is dystopian, that the self has been not so much explored as entombed. In this light, the Mill quote is ironic. It is a reminder that the work of humanity—the AI construct—has become more important than humanity itself. It has replaced the human rather than enhanced it.

All the game's endings are open to challenge and interpretation. I find each one ethically frustrating. Perhaps this is the most sophisticated aspect of *DX:IW*: it leaves players—some players, and I would wager the majority of players—wanting something else. It leaves players with a sense of discomfort rather than triumph. I don't want *any* of the endings I'm given, and I am pushed to consider how a different ending might come to be.

This is the very substance of meaning-creation: the game brings me face to face with the limitations and uncertainties of ethical reasoning. It is precisely the finite, determinate nature of the game—a nature that permits me to *act*, but only in certain ways—that prompts my frustration and ethical reflection; that is, my meaning-creation.

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This meaning-creation is not superficial or trivial. The game does not just allow for ethical reasoning and ethical practice: it encourages them, almost to the point of requiring them for progression (4). It gives players more than just ethical dilemmas. It gives them a *simulation* in which they can act on those dilemmas. In making this argument, I have advanced three claims:

1. Games are intentional, restricted systems in which players nonetheless have agency.
2. It is their very determinacy that allows games to inspire meaning-creation in players.

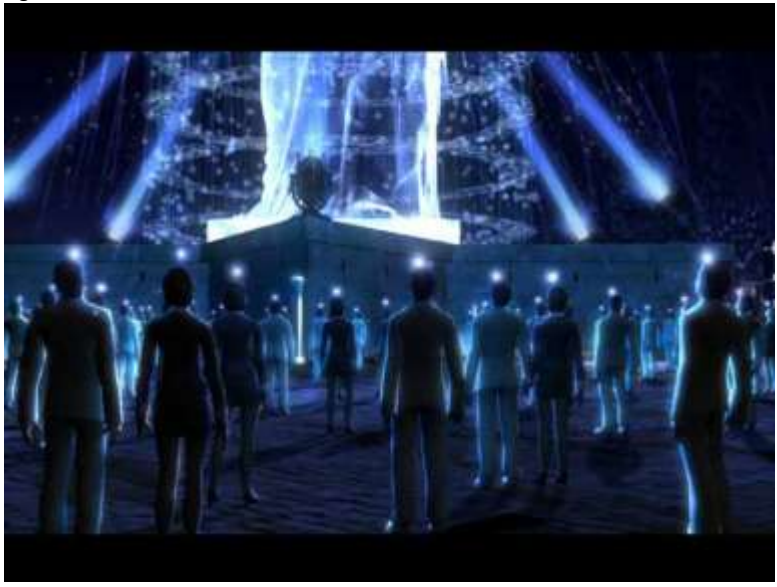
3. *Deus Ex: Invisible War* is a game that prompts meaning-creation by demanding ethical practice; the player engages in and acts on moral dilemmas, which encourages critical ethical reasoning.

Not all, or even most, games inspire such meaning-creation, which is perfectly fine. Ethical practice or meaning-making should not be the only criterion by which we judge games; there are many games worth treasuring for their sheer excitement, or for how they encourage relationships with other players, or for how they allow players to escape into a story. Moreover, we need not demote non-game media just because games have the ability to encourage ethical practice. Other media—like literature, film, and art—also encourage meaning-making, though their mechanics may be different. The point of analyzing *Deus Ex: Invisible War* has simply been to show one way in which games, through their combination of determinacy and agency, can prompt us to engage critically with our ethical sensibilities. Especially when games operate as a rich, multivalent texts (e.g., through carefully realized narrative elements), their structured interactivity can inspire the sort of ethical frustration that leads to meaning-creation and affirms, rather than denies, our agency as human beings.

Figure 1

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:EndOmar.jpg

Figure 2



Source:
http://www.visualwalkthroughs.com/deusexinvisiblewar/apostlecorp/apostlecorp.html

Endnotes

(1) “Rather than beginning by telling learners what to believe, one may begin by finding ways to tap into those activities where the learners are ‘animated by a sympathetic and dignified regard for the sentiment of others’ (Dewey, 1916/2001, p. 361)—that is, to identify and encourage empathy. Any injunction to be empathic is likely to be hollow if it does not coincide with experiences, however. Therefore, it is in direct experience that we should look for opportunities for learning to appreciate others. By developing a growing appreciation and understanding for other people’s moral context, we hone the skills that underlie critical ethical practice.” (Shulke, 2009)
“According to Aristotelian virtue ethics, morality is not a matter of learning universal laws. It is learning how to be good by strengthening one's practical wisdom to the point that it is capable of resolving moral dilemmas as they arise. Practical wisdom is essential even for those who believe in a moral code as it is the skill that allows one to recognize when to apply a particular rule.” (Simkins, 2008)

(2) Dialogue in *DX:IW* favors the Socratic: a non-player character will give reasons for completing a certain objective, and Alex D. (whom players control) will challenge the reasons or ask for an explanation. Players are reminded that the ideas in the game come from humans, not some omniscient entity that hands out fiats. Thus, the structure of the dialogue is itself a nod to traditional modes of ethical reasoning.

(3) The number of vying factions varies. For example, if the player has killed the leader of the Illuminati earlier in the game, then she will not receive any goal-directed orders from the Illuminati. For simplicity’s sake I have left such complexities out of this particular analysis.

(4) N.B. These things are dependent on the level of immersion and investment, or affect, the game gives the player. For further reading, see Simkins and Steinkuehler (Simkins, 2008)

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