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Deus Ex Pandemus: Is Movement Control Here to Stay?

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Abstract: Conspiracy theorists and laymen wonder whether the emergency measures introduced in response to COVID-19 will be upheld even after the pandemic is over. Using plot elements of Deus Ex the video game, one can show that measures such as movement control are not sustainable in the long run.

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During the first months of 2020, the world seems to accelerate its transformation into the Orwellian nightmare. Omnimonopolizing behemoths, monstrous income inequality, mass surveillance and the COVID-19 pandemic are the reality we face on a daily basis. As I am writing these lines, millions of people are infected with the virus, some of the food and basic necessities are in shortage, and the government of my city has just introduced movement control through the system of city passes. Some people worry whether these emergency measures are here to stay. Indeed, temporary fixes often tend to turn into permanent solutions, especially when you are dealing with the government. The US federal income tax was introduced as wartime measure, yet was never repealed. The extension of federal government's powers due to 9/11 terrorist attack was though temporal, but the PATRIOT Act is still in force. In the year of 2020, it is hard to imagine life without being billed by the amount you earn or without a humiliating search before boarding the plane. There are reasons to believe, however, that the dystopian reality of movement control, curfew and city passes is the least of our worries in the long run.

Whether it is due to generation identity or personal interest, a dystopia in my head is associated with videogames rather than iconic novels of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. It has been twenty years since the original Deus Ex got released by Ion Storm. The plot of the iconic videogame set in 2050s world, plagued by multinational corporations, oligarchy, mass surveillance, income inequality, terrorism, as well as the 2050s plague itself - the Grey Death virus. The franchise's plot and settings are excellent for showing how inconsistent the long run movement control expectations may be.

The game's main antagonist is trillionaire Bob Page, who runs the most powerful Page Industries Corporation, holding stakes in many sectors of the economy across the globe. Although certainly a villain, Page himself is presented somewhat as a Renaissance man involved in science, technology and philanthropy. In addition to his wealth and intelligence, Page is powerful enough to influence the US Senate, push appointments of Cabinet-level officials, maintain his own armed forces and even run a shadow world government.

After a terrorist attack on the Statue of Liberty, the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition is formed with the stated purpose of fighting the terrorist threat, acting at the expense of the basic civil liberties under the guidance of the US government heavily influenced by Page.

The economy is dominated by powerful multinational corporations, each being a monopoly in its respective industry. The income inequality is constantly underlined by scenes,

such as bums at the burn barrel partying in the black alley next to the luxurious apartment building with its nano-augmented tenants.

In addition to the terrorist threat and income disparity, the world suffers from pandemic of the Grey Death virus, secretly created in the People's Republic of China and distributed by the corporation owned by Page - the very same corporation that administers the distribution of the scarce vaccine.

The game goes on and on with its layers of conspiracy theories and dystopian predictions, including the Illuminati, the omniscient artificial intelligence and the use of nuclear warfare. Although sometimes silly, some of these predictions are frightening. Even though the game was released before 2001, its New York City skyline does not include the twin towers of the World Trade Center. As I am writing these lines, the world is counting millions of victims infected by the COVID-19 virus originated in the People's Republic of China. Finally, the most powerful Alphabet Inc. is co-owned by the man named Page.

One of the many videogame elements perfected in Deus Ex is its atmosphere. It became a signature not only for the original 2000 game, but also for the entire franchise. In every game's settings, we are gradually led from mere presence of law enforcement officials on the streets in the games' beginning to martial law and curfews in the end. It is implied that total control is the ultimate objective of a game's ruling class, whether it's the idealist Bob Page in the original game, barely humane faction leaders in its sequel or power-hungry oligarchs and bureaucrats in the prequels.

