

Why SOMA Matters

This essay discusses horror and philosophy. You have been warned.

For all its merits, I'm not sure I would call *Frankenstein* a scary story. It's aimed more at stimulating the mind than the gut. I'd like to talk about SOMA, a modern horror story which happens to be a video game.

We begin with a quote, followed by a nightmare. We're placed in the shoes of Simon, who's been in a car crash and is scheduled to go in for a brain scan. It all seems fairly normal.

There's no one to meet us at the address given. *How odd.* After a bit of snooping, we find the code needed to go on. But why are we in a deserted office instead of a hospital?

We finally meet David Munshi, who, it turns out, is a medical student. *We're alone with this fellow in a room full of computer gear and a weird-looking chair. He just admitted that he's not a full doctor. Why on earth would we trust him?*

But like good little players, we sit in the strange metal chair. A device is lowered that covers our face, and the scan begins. Fade to black.

Soma is simply Greek for "body", but it's a word fraught with meaning for Christians.

The same New Testament which tells us "the flesh lusts against the spirit" also hints at a heaven where our physical bodies are perfected. So does God like the body or doesn't he?

I decided to play SOMA after watching it played on YouTube (thank you, MauLer and Markiplier). No video can prepare you for your first monster.

You've just made contact with (hopefully) the other human survivor on Pathos-II, Catherine. You proceed to the reactor room, start down a ladder...and it breaks off. Great. Now you're stuck down here with—dear Lord, *what is that thing? Run!*

In a panic, you scramble up the nearby stairs and slam the hatch. Safe.

Except you're in for a shock.

Carl

Is that a voice coming from up ahead? Another survivor? You run forward, to find a bizarre scene. A robot is lying on the garage floor, asking for help in a male human voice. (*Don't artificial beings usually have monotone female voices?*)

Naturally you ask: "Are you human?"

"Do I look human? Was it the body that gave me away?" The 'bot waves its single metal arm. "See my arms? My legs?"

It turns out that Carl here was piloting a drone via neural link and there was an accident. So is he a man in a metal shell or a malfunctioning machine?

You decide to explore further.

Catherine said you should head for the comm center.

Two switches

There are two switches that will route power to the comm center: one near Carl, the other upstairs. The one upstairs has warnings attached, leading to a dilemma: *something killed Carl*, most likely the thing downstairs. Do you risk letting it loose again?

Without spoiling too much, let me state that his screams convinced me of his humanity.

Anybody home?

Now things take a turn for the weird.

You entered Munshi's office as a man, in a human body, and perhaps you've been telling yourself all this time that's what you still are. Nothing like the ocean to shatter your defenses.

Ever since arriving on Pathos-II you've not been yourself.

Frictional Games makes first-person horror titles. Now they put that perspective to good use.

Thanks to Paul, Christianity's official stance is that the flesh is evil and must be subdued...but I think that misses the point.

Jesus is perhaps the most physical person I know. He washes feet; he serves food. He died on a cross. In short, he's living proof that *God loves matter*. So why do we despise it?

SOMA is a video game. While it conveys the sights and sounds of a ravaged world, the other senses can only be hinted at.

Pathos-II is a sterile place; everything including the toilets is metal. There are no carpets or pillows. If you didn't know better, you'd think it was *designed* for robots.

What does structure gel smell like? Does Simon even have a sense of smell anymore?

Another detail adds to the atmosphere: the lack of mirrors. Obviously seeing a machine where a face should be is too disturbing to be borne. When Simon finally sees himself, he sees a demon.

The flesh is not evil.

Death

Amy Azzaro sums it up well: "Nothing is allowed to die." Pathos-II is hell because the "life support" system doesn't allow death.

Many modern games revel in carnage. You never need feel bad, because it's not 'real'. You don't *know* anyone you kill. SOMA is different.

Frictional excels at using bits of information (journals, emails, etc.) to make its characters feel human, even in their absence. In my opinion, they perfected this in SOMA. You may be "only" killing machines...but they have souls.

I'm glad the system, called the warden unit or WAU, doesn't speak. You're supposed to draw your own conclusions as to its motives and the rightness of its actions. Is it a cancer, as Catherine says? Or is it doing its best to preserve life by any means? Is it good, evil or simply obeying its programming?

More Stories

Here are a few more stories dealing with life, consciousness and identity:

- Doctor Who: "The Rebel Flesh". When does a duplicate become a real person?
- I, Robot (starring Will Smith). Can a robot be a person?
- "What Do You Mean...Human?" An article by John W. Cambell, Jr. about just how difficult it is to define humanity. Printed in *Analog Readers' Choice*.