This is the scary part, where dream comes true: the globalization, the monopoly, the virus, and the curfew are here. For a moment, let us consider Deus Ex future projections seriously and inquire into the motivation of its characters. Suppose the conspiracy theory holds; therefore there is a collective of people (whether it is the Illuminati or some other form of shadow world government) secretly and successfully affecting the events in the world to pursue its goals and objectives.

Let us suppose that it is reasonable to assume rationality of specific individuals such as Bob Page. This assumption would be quite hard to work with though, since Page is still human for the majority of the game and, therefore, is a subject to humane limitations, such as impulsivity. The rationality is even harder to assume for the bosses of the second game, Deus Ex: Invisible War, who hardly resemble serious thoughtful individuals.

In the prequels, however, the setup is different. The main villain, influencing the characters in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* and directly affecting the events of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, is the Illuminati - an international collective of businessmen and government officials, secretly pursuing their own agenda. Let us ignore the fact that the name pops up in every other conspiracy theory of the last two centuries and still focus on the motivation behind.

Can we assume that the collective (the Illuminati) in the game act rationally? More specifically, can we trust said collective to be more rational than Bob Page because it's a group of people? Basic intuition, as well as many anecdotal evidences from politics, business and even behavioral studies suggest so. At least some academic researchers (Shaw 1932, Kugler et al. 2012, Bornstein et al. 2004) tend to support the idea as well.

Clearly, there is no ground to believe that the groups always act rationally. As we know from history, the Politburo, the late USSR's de-facto governing body, was involved in series of consistently irrational decisions in the 70s and 80s that eventually destroyed the Soviet Union and the Politburo itself. Almost everyone once attended a residents' association meeting can come up with an example as well. The idea, however, that a group is more rational than an individual seems to hold in general.

Let us keep going with the assumption that the shadow world government collective in *Deus Ex* act rationally. That is, they maximize their intertemporal utility, given the constraints and uncertainty they are facing. Clearly, we do not know the functional form of such collective's utility function. It seems reasonable to believe, however, that it can be expressed in generic terms of money (that, in the given reality, can be used to purchase the power, but not vice versa).

One can easily imagine how controlled spread of the virus, the omnimonopoly and the abuse of government powers can serve the goal of making more money for the ruling oligarchy. Movement control and curfew, however, do not seem to fit into the puzzle. The current trend is that higher and higher percentage of the economy depends on services, not manufacturing. This is aligned with general direction of technological progress and seems to hold firmly (Francois and Reinert 1995, Moroy 2012). Clearly, there are services with increased consumption during the stay-at-home period, such as media entertainment. For the majority of services, however, the ability to go out and actively engage in consumption is critical. By keeping people home you decrease their spending and severely hurt the entire sectors of the service economy.

What are these sectors hurt the most during a lock down? Some are naturally exempted (such as healthcare or utilities) from suffering, some can continue operating over the Internet (such as financial services) and, therefore, manage losses, but the rest are pretty much doomed, either by severe reduction of business (such as food services) or by direct halts (such as transportation and recreation). As we can see, some of the most monopolized sectors are among the once hurt the most (such as airlines and film industry).

If we really suppose that the shadow government collective have orchestrated the pandemic and the following lockdown, than they had to do it in their own interest. The Illuminati, for example, are supposed to represent major businesses including airlines and film industry, whose bosses must have some degree of influence over the collective's decisions and actions. This leads to major contradiction: an airline, being a profit-maximizing enterprise, enters a shadow government structure to run its costly operations that hurt its own revenues. One can come up with a situation when such actions are reasonable in the short run (for the purpose of, say, driving competitors out of the market), but are not sustainable over longer periods.

Same logic can be extended to include alleged conspirators from other industries, who do not gain much by enforcing movement control, but have their business risks increased either directly or due to network effect. Truly rational shadow world government collective, representative of major industries, will not seek long-term movement control. On the contrary, one can easily find Nash Equilibria in such collective's division into rival fraction with polar goals (which is exactly what happens in Deus Ex: Invisible War), though this is the topic for separate inquiry.

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